



**Republic of Rwanda**

**Joint Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review**

**51<sup>st</sup> Session of the UPR Working Group**

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**Submission by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen  
Participation and  
Centre for Minority Rights Development**

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**CIVICUS: World Alliance for  
Citizen Participation**

Web: [www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)

CIVICUS UPR Focal Person

Olimjon Bakhtaliev

[olimjon.bakhtaliev@civicus.org](mailto:olimjon.bakhtaliev@civicus.org)

Sigrid Lipott

[sigrid.lipott@civicus.org](mailto:sigrid.lipott@civicus.org)

Tel: +41 22 733 3435

**Centre for Minority Rights  
Development**

**Nyangori Ohenjo**

Kisamis Town, Magadi Road,

P. O. Box 379-00511

Ongata Rongai, Kenya

[mail.admin@cemiride.org](mailto:mail.admin@cemiride.org)

+254 20 2500055

<https://www.cemiride.org/contact/>

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1** CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. Founded in 1993, CIVICUS has members in over 180 countries throughout the world.
- 1.2** The Centre for Minority Rights Development (CEMIRIDE) is a regional organisations registered in Kenya working on defending the rights of indigenous peoples, human rights defenders, governance, and human rights issues. The CEMIRIDE is committed to empowering citizens, particularly indigenous peoples and ethnic minority communities, to contribute to sustainable peace, social justice and reconciliation across the Great Lakes region.
- 1.3** In this submission, the two organisations assess the Government of Rwanda's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society and the full enjoyment of civil and political rights. Specifically, we examine Rwanda's fulfilment of the rights to freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) since its last Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in January 2021. To this end, we analyse Rwanda's implementation of recommendations received during the 3rd UPR cycle and provide targeted follow-up recommendations.
- 1.4** During the 3<sup>rd</sup> UPR cycle, the Government of Rwanda received 39 recommendations related to the space for civil society (civic space). The government accepted 18 recommendations and noted 21. There were 24 recommendations on freedoms of expression and opinion, eight on freedom of association, two on HRDs and one on freedom of peaceful assembly. The Government of Rwanda accepted 11 recommendations on freedom of expression, five on freedom of association, and one recommendation on freedom of peaceful assembly. However, our evaluation demonstrates that it has implemented only part of the recommendations.
- 1.5** We are deeply concerned about restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and media freedom and media freedom. Unclear legal provisions and restrictive laws such as Law No. 60/2018 of 22 August 2018 on the Prevention and Punishment of Cybercrimes, which curtail the rights of civil society and journalists., These provisions, contribute to promoting legal uncertainty and a climate of unwarranted self-censorship where individuals and organisations often refrain from engaging in open dialogue.
- 1.6** We are further alarmed by severe restrictions on the right to freedom of association and the adoption of the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Law No. 058/2024, which introduces further restrictions, including giving the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) discretionary powers, such as the authority to approve or remove CSO leaders, make organisational changes and suspend CSO operations.

**1.7** As a result of these concerns, civic space in Rwanda is classed as ‘repressed’ by the CIVICUS Monitor, indicating the presence of serious restrictions on the exercise of fundamental freedoms and active civic participation.<sup>1</sup>

- Section 2 of this submission examines Rwanda’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international standards concerning freedom of association.
- Section 3 examines issues related to the protection of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists.
- Section 4 assesses Rwanda’s progress regarding freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information.
- Section 5 reviews the situation concerning freedom of peaceful assembly, including administrative and cultural barriers to participation.
- Section 6 presents recommendations to address the concerns raised and support the implementation of UPR recommendations.
- Section 7 in an annex evaluating the implementation status of civic space-related recommendations from the 3rd cycle.

## **2. Freedom of association**

**2.1** During Rwanda’s third UPR cycle, the government received seven recommendations on freedom of association and the creation of an enabling environment for CSOs. Among other commitments, the government pledged to ‘review the registration requirements for local and international non-governmental organisations with a view to better facilitating and simplifying the process and strengthen the role of civil society’. It accepted two recommendations and noted five. The government has partly implemented the five recommendations it accepted, as outlined below.

**2.2** Article 39 of the Constitution of Rwanda guarantees the right to freedom of association. Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Rwanda is a state party, further guarantees this right. While the constitution and international commitments formally uphold fundamental rights, the effectiveness of these protections remains restricted by laws such as Law No. 058/2024 governing NGOs and administrative practices.

