



UPR Info pre-sessions – 37th Session of the UPR Working Group

Republic of Rwanda (7 December 2020)

Statement delivered on behalf of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

This statement is delivered on behalf of CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists, and DefendDefenders, a regional organisation that seeks to strengthen the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) throughout the East and Horn of Africa sub-region. CIVICUS and DefendDefenders routinely submit joint UPR reports.

Regarding Rwanda, and in this statement, we focus on civic space, looking at the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the situation of human rights defenders, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. For further information, analysis and recommendations, our report is available online¹ and upon request.

An analysis of recommendations received in 2015 shows that implementation of those Rwanda accepted has been weak and partial. Concerns are mounting over a disconnect between law and practice. HRDs, civil society activists and journalists have been targeted in a series of attacks, which points to a pattern of undue restrictions.

Regarding **freedom of opinion and expression**, Rwanda falls behind on its commitments. In practice significant restrictions on access to information, freedom of speech, and the political space persist. Cases of harassment and intimidation of journalists have been recorded.

Regarding **HRDs**, we stress that they have been systemically targeted since 2015. The examples documented illustrate a pattern of systematic threats. This points to a failure on the part of the Government of Rwanda to uphold and implement accepted UPR recommendations. Since 2015, threats, arbitrary arrests, intimidation and harassment of HRDs and other dissenting voices have been matched by increasingly sophisticated online smear and intimidation campaigns. Violations are committed with impunity.

Regarding **freedom of peaceful assembly and association**, the analysis is similar. Since 2015, Rwanda has failed to uphold and implement relevant recommendations.

We call on the Government of Rwanda to create and maintain, in law and in practice, an enabling environment for civil society. At a minimum, urgent steps should be taken to prevent further backsliding. **Recommendations** are available in our report. We stress the following:

- Fully investigate threats against HRDs, journalists, and representatives of the media and bring the perpetrators to justice;

¹ DefendDefenders, "DefendDefenders and CIVICUS release report ahead of Rwanda's UPR review," 10 July 2020, <https://defenddefenders.org/defenddefenders-and-civicus-release-report-ahead-of-rwandas-upr-review/> (accessed on 12 November 2020).

- Revise the Penal Code and national security laws to ensure that provisions related to criminal libel and insult are consistent with international human rights standards;
- Desist from conducting smear, misinformation and threat campaigns against HRDs, journalists, human rights groups and others seeking to express legitimate opinions;
- Amend restrictive provisions of Law No. 04/12 that interfere with the operations of CSOs in Rwanda; and
- Approve, facilitate and protect peaceful demonstrations, including those expressing views that are critical of the government's policies and actions.