

BURUNDI

Media Sustainability Index 2006-2007

Introduction

Overall Country Score: 2.13

One of the turning points in the recent history of Burundi is the civil war breakout on October 21, 1993, after the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi's first democratically elected president. A total of 50,000 to 100,000 persons (mostly Tutsi) were killed. Sources even talk about 200,000 to 400,000 victims. To put an end to the conflict, a peace agreement was signed on September 28, 2000 in Arusha, Tanzania, and a transitional process began, with a rotating presidency between the government and the rebels. At the end of the transitional period, Pierre Nkurunziza, who came from the rebel side, was elected President of the Republic in 2005.

The economy of Burundi is predominantly rural, essentially based on agriculture and stockbreeding. The agricultural production is divided between export-destined products, such as coffee, tea and cotton, and food production.

On February 20 and 21, 2007 the President of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza, promised – after visiting a number of editorial rooms – the government's financial support to help develop the media in Burundi. A few weeks before, On January 3, 2007, the court of first instance of Bujumbura had acquitted Serges Nibizi, Domitille Kiramvu and Matthias Manirakiza, prosecuted as the editor in chief, an APR (African Public Radio) journalist and the manager of Isanganiro Radio respectively – three private stations broadcasting from Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi.

Another journalist, Corneille Nibaruta, manager of Radio Bonesha FM, in exile abroad for more than a month, was acquitted in the same court order even though he had never been heard by a magistrate, so he was able to come back to the country a few days later.

The visit and promise of the chief of state put an end to a period (2006) characterized by the tense relation between the public authorities and the media. During the year 2006, 42 cases of infringement of the freedom of the press were recorded, compared to 12 in 2005 and 0 in 2004.

Placed under a long domination of the State media monopoly (National Radio Television of Burundi, Burundi Press Agency, the newspaper *Ubumwe*) the media landscape in Burundi is now populated by multiple private media. Today there is 1 public television and 1 public radio station (NRTB), 10 private radio stations, 10 newspapers and 4 press agencies.

The Report on the freedom of the press in Central Africa, published at the end of December, 2006 by Journalists in Danger (JID) – the Congolese NGO defending the freedom of journalists in Central Africa – notes that Burundi leads the group of countries in the Central African sub-region in which the freedom of the press has deteriorated considerably.

However, after a civil war that lasted for more than a decade, Burundi went through a period of transition that managed to restore hope even beyond the borders of the country. Just as incredible, this transition opened the way to general elections that brought to the highest office the current President of the Republic, Mr. Pierre Nkurunziza, who changed his ex-rebel leader's hat for the chief of state insignia.

But the sense of hope revived by the political successes of the "Burundi miracle," often mentioned as a typical example for conflicted African countries – has vanished progressively, culminating in 2006. Instead of creating the framework necessary to promote a culture of democracy the new government immediately distinguished itself by instituting a new authoritarian regime, and restricting public liberties. Death threats, cases of imprisonment and police questioning, more or less real conspiracies have happened on a regular basis in the political landscape of Burundi and the journalists and the media have had the biggest share of them.

Confronted with the strong opposition of the media defense organizations against this situation, the President of the Republic convened a meeting with the public and private media directors on October 18, 2006 in Citega. Two main decisions were taken in this meeting:

- The setting of a permanent consulting organism between the government and the media. According to this, a committee made up of two or three journalists could be seen at any time, upon their request, by the President whenever such a situation arises that requires consultation between the government and the media;
- The creation, by the President, of a fund consisting of almost twenty thousand Euro destined to the training of journalists in Burundi for the future "Truth and Reconciliation" commission studying the crimes committed in Burundi since the 1962 Independence until this day.

A few weeks after this meeting, three journalists were sent to the central prison of Mpimba within one week. They were investigated for "violating the judicial confidentiality" and "circulating secrets concerning the State's security" in the case of an alleged failed coup against the President of Burundi. Sent to the central prison of Mpimba in September 2006 these journalists were released on January 4, 2007, after spending more than a month behind bars.

At the beginning of August 2006, President Nkurunziza became convinced of the existence of a "project meant to destabilize the population and the democratic institutions." First, eight persons including the former vice-president Alphone-Marie Kadege, were accused of having concocted this coup. They were arrested and transferred to a prison in Bujumbura. A few days later, the former President, Domitien Ndayizeye, was also arrested for an alleged involvement in the preparation of the same coup.