**2.3** We recognise the government’s efforts to uphold the right to freedom of association in the labour sector. Trade unions operate legally and actively advocate for workers’ rights, including by advancing discussions on a minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Although a unified national minimum wage has not yet been formally established, ongoing consultations between employers, the government and trade unions

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<sup>1</sup> CIVICUS Monitor: Rwanda, <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/rwanda>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Minister Nkulikiyinka emphasizes role of trade unions in advancing decent work’, Ministry of Public Services and Labour, 2024, <https://www.mifotra.gov.rw/news-detail/minister-nkulikiyinka-emphasizes-role-of-trade-unions-in-advancing-decent-work>.

demonstrate constructive engagement in developing a minimum wage policy.<sup>3</sup> These steps reflect meaningful progress toward fulfilling article 39 of the constitution and article 22 of the ICCPR.

**2.4** However, despite these efforts, structural and regulatory barriers continue to restrict the operational independence of civil society. Although the government established a two-year implementation period for Law No. 058/2024, it has now been a year since the law was enacted and no detailed administrative guidelines have been issued to support a predictable and transparent registration process. This regulatory uncertainty continues to hinder CSOs in understanding and meeting compliance obligations.

**2.5** Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have been affected by restrictive regulations. On 29 July 2024, the RGB issued new regulations pursuant to Law No. 72/2018 governing the organisation and functioning of FBOs.<sup>4</sup> These were followed by stricter compliance directives in March 2025.<sup>5</sup> While the stated aim is to ensure coherence, safety and transparency, the regulations impose strict requirements for legal operation.

**2.6** According to the RGB's publicly available registration procedures, FBOs must obtain legal personality to operate and comply with a range of requirements. These include: a letter of collaboration from district authorities certifying that the place of worship meets local construction standards, notarised statutes and a statement of faith, proof of appointment of leadership in accordance with the statutes, a non-criminal record certificate for both the legal representative and their deputy and a bachelor's degree in religious studies or equivalent certification for the legal representative. Additional obligations include an annual action plan with a declared budget source and at least a thousand signatures from the church members in the same district as the church location, submitted via the RGB's official portal.

**2.7** In August 2024, government authorities shut down thousands of churches and prayer houses, accusing them of failing to comply with health and safety regulations.<sup>6</sup> By the end of August 2024, over 14,000 places of worship had reportedly been inspected across Rwanda, and over 8,000 closed for violations,

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<sup>3</sup> 'Labour Day: Thousands of mine workers benefit from minimum 'living' wage', The New Times, 1 May 2025, <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/26112/news/economy/labour-day-thousands-of-mine-workers-benefit-from-minimum-living-wage>.

<sup>4</sup> 'Faith-Based Organisations', RGB, <https://www.rgb.rw/1/civil-society-faith-based-and-political-organisations/fait-based-organisations>.

<sup>5</sup> 'Official Gazette No. Special of 07/03/2025', RGB, <https://www.rgb.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=120621&token=48218a27183ee828b80536211e9d34bf932b921e>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Why has Rwanda shut thousands of churches and banned faith groups?', Andalou Ajansi, 9 September 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/why-has-rwanda-shut-thousands-of-churches-and-banned-faith-groups/3325559>.

according to Local Government Ministry figures.<sup>7</sup> On 28 August 2024, authorities issued a ban on the activities of 43 religious groups that they accused of operating illegally.<sup>8</sup>

**2.8** Law No. 058/2024 was introduced with the stated aim of improving regulatory clarity and operational efficiency.<sup>9</sup> While we welcome positive provisions such as the clarification that only funding linked to criminal activity may be restricted and the elimination of district-level reporting approvals, we remain concerned about the law's centralisation of oversight within the RGB. The RGB retains discretionary powers over the registration, internal governance and financial operations of CSOs, without any explicit availability of legal recourse mechanisms.

**2.9** Article 7 of the 2024 NGO Law allows the RGB to deny registration on vague grounds such as 'peace, security or good morals', terms that lack precise legal definition.<sup>10</sup> Article 12 prohibits 'political activities' without clearly defining what constitutes such activity, creating a chilling effect for organisations engaged in governance or human rights work.<sup>11</sup> These provisions contradict Rwanda's obligations under ICCPR article 22(2), which affirms that freedom of association is the general rule and any limitation must remain the exception. In line with international human rights standards, any restriction must be clearly defined by law (legality), serve a legitimate public interest such as national security or public order (necessity) and be strictly tailored to avoid excessive interference (proportionality).

