

## In Focus:

### Funding Locally: The Power of Frontline Activism in Burundi

*Contributed by Tony Tate, Program Officer, Fund for Global Human Rights  
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On February 7, 2012, Burundian police officers arrested human rights activist Faustin Ndikumana. Faustin is the head of an organization known as PARCEM (an acronym loosely translated from the French as Action and Speech for the Evolution of Mentality), which regularly publishes reports on human rights violations, investigates corruption in the public sector, and promotes the economic and social rights of rural Burundians. One week prior to Faustin's arrest, PARCEM had released a report highlighting corruption in the hiring of judicial personnel.



He then conducted a round of radio and television interviews related to the report's findings. Apparently due to his public stance, Faustin was charged with defaming the Minister of Justice and was placed in Bujumbura's overcrowded and unsanitary central prison. The local human rights community reacted to Faustin's arrest swiftly and effectively. This illustrates the importance of funding a number of local human rights groups that work collectively to mount rapid and coordinated responses to such threats.

Within days of Faustin's arrest, nine Burundian rights organizations issued a joint press statement calling for his release. This effort was spearheaded by FORSC, an organization that coordinates civil society activity in the country. Long-time activist Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, a former recipient of the Martin Ennals Human Rights Award and Director of the organization APRODH, gave press interviews denouncing Faustin's detention. APRODH also facilitated legal representation for Faustin through an emergency fund that the organization administers to assist activists in danger. In a show of solidarity, members of FORSC, APRODH and other groups attended Faustin's legal hearings en masse and routinely visited him in prison. At the same time, these organizations quietly made use of existing connections with judges, police and other government officials to ensure Faustin's safety and to advocate for his release.

Faustin's arrest took place in the context of a wider crackdown on civil society in this small, landlocked country located directly south of Rwanda. Burundi and its neighbor Rwanda share many attributes including a similar ethnic makeup, geography, language, colonial history and pattern of horrific cycles of state-orchestrated killings since independence. After the end of the civil wars in both countries, however, they followed a very different trajectory in dealing with civil society. In Rwanda, President Paul Kagame has effectively silenced any internal criticism of his regime, whereas in Burundi human rights activists and journalists had enjoyed relative freedom to promote their views and press for change. The existence of a flourishing civil society in Burundi challenged the dominantly held view that countries emerging from conflict must necessarily curtail human rights in the name of stability and economic development. This situation changed abruptly in 2010 when President Nkurunziza was elected to a second term and his government began cracking down on activists and journalists. To counter this, civil society groups have coordinated their efforts to push back against government attempts to narrow public debate and democratic space.

Two weeks after his arrest, Faustin was released from prison on bail, although as of this writing he still faces defamation charges. His release can be partially attributed to the actions of international actors. In this case, Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project issued press releases calling for Faustin's liberation. Ambassadors and UN officials in Burundi also used diplomatic means to help secure his release. Added to this, however, were the actions taken by APRODH, FORSC and other organizations in advocating for his freedom which shows that local actors have a critical and unique role to play in effecting change. These groups choose to work together to provide protection to one another and to help push back against government attempts to close democratic space and limit individual freedoms and civil and political rights. This example shows that human rights groups can amplify their message by combining their efforts and providing some protection for one another, particularly when taking a dangerous public stance.

The effectiveness of frontline human rights groups in responding to the arrest of a colleague demonstrates the importance of international funders providing support to national human rights groups as part of a comprehensive portfolio that includes funding at the international, regional and national levels.

In Burundi, a principle strategy of the Fund for Global Human Rights has been to fund local organizations that collectively push back against government attempts to limit citizen's enjoyment of their civil and political rights. By providing support to an array of organizations such as APRODH, FORSC, PARCEM and others, these groups can more easily coordinate their advocacy and combine efforts when one of them comes under threat. Additionally, our grantees have more autonomy in selecting what issues they want to work on and respond to unforeseen issues as they arise with the use of general support grants (such as in the case of the arrest of Faustin).

Their timely response to Faustin's arrest and the steps taken to secure his release are an example of how this strategy is working. Additionally, small investments of financial or technical resources can yield large results in the hands of local activists who strive to hold their governments accountable and to build better societies. The Fund for Global Human Rights makes grants of 5,000 up to 30,000 USD for ongoing, one year support. When a funder is able to provide direct funding to the "grass roots" these relatively small amounts of money can yield big returns in terms of what groups are able to do and how far a few thousand dollars can go.

#### **Resources for Funders:**

- Visit The Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) – [www.fundforglobalhumanrights.org](http://www.fundforglobalhumanrights.org) or contact Tony Tate at [ttate@globalhumanrights.org](mailto:ttate@globalhumanrights.org).
- Read the article, [\*Rights Groups Demand Release of Burundi Anti-graft Activist\*](#), Democracy Digest, February 2012.
- Read the article, [\*Growing Grassroots Philanthropy\*](#), on the website of the Global Greengrants Fund.
- Read [\*Advocacy Funding, The Philanthropy of Changing Minds\*](#), by GrantCraft.