

World Watch Research

# Burundi: Background Information

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**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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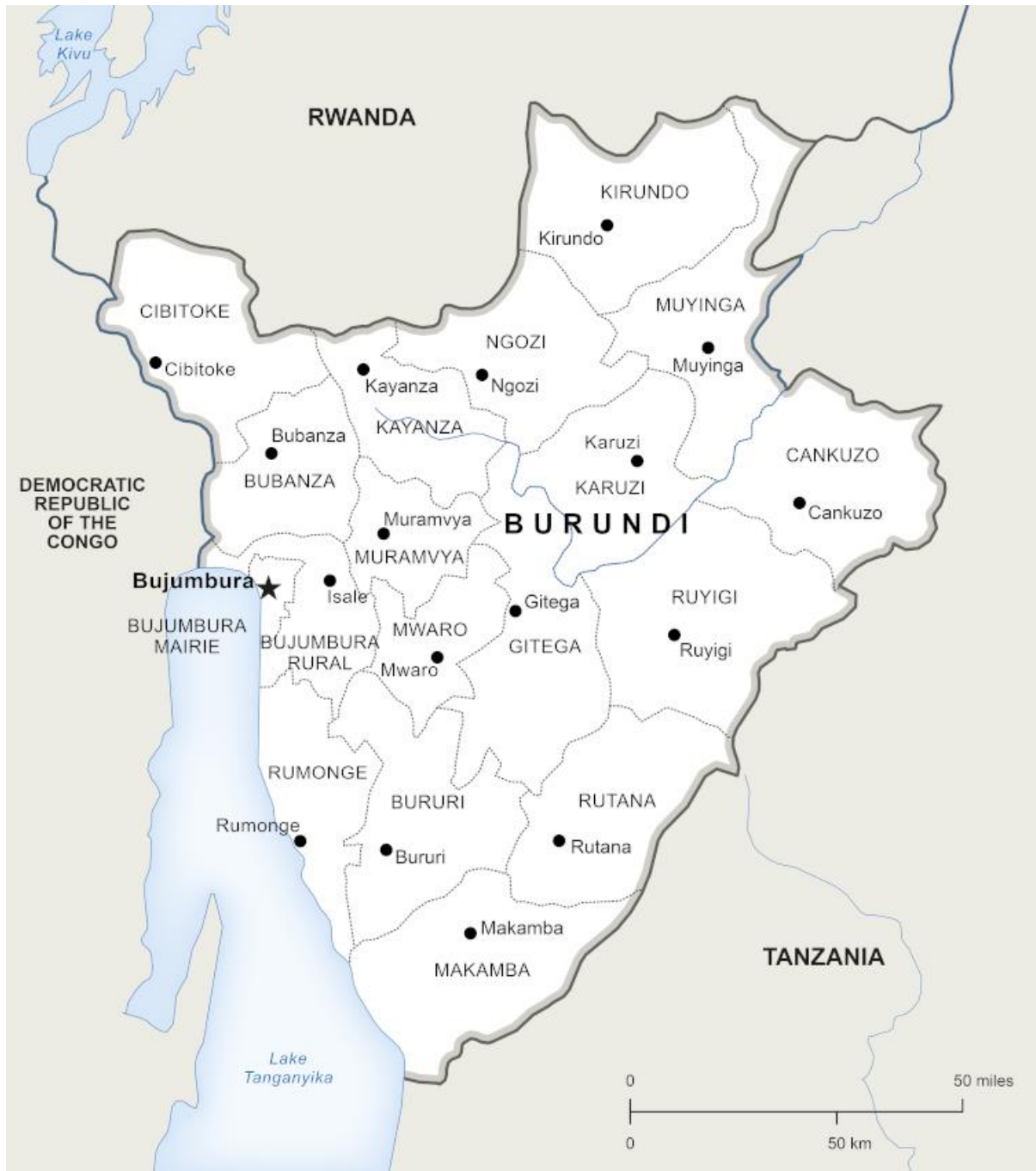
## Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Burundi: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
13,592,000	12,748,000	93.8

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

The current geographical area covered by Burundi and Rwanda used to be ruled by the kingdoms of Rwanda and Urundi in which the Tutsi upper class dominated the Hutu-majority lower classes. Germany colonized Burundi and Rwanda as part of German East Africa in the period 1890-1916.