**2.10** Although article 5 of the 2024 NGO Law formally guarantees administrative and financial autonomy, in practice this is restricted.<sup>12</sup> The RGB may intervene in internal decisions such as leadership changes or changes to statutes, without offering any legal remedies. Bureaucratic procedures include procedural requirements, mandatory announcements of name changes in national newspapers, requirements for tax and social security clearance and justifications for overhead costs that place disproportionate burdens on smaller, grassroots organisations.

**2.11** We further note with concern the administrative measures and directives that disproportionately affect CSOs restrict engagement with international partners. For instance, the 25 March 2025 directive on the prohibition of cooperation between registered Rwandan CSOs and the Government of Belgium

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> 'Rwanda Cracks Down on Over 40 Religious Groups', News Central, 23 August 2024, <https://newscentral.africa/rwanda-cracks-down-on-over-40-religious-groups>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Official Gazette No. Special of 19/07/2024', RGB, <https://www.rgb.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=102343&token=f3216133e9f2990811c89e30aa85bdb648c94073>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

affects partnerships and illustrates the need for clearer procedural safeguards to ensure that engagement with development partners remains consistent with Rwanda's international obligations on freedom of association and cooperation.<sup>13</sup> The directive provided no procedural safeguards, was not subject to parliamentary oversight and included warnings of legal sanction for non-compliance.

**2.12** Article 22 of Law No. 058/2024 limits national CSOs to membership of no more than three umbrella organisations. This restriction raises concerns regarding its compatibility with the right to freedom of association, as guaranteed under article 41 of the constitution and international standards, as any restriction should be necessary, legitimate and proportional.

**2.13** We recognise the government's efforts to foster dialogue through umbrella platforms and national policy consultations.<sup>14</sup> While pluralism and consensus are foundational principles enshrined in article 11 of the constitution, and the Cabinet Manual formally mandates consultation with CSOs during policy formulation and review, in practice, these consultative processes are inconsistently applied across different sectors.

**2.14** Additionally, citizens have the right to petition during parliamentary hearings and before the Supreme Court, as provided for under the 2012 Law on the Supreme Court and the Law on the Organisation and Functioning of Jurisdictions in Rwanda. However, the inconsistent application of these mechanisms limits meaningful civil society participation and weakens the institutionalisation of pluralism in legislative and policy processes. For instance, consultations with civil society on the draft law governing health services demonstrate positive efforts at inclusion.<sup>15</sup> However, similar engagement was notably absent during the drafting of the NGO Law, illustrating gaps in consistent application.

### **3. Harassment, intimidation and attacks against civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists**

3.1. During the third UPR cycle, the government received 13 recommendations regarding the protection and promotion of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists. Rwanda accepted three recommendations and noted 10. Among other recommendations, Rwanda committed to 'strengthening the safety of human rights defenders by amending relevant legislation to align with international democratic standards'. The government has expressed a commitment to ensuring a safe and enabling

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<sup>13</sup> 'RGB prohibits NGOs, FBOs, and Common-Benefit Foundations registered in Rwanda to have any kind of cooperation with the Government of Belgium and its affiliated entities', RGB, 27 March 2025, <https://www.rgb.rw/updates/news-detail/public-notice-11>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Explanatory Note of Draft Law Regulating Healthcare Services', Parliament of Rwanda, 2024, <https://www.parliament.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=109571&token=3e3a772a97ec2483f8267ab7683107783410afaa>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

environment for CSOs. However, legal and administrative safeguards necessary to realise this commitment have not been fully established.

