INGOs suspended in Burundi amid crackdown on civil society

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By [Christin Roby](https://www.devex.com/news/authors/1274425)

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A three-month suspension placed on almost all international NGOs operating in Burundi earlier this month is part of a wider crackdown on civil society, analysts say, in a nation where an estimated [3.6 million](https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-bulletin-humanitaire-publication-15-ao-t-2018) people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Government officials claim the ban comes as a result of organizations violating an article in the [General Framework for Cooperation between the Republic of Burundi and Foreign NGOs](https://www.presidence.gov.bi/2017/01/23/loi-n1-01-du-23-janvier-2017-portant-modification-de-la-loi-n1-011-du-23-juin-1999-portant-modification-du-decret-loi-n1-033-du-22-aout-1990-portant-cadre-general-de-la-cooperatio/), a 2017 amendment that means recruitment of national staff must respect ethnic quotas laid out in the constitution.

But humanitarians argue that while the national constitution does seek to achieve ethnic balance within public administration, it does not include recruitment parameters for NGOs. “The logic behind the constitutional law is to encourage power sharing … and no one is questioning power sharing as a principle at the government level … but why are these quotas being specifically implemented on INGOs and not other sectors?” Rachel Nicholson, an [Amnesty International](https://www.devex.com/organizations/amnesty-international-44474) researcher, asked.

Some 130 international NGOs are represented in Burundi, according to a government official. The suspension excludes those INGOs running hospitals and schools, in what some say is a tactic to avoid blame for any negative impacts of the suspension.

Some humanitarians are concerned the move follows other attempts to control the actions of local and international NGOs and silence dissent in the country. In December 2016, the National Assembly adopted two bills: One that compels NGOs to obtain authorization from the minister of interior for any activity and another that requires any transfer of funds of foreign origin to pass through the central bank.

“This suspension represents the evolution of shrinking space for INGOs and civil society in Burundi,” a humanitarian based in Bujumbura told Devex on condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions.

Tensions between civil society and government officials have been worsening since 2015, when President Nkurunziza announced his bid for a third term in office — a move that many deemed unconstitutional. It sparked widespread protests, and subsequently a failed coup.

“NGOs are constantly under attack, [so] that you wouldn’t dare leave your house,” the aid worker said. “NGOs have very good relationships with local partners and populations, so the hostility [against NGOs] is a discourse used [by government] to legitimize their actions and get support from the population.”

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Experts also speculate that the crackdown on NGOs could be part of a government attempt to control INGO finances and activities following the [2016 suspension](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/countries/burundi_en) of direct financial support from the European Union; or that it could stem from a “desire to get rid of observers who are suspected of documenting human rights and informing the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and others,” a source told Devex.

“International NGOs are not providing resistance, but instead providing resources to the population” of which the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](https://www.devex.com/organizations/united-nations-office-for-the-coordination-of-humanitarian-affairs-unocha-20984) has estimated [one-third](https://www.unocha.org/burundi) are in need of humanitarian assistance, Nicholson added. “With all of the politics, [it is important] not to lose sight of the fact that this is going to affect a population in great need.”

The government has now given INGOs three months to produce four documents or risk being completely deregistered in the country: A signed cooperation agreement with the ministry of foreign affairs; a signed partnership agreement with the related ministry acknowledging acceptance of the 2017 NGO law; an agreement to respect banking regulations that require international currency transactions to pass through the central bank; and a progressive plan which outlines how the organization will eliminate ethnic inequalities in staffing within three years.

Nicholson’s concern is that state officials could use the requested documents to nullify certain organizations, saying that what is required of the three-year staffing plan remains unclear. However, it seems that once the criteria are satisfied, organizations could reopen.

“We are not taking a definite position on this [suspension] but rather asking a few questions because it is important to reject some of the inequalities of the past in Burundi, but also how do you make sure it is through a process that is clear and transparent and where there are safeguards in place to make sure that you are not creating new inequalities or grievances,” she explained.