Several independent human rights and media organizations denounced this arrest wave and doubted the very existence of the coup. President Nkurunziza became angry and issued a stern warning to these organizations. "Some radio stations and journalists have set themselves up as tribunals and judges and that must end," he hammered on August 17 while on a tour in Ngozi (North of the country). The following conclusion arises from this panel: the 2nd goal proved to be the most solid whereas the 1st goal showed the highest degree of weakness.

Objective 1: Freedom of Speech**Score: 2.13**

The Constitution of Burundi issued on February 28, 2005 (article 30) and Law no. 1/02 given on November 27, 2003, in order for the press in Burundi (article 2) to have recognition of the freedom of the press. “It is rather the enforcement of the law that is problematic,” all the participants to the MSI Panel in Burundi admitted. This is more visible in the provinces where the local (political, military, police) authorities frequently and deliberately violate the texts establishing the freedom of speech.

Some participants wished to note that this tendency is nonetheless on a downward trend since the elections and particularly since the beginning of this year. The panelists also deplored the dependency of the Courts and tribunals on the political and the law-enforcement organisms. This dependency explains why journalists are often arrested in total disregard of procedures and ill-treated while in detention.

In principle, the media – public as well as private – are equal even though in real life the authorities favor the public media. The MSI participants noted that the public media receive State subventions while the private media do not. Access to the profession is not regulated in Burundi: there is no school of journalism.

The judicial standards protecting the freedom of expression are very much in place (Article 30 of the Constitution, Law no. 1/025 given on November 27, 2003) and they are in conformity with international conventions; however, they suffer from a lack of strict, fair and equitable treatment. For example, article 3 of the law of the press stipulates that in order to exercise his/her profession the journalist has the right to access information sources, to investigate and comment freely on the facts of public life. However, what really happens is that journalists encounter numerous difficulties when they try to approach certain political leaders for interviews or reports.

The spoken press license is granted on a legally fair and competitive basis. The NCC (National Communication Council) is the institution authorizing the setting and use of radio and television installations according to its organic law, strictly respecting the principle of equality between the operators and under the provisions of the law. But the composition of the NCC whose members are appointed by the President of the Republic at the referral of the minister of information calls into question its independence with respect to the government. Some panelists showed that: “there is an informal marginalization of those media whose editorial policy is not to the liking of the regime.”

The access on the market and the tax regime for all the press institutions is the same as for all the other companies. In articles 13 and 14, the law of the press passed in 2003 exempted the public as well as private media organizations of the transfer tax and instituted a promotion trust for the press institutions in Burundi. But this exemption is still not applied and to this day no media organism has benefited from the promotion trust funds. The promise of the head of State, which has not materialized yet, looks more like a generous gesture than a legal obligation, the panelists regretted.

According to the statistics of the press defense organizations including Journalists in Danger (JID) at least 42 cases of various infringements of the freedom of the press including imprisonments, threats and cases of censorship were recorded throughout 2006. These infringements were perpetrated by the State services (the police, the judges). But in 2007 a downward trend has been noted as only 5 cases of violation of the freedom of the press were recorded in the first half of this year. However, the authors of these violations have never been disturbed – not even when identified.

The preferential treatment given to the public media has been a fact for a long period of time, particularly during the years when the National Radio-Television of Burundi (NRTB) and the Burundi Press Agency (BPA) had the monopoly; whereas today the private media are more and more associated with the actions of the government and other public institutions, the MSI participants admitted. However, it is very often that the State-run media suffer from the censorship enforced by the ministry of communication: no information published by the State-run media can be unfavorable to a member of the government as long as he/she is in office. In Burundi slander is considered a criminal offense. However, the participants were not able to point out the procedures and facts of the criminal jurisdiction.

The access to public information is free (article 3 of the law of the press and 18 of the Ethics and Deontology Code) but journalists encounter financial difficulties when they need to lead serious and objective investigations. It's all the same – they have no Internet access in the editorial room.

The press organizations have free access to international information broadcast by foreign networks such as Voice of America, BBC and RFI and received in the frequency modulation (FM) band. There is also the Internet, but unfortunately it is only available in the urban areas (Bujumbura, Gitega) and quite expensive (averaging \$1 per hour).