- 3.2. Article 12 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders mandates states to take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of HRDs. The ICCPR further guarantees freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. The constitution provides for substantial protection of HRDs and stipulates various freedoms. Chapter 5 of the constitution provides for the respect for and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the government and its agencies.
- 3.3. However, no legal or institutional framework exists for the protection of HRDs and there are no independent mechanisms to investigate threats or reprisals. For instance, the Media Law No. 02/2013 formally recognises the right of journalists to protect sources, but lacks clear safeguards against indirect forms of interference such as surveillance.<sup>16</sup>
- 3.4. The death of journalist and human rights activist John Williams Ntwali on 18 January 2023 attracted significant attention, with calls for an independent investigation into the mysterious circumstances of the traffic accident that caused his death.<sup>17</sup> His passing prompted renewed discussion about the situation of HRDs in Rwanda, contributing to ongoing conversations on protection and promotion of civic space.
- 3.5. In March 2024, human rights advocate François-Xavier Byuma was freed from prison after completing a 19-year sentence over charges of participation in weapons training during the 1994 genocide, along with abduction and assault. He claimed he was denied the opportunity to present a full defence.<sup>18</sup>
- 3.6. In May 2024, Rwandan immigration authorities denied entry to Clémentine de Montjoye, a senior researcher in the Africa division at Human Rights Watch, on arrival at Kigali International Airport. De Montjoye travelled to Rwanda for meetings with foreign diplomatic officials but was told on arrival that she was 'not welcome in Rwanda' for undisclosed 'immigration reasons'. Kenya Airways was instructed to ensure her removal from Rwanda.<sup>19</sup>
- 3.7. In his annual report on 29 September 2022, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted that Rwanda is one of 42 countries where people working or

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<sup>16</sup> 'Current practices in electronic surveillance in the investigation of serious and organized crime', UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/organized-crime/Law-Enforcement/Electronic\\_surveillance.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/organized-crime/Law-Enforcement/Electronic_surveillance.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> 'Court fines speeding driver over death of local journalist', The New Times, 8 February 2023, <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/4854/news/crime/court-fines-speeding-driver-over-death-of-local-journalist>.

<sup>18</sup> 'Activist handed 19-year jail term', The New Times, 24 August 2007, <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/433/National/activist-handed-19-year-jail-term>.

<sup>19</sup> 'Rwanda denies entry to senior human rights researcher', The Guardian, 19 May 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/19/rwanda-denies-entry-to-senior-human-rights-researcher>.

cooperating with UN agencies on human rights issues continue to face intimidation and reprisals.<sup>20</sup>

#### **4. Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information**

- 4.1. During the third UPR cycle, the Government of Rwanda received 14 recommendations regarding freedoms of expression and opinion, accepting 10 and noting four. Among others, the government accepted a recommendation to 'strengthen media pluralism and the safety of journalists by amending the respective legislation to comply with international democratic standards and strengthen measures to encourage the exercise of an independent media and enhance the enjoyment by all persons of the freedom of opinion and expression, collectively and as individuals'. The government has partly implemented seven recommendations by strengthening public outreach mechanisms, including the regular use of official press briefings and social media platforms to facilitate timely and accurate information sharing.
- 4.2. Article 38 of the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression while ICCPR article 19 affirms the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. The government, in collaboration with international development partners, has introduced media training to help develop media capacity, contributing to the development of a professional and responsible media sector.<sup>21</sup>
- 4.3. However, the Media Law (No. 02/2013), while presented as a framework to protect press freedom, remains restrictive. It grants the government authority to license new media outlets and requires journalists to obtain accreditation from state institutions, rather than through independent, self-regulatory bodies.<sup>22</sup>
- 4.4. The Information Communication and Technology (ICT) Law (No. 24/2016) continues to restrict online activities related to freedom of expression. For instance, it criminalises the use of ICTs to cause 'annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'Report details disturbing trends as reprisals continue against people cooperating with the UN', UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 September 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/report-details-disturbing-trendsreprisals-continue-against-people>.

<sup>21</sup> 'Workshop aims to enhance media's role in promoting alternative dispute resolution in Rwanda', Ministry of Justice, 14 March 2025, <https://www.minijust.gov.rw/news-detail/workshop-aims-to-enhance-medias-role-in-promoting-alternative-dispute-resolution-in-rwanda>.

<sup>22</sup> 'Law No. 02/2013 of 08/02/2013 Regulating Media', Government of Rwanda, 11 March 2013, [https://rura.rw/fileadmin/Documents/ICT/Laws/Media\\_Law\\_Official\\_Gazette\\_no\\_10\\_of\\_11\\_03\\_2013.pdf](https://rura.rw/fileadmin/Documents/ICT/Laws/Media_Law_Official_Gazette_no_10_of_11_03_2013.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> 'Official Gazette No. 26 of 27/06/2016', Ministry of ICT and Innovation, 18 June 2016, [https://www.minict.gov.rw/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minict\\_user\\_upload/Documents/Laws/ICT\\_LAW.pdf](https://www.minict.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/minict_user_upload/Documents/Laws/ICT_LAW.pdf)

