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Rwanda: Official interference in affairs of human rights NGO places independent human rights work in peril

The former leadership of the Rwandan human rights organization LIPRODHOR, the Rwandan League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights (*la Ligue rwandaise pour la promotion et la défense des droits de l'homme*) has been forced out. The circumstances in which the board was replaced strongly indicate the involvement of the Rwandan authorities.

The capacity of human rights defenders to work in Rwanda has been further weakened and the space for meaningful human rights work has all but closed up.

The move followed a decision by the former leadership to leave the Collective of Leagues and Associations for the Defense of Human Rights in Rwanda (*Collectif des ligues et associations de défense des droits de l'homme au Rwanda*, CLADHO), a platform of human rights organizations, on the grounds that its executive committee had been put in place by the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), an official body charged with promoting and monitoring good governance.

On 3 July 2013, the President of LIPRODHOR wrote a letter to announce LIPRODHOR's decision to pull out of CLADHO, questioning the selection of CLADHO's new committee and the network's capacity to protect member organizations. Two other partner organizations also signed the letter.

On 21 July 2013, a group of LIPRODHOR members, which included a former president of the organization, held an extraordinary general assembly to discuss the organization's decision to leave CLADHO. The meeting was conducted without notifying LIPRODHOR's governing board, which included the President and the Vice-President. According to the statute of the organization, members should receive an invitation letter at least eight days before the meeting. In addition, the number of participants in the meeting did not meet that required for a General Assembly, which needs an absolute majority. The meeting resulted not only in the reversal of LIPRODHOR's withdrawal from CLADHO, but in the replacement of LIPRODHOR's board and President. A new board, including a new President, were elected and scheduled to begin in post from 26 July 2013.

The election of the new board was swiftly recognized by the RGB, despite complaints by the ousted board regarding the legitimacy of the procedure. The former board of LIPRODHOR has since launched a legal action against the decision of the RGB to support the former board's dismissal, as well as the cancellation of the decision to leave CLADHO. The case is on-going.

The Rwandan authorities have shown that they have too much influence in the internal workings of NGOs. Incidents such as these demonstrate how legitimate freedom of association can be curtailed and how an organization's independence can be compromised.

The procedure for resolving internal conflicts in civil society organizations in Rwanda is governed by law. The 2012 law governing the organisation and the functioning of national NGOs specifies that all national NGO statutes shall provide for an organ charged with conflict resolution. To comply, Article 19 of LIPRODHOR's statute provides for a *Committee for Discipline and Conflict Resolution* for handling such disputes, but this was not used.

Restrictions have been placed on LIPRODHOR's activities. A workshop scheduled for 24 July 2013 was prevented from going ahead by the police. The workshop, organized by LIPRODHOR, was on how civil society organizations could submit evidence as part of the reporting process for the United Nations Universal Periodic Review.

Background information

Amnesty International has documented longstanding patterns of intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders by the Rwandan authorities. Human rights defenders are regularly intimidated, threatened, and subjected to public and personalized attacks or administrative obstacles. Reporting on human rights violations, especially if publically denounced, leads to hostile government reactions. Human rights defenders often avoid working on sensitive areas, and refrain from or delay publishing to minimize potential repercussions. Rwandan human rights defenders also face challenges within their own organizations which have been infiltrated by people close to the authorities.

Few human rights organizations left in Rwanda retain some level of independence, but LIPRODHOR has been one such organization. It was established in 1991 and became one of the only credible independent national human rights organisations. By 1999, it had significantly increased its operations, staff and monitoring presence. LIPRODHOR's capacity to investigate and report on human rights violations incurred attacks from the Rwandan authorities. Its staff members have repeatedly been intimidated, harassed and forced into exile. The authorities have sought to discredit the work of the organization. A parliamentary commission report in March 2003 accused the Democratic Republican Movement (Mouvement démocratique républicain), a political opposition party, of propagating an alleged "divisionist" and discriminatory program and accused LIPRODHOR of obtaining foreign funding for the party. A second parliamentary commission in June 2004 alleged that LIPRODHOR, along with other organizations, was guilty of holding and disseminating genocide ideology and recommended its dissolution.

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