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Rwanda urged to end clampdown on dissent as Charles Ntakirutinka released

The release today of a former government minister following a decade in prison has prompted Amnesty International to call for an end to the ongoing persecution of political opponents and journalists in Rwanda.

"Charles Ntakirutinka spent 10 years of his life in prison because he formed a political party," said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Africa Director.

"Ten years after Charles Ntakirutinka was jailed, political opponents and journalists still spend years in prison for speaking out.

"The Rwandan government should put promises to respect freedom of expression and association into practice."

Considered a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, Charles Ntakirutinka was arrested in April 2002, as part of a crackdown before the 2003 presidential elections, the first elections after the 1994 genocide.

After serving as a minister in the post-genocide government, Charles Ntakirutinka launched a new political party, the Democratic Party for Renewal (PDR-Ubuyanja), in 2001 with former President Pasteur Bizimungu.

After an unfair trial in 2004, Charles Ntakirutinka was convicted of "inciting civil disobedience" and "association with criminal elements".

The prosecution claimed he had organized clandestine meetings, along with his party colleagues, to disturb public order, provoke civil conflict and target certain government authorities for assassination.

The Rwandan authorities continue to prosecute political opponents and journalists for criticizing the government. Repression escalates in the run-up to elections.

The months leading up to the August 2010 presidential elections, which President Kagame won with 93 per cent of the vote, saw a crackdown on freedom of expression and association.

New opposition parties were prevented from contesting the elections. The United Democratic Forces (FDU-Inkingi) and the Democratic Green Party were unable to obtain security clearance to organize meetings needed for their registration.

The only new party to secure registration, PS-Imberakuri, was infiltrated by dissident members and decided not to stand.

Bernard Ntaganda, president of the Ideal Social Party (PS-Imberakuri), was sentenced to four years imprisonment in February 2011. He was found guilty of “divisionism” for holding public speeches criticizing government policies ahead of the 2010 elections, breaching state security and attempting to plan an “unauthorized demonstration”.

His prosecution for threatening state security and divisionism was solely based on speeches criticizing government policies. His case is currently on appeal.

The trial of Victoire Ingabire, leader of the United Democratic Forces (FDU-Inkingi), is on-going. She is charged with terrorism, creating an armed group, “genocide ideology”, “sectarianism”, and willingly disseminating rumours aimed at inciting the public against the existing leadership.

The “genocide ideology” charges were based, in part, on her public call for the prosecution of war crimes committed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).