- 4.5. While some progress has been noted, some recommendations remain unaddressed. Despite the initiatives taken by the government, the enabling environment for freedom of expression remains significantly constrained. Criminal laws continue to pose serious obstacles to free expression. Rwanda's Penal Code provisions still contain offences such as 'spreading false information' and 'divisionism'. They remain broadly defined and fail to meet the requirement of legality as set out under ICCPR article 19(3).
- 4.6. On 5 October 2022, a court acquitted three journalists, Damascene Mutuyimana, Shadrack Niyonsenga and Jean Baptiste Nshimiyimana, who had been detained for four years on charges of spreading false information with the intention of inciting violence and tarnishing the country's image.<sup>24</sup>
- 4.7. The registration process mandated by the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority for all media entities, including online platforms, entails a high degree of bureaucratic control, such as the requirement to secure adequate funding to establish and maintain a broadcasting service, which excludes many small media outlets that lack substantial capital, and therefore attacks as a deterrents against independent voices.<sup>25</sup> This form of oversight deviates from international best practices on media regulation and imposes significant administrative and financial burdens. It runs counter to UN Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 34, interpreting ICCPR article 19, which emphasises that any restrictions on freedom of expression must be lawful, necessary and proportionate.
- 4.8. We further note that while Rwanda has invested in internet access, ICT development<sup>26</sup> and several online news platforms, these advancements have not been matched by a clear and consistent legal framework to protect online freedom of expression. This legal uncertainty creates room for subjective interpretation, undermining press freedom and limiting civic expression.
- 4.9. Despite the existence of Law No. 04/2013 relating to access to information, monitored by the Ombudsman with focal points in each administrative governance sector, compliance challenges continue to undermine its effectiveness, pointing to the need for clear guidelines on practical implementation.<sup>27</sup> We remain attentive to barriers such as broadly worded provisions in criminal law, including on

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<sup>24</sup> 'Rwanda court acquits reporters accused of publishing fake news', Reuters, 5 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rwanda-court-acquits-reporters-accused-publishing-fake-news-2022-10-05>.

<sup>25</sup> 'Regulation 017/R/MR-ICT/RURA/2022 of 17th/01/2022 Governing Broadcasting Services in Rwanda', Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority, 17 January 2022, [https://www.rura.rw/fileadmin/Documents/ICT/Laws/Regulation\\_Governing\\_Broadcasting\\_Services\\_in\\_Rwanda\\_for\\_January\\_2022.pdf](https://www.rura.rw/fileadmin/Documents/ICT/Laws/Regulation_Governing_Broadcasting_Services_in_Rwanda_for_January_2022.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> 'The Power of Internet Connectivity Enhances Learning', UN Rwanda, 4 November 2024, <https://rwanda.un.org/en/282782-power-internet-connectivity-enhances-learning>.

<sup>27</sup> 'Official Gazette No. 10 of 11 March 2013', RGB, [https://www.rgb.rw/fileadmin/user\\_upload/RGB/Publications/LAWS\\_AND\\_REGULATIONS/LAW\\_ACCESS\\_TO\\_INFORMATION-08-02-2013.pdf?utm](https://www.rgb.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/RGB/Publications/LAWS_AND_REGULATIONS/LAW_ACCESS_TO_INFORMATION-08-02-2013.pdf?utm).

destabilising national security, that lack clear and precise limits, which can potentially enable expansive interpretation and undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression.<sup>28</sup> These shortcomings fall short of Rwanda's obligations under the ICCPR and its commitments during the third UPR cycle.

4.10. Pro-government coverage is partly motivated by competition for state advertising revenue. Financial pressures have motivated outlets and journalists to use YouTube as a tool for monetisation, but journalists face restrictions on online expression. For example, authorities have targeted bloggers and journalists, including those using YouTube, with intimidation, arrest and prosecution.

