

Three Burundian lawyers sentenced to lifelong imprisonment 14 June 2021

In February 2021, Burundian lawyers Dieudonné Bashirahishize, Armel Niyongere, Vital Nshimirimana were informed that they were sentenced in absentia to lifelong imprisonment.

In January 2017, the three Burundian lawyers [had already been disbarred](#) from the Burundi Bar Association by request of its Ministry of Justice on the charges of “participation in an insurrectional movement”, “attempt to overthrow the state institutions” and “violation of the code of conduct”. It is believed that their disbarment is connected to their work on a human rights violation reports in Burundi, which was discussed in July 2016 by the United Nations Committee against Torture in Geneva.

Recently, the Supreme Court [sentenced](#) the lawyers in absentia, among other human rights defenders and journalists, to life imprisonment and accused them of a coup attempt against the former president. We have been informed that this judgement was issued in secret in June 2020. It was not until 2 February 2021, that the three lawyers were informed about the judgment of the Supreme Court, after the Supreme Court published a document about the case.

According to the information received, the three lawyers have tried to get access to the procedural files; however, this was not allowed and was met with threats and intimidations. As of today, the lawyers still have not had access to any case files.

Article 16 of the United Nations (UN) Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers states that governments must ensure that lawyers “are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance or improper interference.” The Principles further require that lawyers “shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards, and ethics. Basic Principle 21 states that “is the duty of the competent authorities to ensure lawyers access to appropriate information, files and documents in their possession or control in sufficient time to enable lawyers to provide effective legal assistance to their clients. Such access should be provided at the earliest appropriate time”.

Lawyers for Lawyers is concerned about the situation of lawyers in Burundi. Already in October 2016, Lawyers for Lawyers and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) shared concerns about the situation of Dieudonné Bashirahishize, Armel Niyongere and Vital Nshimirimana in a [joint letter](#) to the President of the Republic of Burundi.

In view of the above, Lawyers for Lawyers urges the authorities of Burundi to:

- Put an end to all acts of harassment, including judicial harassment against Dieudonné Bashirahishize, Armel Niyongere and Vital Nshimirimana;
- Guarantee in all circumstances that all lawyers in Burundi are able to carry out their legitimate professional activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.