In reference to the access to the profession of journalism, the panelists stated that it is not legislated by any law of the press or the Ethics and Deontology Code. It is not restricted either. Any person who wishes may become a journalist, even in absence of appropriate training. Therefore the government does not impose any restrictions on the access to the profession.

Objective 2: Professional Journalism

Score: 2.36

The discussions among the MSI participants emphasized that, for some of them, the practice of the profession is satisfactory, whereas others regretted the perpetuation of many cases of questionable professional practice. The ethical and deontological standards are there, but the media professionals often mention practical or political difficulties such as: low incomes, difficult access to information sources, self-censorship within both the public and private sector, outdated equipment, corruption, etc. – due to which these standards are not always met.

Despite these difficulties, some media organizations manage to produce objective and well-researched reports. For example, in August 2006, when the government accused the former President, Domitien Ndayizeye of an attempted coup against the institutions, the private radio stations – RPA, Isanganiro and Bonesha FM – investigated and proved that the coup had been in fact plotted by the authorities in order to muzzle the opposition. The managers of these stations

were sent to prison as a result of these exposures. In January, 2007, the Supreme Court of Justice of Burundi confirmed the facts and analyses made by these radio stations and acquitted the former President of all the charges against him.

There is an Ethics and Deontology Code of the Burundi press guarded by the Burundi Press Association (BPA). All media professionals accept its rules. The BPO (Burundi Press Observatory) was created on April 8, 2004, to watch over the preservation of all the journalistic rules and fight against media corruption. During the Panel discussion, a participant confessed to having received a sugar sack from the Sugar Company of Burundi during a visit organized by the managers of this company to several press organizations. Despite having noticed the flawed functioning of the company all the journalists praised the work quality in this company.

All the MSI participants deplored the widespread practice of self-censorship in Burundi. Not only does it happen in the public media – where no article against the government can be published – but also the managers of the private media refuse to address information that is unfavorable to their financial partners or local interests – considered as backers.

When it comes to event treatment, the journalists enjoy a sort of “monitored” freedom, which is to say that they do not have the authority to cover any event. Some events are restricted either by the public authorities (by means of injunctions) or by the managers of the press organizations (self-censorship). The panelists noticed, for instance, that during 2006 any press organization that dared criticize the former strong man of the ruling party, Mr. Hussein Radjabu (today, in disfavor with the government) was harassed by the security services. Thus, Corneille Nibaruta, manager of Bonesha FM radio, was forced to exile himself between November 2006 and February, 2007, after broadcasting the information that Hussein Radjabu was the one who had the idea of the coup of which the opposition was subsequently accused.

It appears that with a minimum salary from between \$50 and \$100 journalists in Burundi are exposed to all sorts of solicitations – sometimes contrary to their ethics and deontology – in the need to survive. This permanent fight for survival has repercussions on the media production. A large part of it is allotted to the political news. However, as a general rule, the entertainment programs outweigh the news. In terms of percentage, the news cover 30 percent, the entertainment (music, films) – 60 percent, and the cultural and educational programs – 10 percent.

The installations and equipment of the press are outdated, but manage to fulfill their tasks. This development must be nonetheless regarded in a relative perspective as it varies from one sector to another. The written press seems to drag behind the audio-visual. Journalists from the written press even complain that they lack a tape recorder. The private radio stations often work with only one computer and a bit of second-hand equipment acquired through outside financing. RPA, for instance, produces all its shows in only one studio.

Objective 3: Plurality of News**Score: 2.16**

All the MSI participants recognized and congratulated themselves for the existence in Burundi of more than one source of information: television, radio, written press and Internet. These sources are usually available as there is no measure that might restrict or deny the population access to them. In addition to the fact that these media are concentrated in the urban centers, access to the sources of information is limited by the very low income of the population.

There are multiple, private and public news sources (television, radio, newspapers, internet) but they are usually prohibitive due to the scarce earnings of the population. It must be said once more that these difficulties are relative as they are much harsher in the rural areas, where only the radio is available (in the households that can afford a radio receiver), than in the urban areas, where in every household, on average, there is a television set or a radio receiver. There are no community radio stations in Burundi.

