

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

15 October 2020 AI Index Number: AFR 16/3230/2020

# BURUNDI: RELEASE OUTSPOKEN OPPOSITION POLITICIAN

The arrest of former parliamentarian Fabien Banciryano on 2 October 2020 on charges of rebellion, defamation and threatening internal state security sends a clear message that Burundi's new government is intolerant of peaceful dissent. Assuming the charges against him are based solely on statements he has made, Amnesty International calls on the Burundian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release the opposition politician, who has been outspoken on human rights issues in the country.

Fabien Banciryano was called in for questioning at the Special Research Bureau (BSR) on 2 October and detained there until 8 October, when he was brought before a magistrate at the Ntahangwa parquet in Bujumbura. After a lengthy hearing behind closed doors, the magistrate confirmed his arrest and provisional detention, and he was transferred to Mpimba prison. Fabien Banciryano's fragile state of health and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic raise additional concerns about his continued detention, and Amnesty International calls on the prison authorities to ensure that he has access to appropriate medical care.

The accusations against Fabien Banciryano appear to be based primarily on statements made while he was a member of the National Assembly between 2015 and 2020, which would normally be covered by parliamentary immunity. In a letter to the National Independent Human Rights Commission (CNIDH) on 7 October 2020, Fabien Banciryano noted that he had been interrogated in relation to speeches made during sessions of the National Assembly.

While serving in parliament, Fabien Banciryano was a rare voice of dissent. In February 2020, Fabien Banciryano opposed the designation of Pierre Nkurunziza as the country's Supreme Guide of Patriotism, saying that there had been numerous killings and other human rights violations during his 15 years in office. In March 2020, he wrote to the Bubanza prosecutor asking them to investigate 21 cases of enforced disappearances and killings in the province since 2016. His arrest is a clear attack on the right to freedom of expression and sends a chilling message that anyone speaking out against human rights violations, regardless of rank, risks prosecution.

Previously, during a September 2018 session of the national assembly, he came under fire after supporting the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi and denouncing the continuing human rights violations in the country. The then-Justice Minister, Aimée Laurentine Kanyana, issued a warning to those spreading "alarmist information without the facts", asking the President of the National Assembly to initiate proceedings against them. After the session, police blocked access to his house to prevent him from holding a press conference. Similarly, on 2 October 2020, the day of his arrest, Fabien Banciryano had been planning to hold a press conference to address negative statements made about him by a journalist, but permission to hold the event was refused.

Fabien Banciryano's arrest further undermines hopes that President Evariste Ndayishimiye's government will set a new direction on human rights and allow space for genuine dialogue in Burundi.