

Burundi media regulator bans BBC and VOA

Authorities in Burundi should fully restore broadcasting rights to the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Voice of America, and allow journalists in the country to contribute to the two organisations, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.



A radio station is seen in Bujumbura, Burundi, on March 19, 2015. Burundi authorities recently banned the BBC and suspended VOA from broadcasting within the country. Source: CPJ.

The BBC and VOA have been barred from broadcasting in Burundi since May 2018, when their licenses were suspended, originally for six months, as [CPJ reported](#) at the time. On March 29, Burundi's media regulator, the National Communication Council, announced that it had withdrawn the operating license for the BBC and renewed its suspension of the VOA, according to [news reports](#) and an [official notice](#) by the National Communication Council posted on Twitter by local press freedom organisation, SOS Médias Burundi.

The council also forbade local and foreign journalists operating in Burundi from "directly or indirectly" contributing to the two broadcasters, according to the notice.

"The decision to keep the BBC and VOA off-air, and to forbid reporters from contributing to them, is clearly meant to deny Burundians access to critical reporting and to keep the world in the dark about what is happening in Burundi," said CPJ's Sub-Saharan Africa representative, Muthoki Mumo. "We urge authorities to lift the bans on VOA and the BBC and allow all media, local and international, to operate freely and independently."

Nestor Bankumukunzi, the president of the National Communication Council, who signed the notice announcing the moves, told CPJ via text message that he would answer CPJ's queries but had not done so by the time of publication. Government spokesperson Prosper Ntahorwamiye declined to respond to CPJ's questions.

The National Communication Council alleged that the BBC aired a documentary that was false, slanderous, and violated Burundi's media laws, according to the notice. In December 2018, the BBC aired [a documentary](#) on alleged torture sites run by Burundian security services, which authorities dismissed at the time as "fake news" and demanded the broadcaster take down, according to [news reports](#).

In its notice, the council also accused the BBC of violating assurances the broadcaster had allegedly made last year not to air content that did not meet its own editorial guidelines.

On March 29, the BBC issued [a statement](#) condemning the regulator's decision, saying that it was "a serious blow against media freedom." CPJ's email to a BBC spokesperson requesting further comment did not receive a response.

In renewing VOA's suspension, the council accused the broadcaster of employing Patrick Nduwimana, former director of the privately owned, now-shuttered Bonesha FM, whom it claims is sought by law enforcement, according to the notice and previous [reporting by CPJ](#). In an email to CPJ, a VOA spokesperson said that Nduwimana is "a VOA Swahili contractor and does not broadcast in Kirundi [the national language of Burundi]".

VOA Director Amanda Bennett, who is a member of CPJ's board of directors, said in [a statement](#) that it was alarming that journalists in Burundi "are now forbidden to communicate with VOA".

In the email to CPJ, the VOA spokesperson said that the station had ended the employment of freelance journalists in Burundi "for their own safety," but added that none have reported receiving threats since the renewed suspension was announced.

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