Germany lost the colony to Belgium following the 1st World War. Belgium favored the Tutsis, thus intensifying the societal differences between the two groups. Hutus were prevented from holding public office and faced disadvantages in education. The Belgians also introduced the race-based identity card in 1933. This divided the population along ethnic lines and had serious consequences.

In 1962 Burundi became independent from Belgium and established itself as a constitutional monarchy. Since independence, the country has been facing an intractable conflict between the two main tribes, Hutu and Tutsi. In 1966 a coup instigated by Tutsi officials overthrew the monarchy and Michel Micombero became the country's first president. Micombero's military dictatorship was responsible for the death of 100,000 people during the 1972 Hutu massacre.

In 1993, there was a glimmer of hope that the country was entering a new era when the first democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, took office. However, hopes were dashed when the president was assassinated within months of his election. In 1994, the parliament elected Cyprien Ntaryamira (also Hutu) as president of the country. He was also killed along with the Rwandan president in Kigali in the same year. As the situation in neighboring Rwanda was spinning out of control, parliament again elected another Hutu president, Sylvestre Ntibantunganya. The mainly Tutsi party, Union for National Progress (Uprona), decided to withdraw from the government and this withdrawal marked the start of a period of ethnic conflict which led to the deaths of more than 300,000 people, mainly civilians and severe damage of the country's economy.

The international community tried to help Burundi during the crisis, with the UN taking over from the African Union forces in 2004. This mission ended in 2007 and the country was stabilized through dialogue and various legal and political changes. Following the 2005 constitutional vote, which favored the power-sharing constitution, Pierre Nkurunziza, president until 2020 (he died in June 2020), was elected by both houses of the parliament and belonged to the Hutu rebel 'Forces for Defense of Democracy' (FDD). He was accused by many human rights groups of being responsible for serious human rights violations. However, he claimed that neighboring countries (like Rwanda) were interfering in Burundi's domestic affairs.

In 2010, the country held presidential elections with the hope of leaving behind the previous conflicts that led to the killings of thousands of civilians and left the economy in tatters. However, these elections only showed up the true authoritarian attitude of the ruling party. The ruling party won the election without any contest due to a boycott by the opposition parties. That was quickly followed by the widespread and unlawful arrest of opposition party members. Death-sentences were quickly issued. Restrictions were imposed on the freedom of press and media. The assassination of some senior government officials and the killings of protestors put the country on the edge of crisis which then erupted when the president decided to run for another term in 2015. In May 2015, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of President Nkurunziza's decision to stand for a third term. There were reports that the judges were intimidated. That was followed by protests in the country, especially in the capital city, Bujumbura. A [failed coup-attempt in 2015](#) further showed how divided the country had become, but at the same time showed that the country's president had enough staunch supporters in both the army and the security apparatus to block a coup (BBC News, 13 May 2015). The general human rights record of the country also deteriorated especially after the 2015 general and presidential elections held during the crisis.

In 2020, the country remained volatile and oppressive. Former Hutu rebel leader Évariste Ndayishimiye of the ruling CNDD–FDD party (National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy) was elected president with 71% of the vote in May 2020, with the CNDD–FDD also winning 72 of the 100 elected national Assembly seats. In June 2020, President Nkurunziza, who was due to stand down as president in August 2020, unexpectedly [died](#) at the age of 55. His death was reportedly due to a heart-attack, but some suggest that this could have been a COVID-19-related death (The Guardian, 6 June 2020). Ndayishimiye took office as president, a week after Nkurunziza's death.

In the [Freedom in the World 2023 Burundi](#) report, Freedom House highlights the dire situation in Burundi: "Burundi has been in political and economic crisis since 2015. Democratic gains made after the 12-year civil war ended in 2005 have been undone by a shift toward authoritarian politics and violent repression against perceived opponents of the ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD)."

## Political and legal landscape

Burundi is a small landlocked country located in the Great Lakes Region, one of the most volatile regions on the African continent. Some of the opposition parties in the country were among the factions that earlier fought in Eastern Congo. As a country that has been through a series of devastating conflicts, Burundi has struggled to maintain rule of law. Even though the Constitution guarantees the independence of the judiciary, the judges are not free in practice - state interference and intimidation have been common. Corruption has been one of the main problems.