4.11. Journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga was held in detention for his commentary and news reports published on the YouTube channel Ishema TV in April 2020.<sup>29</sup> On 12 November 2021, the Kigali High Court sentenced Dieudonné Niyonsenga, a YouTuber known for criticising the government on Ishema TV, to seven years in prison and a fine of RWF 5 million (approx. US\$3,500) after finding him guilty of using forged documents, obstruction of government orders and impersonation. He was charged on four counts: forgery, humiliating state officials, impersonation and usurping titles with the intention to mislead the public.<sup>30</sup> On 13 October 2021, security personnel arrested Théoneste Nsengimana, who runs the YouTube channel Umubavu TV Online, and charged him with membership of a criminal group, dissemination of propaganda aimed at harming the Rwandan government abroad, inciting unrest and spreading rumours.<sup>31</sup>

4.12. While Law No. 60/2013 regulating the interception of communications prohibits unauthorised interception, we note the lack of clear oversight to prevent targeted misuse and ensure accountability.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. Freedom of peaceful assembly

5.1. During Rwanda's examination under the third UPR cycle, the government received five recommendations on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. It accepted three recommendations, including to increase the space for dissent and discussion and ensure a safe and enabling environment for everyone to exercise these rights,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> 'Rwandan journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga says he was beaten, detained in 'hole'', Committee to Protect Journalists, 31 January 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/01/rwandan-journalist-dieudonne-niyonsenga-says-he-was-beaten-detained-in-hole>.

<sup>30</sup> 'Youtuber & government critic sentenced to prison', CIVICUS Monitor, 11 November 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/youtuber-government-critic-sentenced-prison>.

<sup>31</sup> 'Rwandan journalist Théoneste Nsengimana detained since October 13', Committee to Protect Journalists, 3 November 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/11/rwandan-journalist-theoneste-nsengimana-detained-since-october-13>.

<sup>32</sup> 'Official Gazette No. 41 of 14/10/2013', Rwanda Law Reform Commission, <https://www.rlrc.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=83847&token=5f4c3ae9f5c8ed66419e4a062e0d9c6524635b3a>.

and noted two. However, as evidenced below, the government has not implemented any of the recommendations.

- 5.2. Article 40 of the constitution guarantees the right to peaceful assembly. ICCPR article 21 also obliges states to protect the right to peaceful assembly and ensure any restrictions are lawful, necessary and proportionate. However, the enjoyment of this right remains limited.
- 5.3. Article 225 of the Penal Code criminalises the organisation of public meetings or demonstrations held ‘without prior authorisation’, effectively thwarting the right to peaceful assembly by establishing criminal liability for people who participate in or facilitate such gatherings. Penalties include jail sentences of at least eight days and of between RWF 500,000 and 1,000,000 (approx. US\$350 and US\$700).<sup>33</sup> While intended to maintain public order, this provision deters legitimate civic participation.<sup>34</sup>
- 5.4. Article 225 of Law No. 68/2018 prescribes that if a protester is convicted of threatening health, public order or security, the penalty is a prison sentence of between six months and a year and a fine of RWF 3,000,000 to 5,000,000 (approx. US\$2,100 to US\$3,500).<sup>35</sup> The law fails to recognise or permit spontaneous demonstrations, thereby restricting the practical enjoyment of this right.
- 5.5. Although there are no reports of denial of meeting permits, the fear of severe penalties for violating assembly rules deters most people from engaging in protests.

## **6. Recommendations to the Government of Rwanda**

- 6.1** CIVICUS, CRD and NAR are profoundly concerned by the failure on the part of the Government of the Republic of Rwanda to fully implement the recommendations it accepted in 2021 relating to civic space and HRDs. CIVICUS, CRD and NAR call on the Government of Rwanda to create and maintain, in law and in practice, an enabling environment for civil society, in accordance with the rights enshrined in the ICCPR, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and Human Rights Council resolutions 22/6, 27/5 and 27/31.
- 6.2** At a minimum, the government should take urgent steps to prevent further backsliding on basic and fundamental civil and political rights. Specifically, it should take steps to ensure the realisation of the rights to freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly, the right to operate free from unwarranted state interference and surveillance, the right to communicate and cooperate with UN and

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Official Gazette No. Special of 27/09/2018’, Government of Rwanda, <https://archive.gazettes.africa/archive/rw/2018/rw-government-gazette-dated-2018-09-27-no-special.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

other regional human rights bodies, the right to seek and secure funding and the state's duty to protect. In the light of this, the following specific recommendations are made:

### **6.3 Freedom of association**

- Ensure the exercise of the right to freedom of association, as enshrined in Rwanda's constitution.
- Continue to strengthen the legal system in order to ensure freedom of association.
- Fully ensure the right to freedom of association by strengthening the role of civil society.
- Amend the NGO Law (Law No. 58/2024) to ensure compliance with international standards by clearly defining unclear provisions such as 'good morals' and establish independent oversight and appeal mechanisms for decisions made by the RGB.
- Guarantee meaningful administrative and financial autonomy for CSOs by removing discretionary powers that allow for intervention in internal governance and financial operations without adequate judicial review.
- Simplify procedural requirements for registration and operations, including by removing disproportionate burdens related to name changes, tax clearance and justification of overhead costs, which unduly affect small or grassroots organisations.
- Institutionalise participatory policymaking by creating binding frameworks that mandate the inclusion of independent CSOs in legislative and regulatory processes.