The citizens' access to national as well as international media is only restricted by the low purchasing power of money at the level of the population, as well as the high cost of some opportunities. Only the members of the richest social category can afford to buy newspapers, whereas the internet is not available outside urban areas. This context explains the scarceness of foreign newspapers in Burundi and the irregular publication of the national newspapers. The international radio stations (RFI, BBC, VOA) broadcast in the FM band, either through a transmitter installed in the country's territory or in partnership with the local radio stations – using their frequencies.

Just like in many other African countries, the Burundi public media act as the government's resonating chamber and do not serve the interests of the public. More than 90 percent of the news on television or the radio is dedicated to the activities of the President of the Republic and of the government. It is frequent that the opposition is not granted access to the public media.

In many cases, the press organizations work with press agencies for news supply but unfortunately these agencies do not always quote the source of their news. There are 4 press agencies in Burundi, namely the BPA (Burundi Press Agency), which is a public agency; Net Press Agency; Infop Agency and Espresso Agency – which have private owners. The BPA sells its news whereas the others often distribute it freely except to their subscribers.

Most of the press organizations are associative – which is to say that they are created as a result of partnerships with foreign associations or backers whose identity is not always known by the larger audiences. In addition to political news, quite often these media also address economic, social, educational and sports problems at a national as well as international level.

Objective 4: Business Management**Score 1.35**

According to the MSI Panel participants, the press organizations in Burundi are not structured as commercial companies. With the exception of the public media, the private organizations are managed without compliance to accounting and commercial standards. The journalists' salaries are entirely at the discretion of the managers of radio and television stations. There is no

advertising market; commercial messages are negotiated by mutual agreement between press organizations and advertisers who often impose their prices to the stations. There is no market research, rating system, print runs or Internet statistics.

The press organizations are professional, which is to say that journalists support themselves exclusively with the income produced by this activity, but they are not profitable enterprises. There is no balance sheet for their activities.

The public media receive subventions from the government and advertisers. The only revenue of the private media comes from commercials and donations from international organizations. There is no advertising market, as the few advertising agencies are not sufficiently developed. Clients often set the advertising rates and the press organizations must accept the terms, as they have virtually no choice.

In a context where there is no market to speak of and the advertising rates are set by the clients, the advertising receipts are ridiculous and the media must look for external financing and more subscriptions to make up for this deficiency.

Independent media receives no subventions from the public authorities even though the law of the press set up a promotion trust funded essentially by annual donations from the State budget.

There is no rating system, not to mention print runs. The available figures concerning the internet go back to the year 2000 and show that there were, at that time, around 2,000 internet users out of an estimated population of 6,223,897. There are currently 4 internet providers in Burundi (cbinet, usan, onatel and matatro).

Objective 5: Supporting Institutions

Score: 2.67

There are support associations that defend the interests of the journalists with the help of international organisms by pressuring the public authorities. There is no training school for journalists in Burundi.

The associations in Burundi (House of the press, the Journalists Association of Burundi, the Radio Broadcasters Association of Burundi, and the Women Journalists Association of Burundi) work hard for the protection of journalists.

The NGOs do not get involved in the legislative modifications concerning the media. They often apply pressure on the government to support legislative reforms of the press, but when the government actually starts the reform process, they do not ask for the NGOs' opinions and considerations. The MOCA (Media Organization of Central Africa) is also based in Burundi.

The education level in Burundi has dropped a great deal in the recent years influencing the performance of the young graduates – which is not higher than average. One must also recall that since there is no school of journalism in Burundi the editorial rooms are populated by graduates of communication schools or other sciences.

Short term training programs are available, allowing journalists to retrain and catch up with the journalists in other countries. Organizations such as the Panos Paris Institute offers the journalists specialized in various fields (peace, fight against the violence affecting women, fight against HIV, etc.). Nevertheless, the outdated equipment and the low income of journalists trained under these circumstances annihilate the training efforts.

The State once owned an NPHB (National Printing House of Burundi, in Bujumbura) which is no longer active. Instead there are 10 private printing houses.

Media distribution networks exist and belong to the private sector. They are not restricted and are often apolitical. Their number could not be determined. A few examples are Arib Info, Abarundi, Burundi Reality, Burundi News.