In May 2018, the voters backed the amendment of the Constitution to extend [presidential term limits](#) with a reported 73% of votes (Al-Jazeera, 22 May 2018). In June 2018, the president vowed not to [seek re-election in 2020](#) (Al-Jazeera, 7 June 2018). However, in 2020 tensions continue to rise as the election-date approached. A report submitted by [the UN Commission of Inquiry](#) on Burundi said, there is a climate of fear and intimidation against anyone who did not show support for the ruling party (Reuters, 4 September 2019). Many Burundians [suspected of supporting](#) the opposition disappeared, were arrested, beaten or killed (HRW 2020 Burundi country chapter). The government particularly targeted members of the opposition National Congress for Freedom (CNL).

Burundi has been experiencing significant challenges since 2015, including a shift toward authoritarianism and widespread repression. The Freedom in the World 2024 Burundi report by [Freedom House](#) states that the country is "not free" with a score of 14/100. The report highlights:

- **Political rights:** Elections in Burundi are neither free nor fair, with the ruling party, CNDD-FDD, maintaining tight control over the electoral process. Opposition parties face severe repression, and the political environment is dominated by violence and intimidation.
- **Civil liberties:** Freedom of expression, assembly, and association are highly restricted. The media is tightly controlled, and journalists, human rights defenders, and political opponents face harassment, arrest, and violence.
- **Judiciary and rule of law:** The judiciary is not independent and is heavily influenced by the executive branch. Corruption is rampant, and the rule of law is frequently undermined by the government.
- **Human rights:** The security situation remains dire, with widespread human rights abuses, including forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Marginalized groups, including

the Twa, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people living with albinism, face significant discrimination and violence.

Furthermore, the Human Rights Watch [2024 Burundi country chapter](#) highlights ongoing human rights challenges in the country. The report describes a repressive environment where civil society and the media face severe restrictions. Notably, journalist Floriane Irangabiye was sentenced to ten years in prison after a flawed trial, a move that violated her right to free expression. Human rights defenders also faced arrests and prosecution on dubious charges, though some were later acquitted. The report underscores concerns about the shrinking civic space, especially as Burundi approaches its 2025 elections. Additionally, the situation for Burundian refugees remains precarious, with coerced repatriations reported, and girls' rights are still a major issue, with 19% married before 18 years of age.

## Religious landscape

Burundi: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	12,748,000	93.8
Muslim	286,000	2.1
Hindu	11,400	0.1
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	528,000	3.9
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	10,200	0.1
Atheist	220	0.0
Agnostic	8,100	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Christians, who often resist joining the ruling party and its aggressive youth league, find themselves in a precarious situation. They are unable to voice concerns about governance issues and human rights violations, aware of the fate that befell journalists who were forced to flee the country. Individuals not affiliated with the ruling party risk losing their jobs and are often coerced into politically-motivated community service, such as constructing offices for the CNDD-FDD, which a 2019 UN report labeled as forced labor. Although freedom of expression is constitutionally protected, it is severely curtailed by oppressive press laws and a hostile environment for media workers, leading to threats, harassment, and arrests. Since 2015, numerous journalists have fled the country, and some have even been forcibly

disappeared. In 2021, life sentences were issued against seven exiled journalists for their alleged involvement in the 2015 events. Relations between the government and the Roman Catholic Church, to which most Burundians belong, have deteriorated, with a 2019 UN report indicating increased government control over churches to suppress political dissent.

## Economic landscape

According to the 2024 [World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook for Burundi](#):

- **Economic growth:** Growth rebounded to 2.7% in 2023, up from 1.8% in 2022. Forecasted growth for 2024 is 3.8%, with further acceleration expected in 2025-26.
- **Inflation and poverty:** Inflation spiked to an average of 27.1% in 2023, driven by food and fuel costs. The poverty rate remains high at 62% (based on \$2.15/day), with little improvement expected in 2024.
- **Agriculture and industry:** Agriculture is the backbone of the economy, contributing 40% to GDP and employing over 90% of the workforce. Industrialization is minimal, with exports largely confined to coffee and tea.
- **Public debt and deficits:** Public debt increased to 72.4% of GDP in 2023. The fiscal deficit decreased to 7.7% of GDP in 2023 but remains a concern.
- **External imbalances:** The current account deficit was high at 13.9% of GDP in 2023. Burundi's international reserves fell to cover just 0.8 months of imports by December 2023.
- **Challenges:** Persistent issues include low productivity, high dependence on foreign aid, inadequate infrastructure, and limited economic diversification. Environmental degradation, high population growth, and political instability exacerbate these challenges.
- **Outlook:** Growth is expected to continue, supported by agricultural performance, mining, and government spending. Structural reforms, particularly in fiscal policy and the private sector, are crucial for sustained improvement.