### **6.4 Protection of civil society activists, HRDs and journalists**

- Strengthen media pluralism and the safety of HRDs and journalists by amending legislation to comply with international democratic standards.
- Independently and transparently investigate all allegations of harassment, attacks, unlawful or arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances and killings of civil society activists, HRDs, journalists and political opposition members, and bring those responsible to justice.
- Take all necessary measures to protect civil society activists, HRDs, journalists and political opposition members.
- Take measures to foster a safe and enabling environment for civil society and HRDs, enabling people to live free from harassment, intimidation and persecution as they exercise their rights and organisational mandates.
- Integrate civil society inputs into national human rights action plans, ensuring that their contributions are reflected in policy priorities, implementation frameworks and budgeting decisions.
- Adopt a dedicated legal framework for the protection of HRDs, in line with the UN Declaration on HRDs, including mechanisms for prevention, rapid response and accountability.

## **6.5. Freedoms of expression and opinion , media freedom and access to information**

- Ensure the exercise of the rights to freedoms of expression and opinion and media freedom, as enshrined in Rwanda's constitution.
- Strengthen media pluralism and the safety of journalists and human rights defenders by amending legislation to comply with international democratic standards.
- Strengthen measures to encourage the existence of independent media and enhance the enjoyment by all people of freedoms of expression and opinion, collectively and individually.
- Revise all provisions that undermine freedom of expression and protect journalists and media operators against harassment and intimidation.
- Eliminate all legislative provisions that undermine freedom of expression and the protection of journalists against harassment and intimidation
- Review the Law on Cybercrime (Law No. 60/2018) to ensure that offences related to digital expression, such as the publication of 'false information', are narrowly defined and proportionate.
- Ensure full implementation of the Access to Information Law, including by training public officials, and adopt additional measures to ensure that civic space is meaningfully supported by enabling civil society, journalists and the public to access, share and utilise information appropriately and safely.

## **6.6. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

- Guarantee freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly by taking steps to expand the space for dissent and discussion and ensuring a safe and enabling environment for everyone to exercise these rights.
- Review and revise restrictive practices affecting freedom of peaceful assembly in the context of religious gatherings, ensuring consistency with ICCPR article 21.
- Continue to strengthen the legal system in order to ensure freedom of peaceful assembly.

**7. Annex: Assessment of Implementation of Civic Space recommendations under the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle.**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Implementation Status</b>
<b>134.49</b> – Ensure the exercise of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of the press and peaceful assembly, enshrined in the country’s Constitution (Costa Rica) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 2 para. 2.9
<b>134.50</b> – Strengthen media pluralism and the safety of journalists and human rights defenders by amending the respective legislation to comply with international democratic standards (Czechia) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 3 Para 3.4
<b>134.51</b> – Strengthen measures to encourage the exercise of an independent media (Barbados) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.7
<b>134.52</b> – Intensify efforts to ensure full enjoyment of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association (Ghana) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.2
<b>134.53</b> – Revise provisions that undermine freedom of expression and protect journalists against harassment and intimidation (Italy) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.3
<b>134.54</b> – Promote and protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly (Latvia) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.7
<b>134.55</b> – Eliminate from legislation all provisions that undermine freedom of expression and protect journalists (Lithuania) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.7
<b>134.56</b> – Increase public awareness on media policy and laws to expand media freedom (Maldives) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.2
<b>134.57</b> – Continue implementing reforms aimed at expanding media freedoms (Republic of Korea) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.2
<b>134.58</b> – Strengthen the legal system to ensure freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association (Romania) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.2

