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# RADIO SILENCE IN EXILE? NOT FOR THESE BURUNDIAN JOURNALISTS

12/02/18 **Written by Sophie Baggott**

Radio silence in exile? Not for these Burundian journalists

□ **“When I found out that I was wanted by the Burundian ruling party’s militia, I felt as if the sky was falling on my head...”**



For Burundi’s independent reporters, such fear has been the crushing norm in recent years.

More than 100 journalists have fled the country since a failed coup in 2015 triggered the government to clamp down on the media. The disappearance of Burundian freelance journalist [Jean Bigirimana](#) in July 2016 intensified these fears; the sky fell for freelancer Laurent\* the following week, when he discovered he was on a list of reporters wanted by the government. “I took precautions to shelter myself”, he said.

Laurent and his family left their homeland for neighbouring Rwanda – but in exile they faced other dangers. “Without work in a foreign country, I wondered how my children would live”, he recalled. They had to drop out of school due to the family’s dire financial straits.

The answer to Laurent’s anxieties, at least for the short term, was a partnership between the Rory Peck Trust and [Radio Inzamba](#). Burundian exiled journalists in Rwanda’s capital, Kigali, had begun broadcasting this online radio channel in July 2015 – just months after Burundian President Nkurunziza’s controversial bid for a third term in breach of the country’s

constitution. The President's move had provoked civil unrest, prompting the authorities to ban three independent radio stations broadcasting outside Burundi's capital, Bujumbura.

Many of the journalists who came under fire now make up Radio Inzamba's staff. Working alongside them since April 2017 have been visiting freelance journalists, each funded for a minimum of three months by the Rory Peck Trust. Through this initiative, staff and freelancers have "an opportunity to reconnect", said Inzamba's director Alexandre Niyungeko. The freelance journalists bring varied experience and boost the station's output, he added.



Alexandre Niyungeko, Radio Inzamba Director

"Radio Inzamba has managed to become an alternative news outlet for the Burundian public, whose right of access to information has been denied by Bujumbura's authorities", Alexandre explained. Inzamba covers topics that are off-limits for Burundi-based media due to fears for safety or closure. "It is very important to continue reporting on Burundi to prevent our country from falling into oblivion and to inform the public about what is happening there", Alexandre explained, "To be able to give a voice to those who can no longer report in Burundi's media..."

#### Find out more about Radio Inzamba through the Trust's new podcast

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Laurent said of his time at the radio station, "Working with Inzamba helped me to feel good still after months of inaction." He also had the opportunity to develop new skills: "Working on radio was a great experience for me as I had been used to the print media."

Another Burundian freelancer, Sylvie\*, who joined the radio station as a visiting journalist last year, agreed about the need to get back to work: "Working for Inzamba changed many things for me because, despite having fled my country, I'm still active in my field. The work also gives me the opportunity to stay informed about news of Burundi."

Sylvie's perspective on the situation for press freedom is mixed. "I find it hard to imagine the future for journalists in exile, as they are limited by the fact that they aren't working in their field", she said. On top of that, Sylvie added, life for a refugee is very hard and no one can be sure of when things will be better in Burundi. "The future for journalists who stay in the country is just as distressing, since their freedom of expression and opinion is constantly violated – they are limited in their investigative work", the freelancer continued.

Despite this, Sylvie can't help but miss Burundi. "I'm sad to think of my motherland – so many memories, good and bad", she said. "When I think of Burundi I feel devastated as, although I know the sun will ultimately rise on this beautiful country that we associated with milk and honey in the past, I tell myself that we are losing a generation of good patriots. Yet I also feel a breath of hope about the future when thinking about Burundi."

Freelance journalist Adrien\* spent several months working at Radio Inzamba in 2017. Before he fled Burundi, the Imbonerakure (the ruling party's militarised youth wing) had threatened and accused him of collaborating with Burundian media in exile. "Horror", Adrien said simply when asked how he felt at the time. "I saw that the situation would get worse", he added. An escalating series of threats eventually pushed Adrien to flee to Rwanda.

Even in the face of present struggles, Adrien holds some hope about his country's prospects. "The future of journalists in Burundi and in exile may improve if we put it right, with your support", he said. In the meantime? "We must continue to work in exile, because the people of Burundi and the world need to be informed."



Radio Inzamba journalists at work

Radio Inzamba is certainly keeping up the momentum on this. The station's long list of ambitions includes extending its broadcasting hours, programmes, and access routes for the public to listen, its director Alexandre said. "Our overall goal is to cover all of Burundi, so even the most remote corners of the country can tune in to Inzamba."

A cautious yet resilient optimism prevailed among the outlooks of all Radio Inzamba's freelance visiting journalists. "I had regret to see the right of expression partly buried", said a fourth freelancer, Anatole. "But Burundian journalists in the country and in exile can still, as always, do good so that the right to information may again become a reality."

"And, in this noble task, it is with your support that this will work out."

**To listen to Radio Inzamba's latest broadcasts and for more information about the radio station, visit [their website](#) or [Facebook page](#).**

*\*Names have been changed for the freelancers' safety.*

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