According to the [Heritage Foundation's](#) 2024 Index of Economic Freedom, Burundi's economic environment is categorized as "repressed," with a score of 38.4, placing it 171st out of 184 countries globally. This score reflects a significant decline from the previous year, underscoring the persistent challenges the country faces in achieving economic stability. The report highlights severe weaknesses in the rule of law, with particularly low scores in property rights, judicial effectiveness, and government integrity, which collectively point to a fragile legal framework plagued by corruption.

Burundi's government size indicators reveal a heavy tax burden relative to its GDP and high government spending, leading to fiscal imbalances and substantial public debt. The regulatory environment is described as highly inefficient, with substantial state interference in business activities and restrictive labor and monetary policies that are far below global averages. The open market components further illustrate the country's struggles, with low scores in trade freedom, investment freedom, and financial freedom, all of which are hindered by bureaucratic barriers and an underdeveloped financial sector.



## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Burundi](#) (accessed 7 October 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Burundi](#) (data updates of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Hutu (Bantu) 85%, Tutsi (Hamitic) 14%, Twa (Pygmy) 1%
- **Main languages:** Kirundi 29.7% (official), French 3% (official), Swahili 2%, English 1% (official), Kirundi and French 8.4%, Kirundi, French, and English 2.4%, other language combinations 2%, unspecified 56.9% (2008 est.)
- **Urban population:** 14.1% of the total population (2021)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 5.48% annual rate of change (2020-25 est.)
- **Median age:** 17.7 years
- **Expected years of schooling:** 11.1 years (11.0 for females and 11.1 for males)
- **Adult literacy rate (ages 15 and older):** 68.4%
- **Employment to population ratio (ages 15 and older):** 78.0%
- **Unemployment, total:** 1.4% of the labor force
- **Youth unemployment (ages 15-24):** 2.7%
- **HDI score and ranking:** Burundi ranked 185th of 189 countries, with a value of 0.433 points
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 61.6 years
- **Gender Development Index (GDI):** 0.999
- **Gender inequality index (GII):** 0.504

According to the [UNHCR Burundi Situation, as of 31 August 2024](#):

- **Refugees and asylum seekers in Burundi:** 90,000 (of which 89,113 were from DRC alone)
- **Conflict induced IDPs:** 7,000
- **Natural disaster IDPs:** 95,000

According to the [UNHCR Burundian refugees in the region](#), as of 31 August 2024, there were the following numbers of Burundian refugees in surrounding countries:

- **Tanzania:** 104,765
- **DRC:** 52,510
- **Rwanda:** 49,157
- **Uganda:** 41,198
- **Kenya:** 32,149

According to Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2023 Burundi](#):

- **Corruption:** Corruption is widespread in Burundi, and officials often escape accountability even when their misconduct is exposed by NGOs and other entities. Organizations tasked with combating corruption are inadequately funded and ineffective. President Ndayishimiye has pledged to tackle corruption, but his actions have been inconsistent. In 2021, his administration terminated the employment of over 120 government workers on charges of embezzlement, yet none were prosecuted. Additionally, Ndayishimiye has restructured the country's anti-corruption institutions, dissolving a specialized anti-corruption court and brigade and integrating their functions into existing offices. The president has also taken the controversial step of banning an



anti-corruption NGO, further complicating the landscape for accountability and transparency in the country. This action raises questions about the sincerity of the administration's commitment to combating corruption.

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Burundi](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** There were 1.51 million internet users in Burundi at the start of 2024, with an internet penetration rate of 11.3%
- **Social media usage:** 940.4 thousand social media users, equating to 7.0% of the total population. 36.0% percent of Burundi's social media users were female, and 64.0% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 7.78 million, representing 58.0%

According to [BuddeComm](#) research (Publication date: June 2024):

- Burundi's telecom sector holds significant potential, particularly given the large proportion of the population under 25. Despite recent growth in 3G and LTE subscribers, the country faces challenges with low economic output, limited fixed-line infrastructure, and patchy mobile connectivity. The government has ambitious digital plans, but progress is hindered by a lack of effective oversight. Although international bandwidth capacity has increased, retail prices remain high relative to the low income of most residents. Key developments include the regulator's preparation for 5G launch, ongoing government projects like e-health and Broadband Burundi 2025, and a 66% mobile subscriber penetration rate.