<b>134.59</b> – Guarantee the right of freedom of opinion and expression, including access to independent news (Sudan) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.8
<b>134.61</b> – Promote an enabling environment for independent media and CSOs, including legal reforms (Switzerland) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.5
<b>134.62</b> – Protect journalists and ensure State authorities comply with access to information law (UK, and Northern Ireland) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.1
<b>134.63</b> – Ensure fully the right to freedom of association (Spain) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 2 Para. 2.8
<b>134.64</b> – Strengthen the role of civil society (Cameroon) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para. 2.7
<b>134.65</b> – Review registration requirements for local and international NGOs to facilitate the process (Canada) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.8
<b>134.60</b> – Guarantee the freedoms of assembly and expression by increasing the space for dissent and ensuring a safe and enabling environment (Sweden) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Partially implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.8
<b>134.19</b> – Continue efforts aimed at strengthening the process of human rights awareness-raising, education and training of civil society, as well as law enforcement officials, social actors, journalists and trade unions. <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.134	Supported	Implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.2
135.44 Conduct thorough, impartial and independent investigations into all reports of harassment and attacks on human rights defenders and journalists, and bring those responsible to justice <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para.VI	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 3 Para 3.4, 3.5
136.40 Ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society, including by lifting onerous registration requirements on civil society organizations (Ireland) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.4

136.42 Guarantee a vibrant civil society and the independence of NGO s by revising laws affecting their registration and operations (Norway) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented- Source: Section 2 Para 2.9
136.43 Guarantee the independence of civil society organizations and human rights defenders (Côte d'Ivoire) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented- Source: Section 2 Para 2.4, 2.7.
135.42 Consider reviewing the registration requirements for both national and international NGO s with a view to simplifying the process (Malta) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para. VII	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.4, 2.7.
135.43 Amend Law No. 04/2012 and Law No. 05/2012, in consultation with civil society organizations , in order to remove existing restrictions on their legal registration (Uruguay) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para. VII	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.4, 2.7.
135.41 Promote the right to freedom of expression by ending detentions and harassment of members of the media and civil society for their reporting (United States of America) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para.VI	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 4.10
136.29 Promote media freedom by creating a legal framework for the self- regulatory Rwanda Media Commission (Germany ) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 4.4, 4.5
136.30 Strengthen freedom of expression, in line with the Constitution of Rwanda and international law, particularly through the establishment of a binding legal instrument that guarantees the independence of the Rwanda Media Commission (Belgium) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.5
136.31 Protect and uphold the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including by respecting and supporting free and independent media, in line with international human rights standards (Iceland) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.4, 4.10
136.32 Take further measures to protect journalists and human rights defenders (Japan) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Partially implemented

		Para Source: Section 4 4.2
136.33 Take measures to protect freedom of expression and protect journalists from harassment and injustices (Norway) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.4, 4.5.
136.34 Take concrete steps to ensure media independence (Sierra Leone) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented
136.35 Remove from the legislation any provision that violates the right to freedom of expression (Spain) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.3, 4.9
136.36 Amend article 2 (19) of the media law to broaden the definition of journalist in order to include citizen journalists, freelance journalists and bloggers, in accordance with international standards on freedom of expression (Canada) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 4.10)
136.37 Enhance freedom of expression by amending the 2018 Penal Code to repeal the offence of spreading false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause hostile international opinion against the Rwandan Government and insults or defamation against the President (Australia) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.3, 4.10
136.38 Take measures against the legal ambiguity regarding the competences of media regulatory bodies such as the Rwanda Media Commission in order to strengthen their independence against government interference and align them with international standards (Austria) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.5.
136.39 Guarantee the protection and freedom of expression of politicians, journalists and rights defenders and fight against the impunity of the perpetrators of violence against them (France) <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 4 Para 4.10
135.40 Amend article 96 of the Penal Code regarding incitement to genocide to bring it into line with international standards on freedom of expression (Slovenia); <b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para. VII	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 3 Para 3.5

<p>136.44 Ensure the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association ; fully investigate threats, arbitrary arrests, intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders, who are recognized as stakeholders in the national Human Rights Action Plan; and review the registration of NGOs in order to simplify the process (Finland)</p> <p><b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14 - Para.136</p>	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.8, 5.2
<p>135.45 Take measures to protect human right defenders and journalists from harassment and attacks and ensure independent credible investigation s of alleged cases and the prosecution of offenders (Austria);</p> <p><b>Source of Position:</b> A/HRC/47/14/Add.1 - Para.VI</p>	Noted	Not implemented Source: Section 2 Para 2.8, 5.2