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Africa - Rwanda

Censorship instead of regulation

## What lies behind the indefinite ban on the BBC

2 June 2015

**Rwanda's announcement that it is indefinitely banning BBC broadcasts in the local Kinyarwanda language has highlighted the country's questionable methods of media regulation. Reporters Without Borders believes the ban is part of a planned gag on the media, partly with an eye to presidential elections in 2017.**

The ban was announced on 29 May by the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA), now the de facto media regulator. [The BBC's Kinyarwanda radio broadcasts had already been suspended since 25 October](#) over a controversial BBC TV documentary about the Rwandan genocide. This announcement changed the provisional ban into a permanent one.

*"This decision just confirms the grave and constant decline in freedom of information in Rwanda,"* said Cléa Kahn-Sriber, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk.

*"Now that little remains of Rwanda's own independent media, it seems that the government is focusing on the international news media, giving itself specific tools to legalize censorship. Space for the media is shrinking in Rwanda as the regulatory mechanisms are being changed to give the government ever more control."*

**Fred Muvunyi** – who left the country last month after resigning as head of the Rwandan Media Commission (RMC), a self-regulatory body – said the RURA's decision has "no legal basis" because the prime minister has yet to issue the order specifying its responsibilities.

*"I don't understand where it got these powers,"* Muvunyi said. *"The special commission of enquiry that the RURA set up to determine the BBC's future in Rwanda knew in advance what conclusions it wanted to reach."*

After working for state-owned media and then sitting on the board of the Association of Rwandan Journalists, Muvunyi was appointed president of the RMC in September 2013. He said its room for manoeuvre was steadily reduced in the course of the past year, reflecting a government desire to move from regulation to direct control of the media.

*"The RMC is supposed to be a media self-regulatory body,"* he said. *"Its job is to ensure that journalists respect media ethics and that media freedom is respected. Unfortunately, the role that I was supposed to play was different from this mandate. The pressure became too much."*

*"I have the feeling that the situation has worsened even more quickly since the BBC affair. But if you look at the legal framework, there had been changes and improvements since 2011. The very creation of the RMC, a media self-regulatory body, was a step forward."*

The documentary that BBC TV broadcast in October 2014 accused Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front of involvement in mass murder, enraging the government and part of the population. The anger was used as pretext for suspending the BBC's local Kinyarwanda radio broadcasts but, in Muvunyi's view, the sanction was misplaced.

*"As far as we were concerned at the RMC, the BBC's radio programmes had nothing to do with the British TV reports broadcast from London,"* he said. *"So we protested against the process of suspension. Some people in the government did not appreciate this, and [we were subjected to threats and intimidation.](#)"*

The threats continued until February, when the prime minister revived a year-old proposed

regulation decree, under which many of the responsibilities of the RMC, an independent body, would be transferred to the RURA, which is supposed to regulate electricity, water, post and transport and which is directly overseen by the prime minister.

*"We again protested, saying this transfer of power would not benefit Rwanda's media community and journalists," Muvunyi said. "We were accused of treason and of working for foreigners and we know full well what this kind of accusation means in our country."*

Finally last month, the RMC was prevented from publishing [a report on the state of the media in Rwanda](#) that had been drafted by international experts with funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNPD). It was blocked by the Rwanda Governance Board, an agency attached to the local government ministry, which had in turn inherited the communication ministry's responsibilities.

*"We were made to understand that publishing the report would be inappropriate although there was never anything the official," Muvunyi said. "But the report was very moderate. The BBC affair was not even mentioned. I had previously tried to resign discreetly because I could no longer work, but I was told from reliable sources that I would not be allowed to step down quietly. So I left the country for my personal safety."*

For many observers of Rwandan politics, it is hard not to regard this progressive restriction of media freedom as part of the preparations for the 2017 presidential election and a probable constitutional amendment allowing President Kagame to run for a third term.

Kagame has a reputation for being a thoughtful man, and reducing the space for debate two years in advance is certainly a mark of foresight.

[Rwanda is ranked 161st out of 180 countries](#) in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

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