## Security situation

The security situation in Burundi remains deeply troubling, exacerbated by long-standing political unrest that began in 2015. Despite assurances of peace and unity from the current president, who succeeded Pierre Nkurunziza in 2020, the ground reality is marked by persistent instability. The US State Department and other global entities have highlighted ongoing violent crimes, such as grenade attacks and armed robberies, underscoring the inadequacy of local law enforcement. This volatile environment has strained international church relations and impeded the movement of domestic church leaders.

Fundamentally, Christians in Burundi face severe insecurity regarding their rights to assembly and worship. Government security agencies have the authority to arrest and detain individuals without cause, creating an environment of fear and intimidation. This atmosphere makes the security of Christian communities particularly precarious, as they navigate a landscape where their freedoms are constantly under threat. The ruling CNDD-FDD party's youth wing, Imbonerakure, further exacerbates this instability, with frequent reports of assaults and property destruction.

Since late 2021, Imbonerakure members have also been involved in armed conflicts alongside Burundian military forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo against rebel factions. International human rights organizations have documented uninvestigated killings and mutilations, implicating both government forces and Imbonerakure members. This combination of violent crime, political repression, and targeted intimidation significantly undermines the security of Christian communities, leaving them vulnerable and at constant risk.

## Christian origins

The Great Lakes Region of Africa is an area where Christian mission arrived very late on the scene. During the second half of the 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church made many attempts to introduce Christianity into the deep mainland of Africa.

In 1879, the White Fathers were sent to Burundi to launch a mission but were unsuccessful when two priests were killed within the first few years. In 1899 further attempts were made following the reorganization of the country as a German colony. In 1907, German Lutherans started working in the country, but following the conclusion of the First World War, in which Germany was defeated, Burundi was made part of the Belgian protectorate by the League of Nations. All the German mission stations were closed and French missionaries took over. Danish Baptists came in 1928 and Anglicans in 1934.

## Church spectrum today

Burundi: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	2,100	0.0
Catholic	8,384,000	65.8
Protestant	3,762,000	29.5
Independent	463,000	3.6
Unaffiliated	312,000	2.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-177,000	-1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,746,100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	2,369,000	18.6
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2,234,000	17.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Christians can be found all over the country, the majority of whom belong to the Roman Catholic Church.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Burundi>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: failed coup-attempt in 2015 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-32724083>
- Recent history: died - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/burundi-president-dies-illness-suspected-coronavirus-pierre-nkurunziza>
- Recent history: Freedom in the World 2023 Burundi - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/burundi/freedom-world/2023>
- Political and legal landscape: presidential term limits - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2018/05/burundi-backs-constitution-extending-presidential-term-limits-180521134736408.html>
- Political and legal landscape: seek re-election in 2020 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/burundi-pierre-nkurunziza-step-2020-180607160413061.html>
- Political and legal landscape: the UN Commission of Inquiry - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-rights/u-n-warns-of-burundi-atrocities-as-divine-ruler-eyes-2020-election-idUSKCN1VP1T8>
- Political and legal landscape: suspected of supporting - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/burundi>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom House - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/burundi/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: 2024 Burundi country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/burundi>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook for Burundi - [https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099214104052437498/pdf/IDU11861270f1be0e14b891832a1c1a03f1f3c45.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*1osyfsi\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*OTY4NTI0ODQxLjE3MjM4OTA3NDA](https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099214104052437498/pdf/IDU11861270f1be0e14b891832a1c1a03f1f3c45.pdf?_gl=1*1osyfsi*_gcl_au*OTY4NTI0ODQxLjE3MjM4OTA3NDA).
- Economic landscape: Heritage Foundation's - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/burundi>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Burundi - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burundi/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Burundi - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BDI>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR Burundi Situation, as of 31 August 2024 - <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111252>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR Burundian refugees in the region - <https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-situation-burundian-refugees-region-31-august-2024>
- Social and cultural landscape: Freedom in the World 2023 Burundi - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/burundi/freedom-world/2023>
- Technological landscape: DataReportal Digital 2024: Burundi - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-burundi>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Burundi-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>