

## The Burundi political crisis: Strategies for resisting the war entrepreneurs

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### Introduction

The political crisis which unfolded in Burundi in 2015, following the controversial re-election of President Nkurunziza for a third term in office, captured the attention of the world. Local and international news headlines quickly raised the spectre of an unfolding 'genocide'. World leaders, such as Samantha Power, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), and Louis Michel, Commissioner and Member of European Parliament, and other international partners, called for action before 'it is too late'. While the region's history of inter-ethnic violence should not be ignored, it is important to recognise how elevating the notion that genocide is imminent can be a powerful aid for those trying to actively promote violent conflict – indeed, as much as ignoring or denying genocide. Whether deliberate or not, it is an unnuanced way of analysing the complex and deeply serious reality now affecting the streets, suburbs and communities of Burundi. Whilst we should remain wary and watchful, erroneously promoting the idea of an imminent genocide is irresponsible, since in itself it can escalate inter-ethnic violence. The situation in Burundi thus needs to be analysed in a judicious and careful way by those in proximity to the situation in order to effectively understand its unfolding dynamics and develop practical solutions. It is our view that Burundi is not (yet) witnessing a genocide unfolding, but rather

– and more accurately – the escalation of a political conflict between Burundi political elite vying for power.

This policy brief will analyse the key elements which have contributed to this analysis of the Burundian crisis.

### Crisis in Burundi: A case of *déjà vu*?

Following the April 2015 nomination of President Nkurunziza for the third consecutive term in office, several opposition parties and civil society organisations organised street demonstrations across the city of Bujumbura. The peaceful demonstrations rapidly became volatile, with a series of violent actions being perpetrated by both the police and youthful demonstrators.

At the peak of demonstrations in May 2015, around 70 people are believed to have lost their lives. The bulk of the victims were opposition demonstrators; however, police officers, soldiers and even some members of the ruling party, one of whom was burnt alive by protestors, perished in the crisis. Up to the current moment, more than 400 people have died and 250 000 live in neighbouring countries as refugees.

On the 13 May 2015, a group of Burundi army and police officers, led by General Godefroid Niyombare, staged a military coup against President Nkurunziza. The stated objective of the coup was to stop the chaos caused by a month of demonstrations and to restore democracy in order to facilitate fair elections. Two days after the initial announcement of the military coup, it appeared that the putsch had failed, and more than 20 coup leaders, from the army and police, were arrested. Among the arrested was General Cyrille Ndayirukiye, a former minister of defence, who was number two inside the coup plotters' hierarchy.

The failed military coup reinforced the determination of the government, led by the *Conseil National pour la Defense de la Democratie-Forces pour la Defense de la Democratie* (CNDD-FDD), to stop demonstrations which quickly become labeled an insurgency. This began a crackdown on demonstrators, through repression and imprisonment and, in some cases, allegations of torture and extra-judicial killings. On 21 July, elections were held, with President Nkurunziza and his political party, the ruling CNDD-FDD, emerging as uncontested winners.

The end of the controversial electoral event signaled the end of street demonstrations and the beginning of a more violent form of resistance and the emergence of urban guerilla movements. Several opposition leaders and prominent figures in exile justified the use of violence against the government by proclaiming it as the only language the president could understand.

The armed violence appeared to be a new form of resistance to the contested tenure of President Nkurunziza, which is considered illegitimate by the 'radical opposition', that appears committed to the overthrow of his regime. Groups of youth, possibly armed by the radical opposition, have been responsible for nightly attacks on police patrols. Specific areas of the capital Bujumbura, including Musaga, Jabe, Nyakabiga, and Ngagara, Cibitoke and Mutakura have seen nightly running street battles. These areas were among those targeted by the government-driven disarmament operation, announced by the President in November 2015.

The armed resistance to President Nkurunziza seemed to have several objectives. It maintained a climate of insecurity in order to put pressure on the Bujumbura regime and force negotiations. Through its resistance, armed groups show that the radical opposition does not recognise the current political regime as legal. It also fueled insecurity, and contributed towards the escalating of the death toll. The ultimate objective was to push the international community to intervene

militarily. Yet, without popular support from the rural population, the opposition was, and is, unlikely to be able to topple the Nkurunziza-led government. This illustrates why the armed resistance was largely urban, with the rural areas remaining relatively unaffected by the crisis with regard to security issues. However, the situation could have changed dramatically had the rebellion managed to gain support from the rural population. This did not happen. One simple explanation for this is the fact that the Burundian population is still exhausted from the civil war that de facto ended in 2008 when the last rebel movement signed a ceasefire agreement. A second reason why the rural population has resisted incitement to violence is the very issue behind the current crisis: it is a political struggle for power in which rural people stand to gain nothing.

### **The African Union intervention: A stillborn initiative?**

On 17 December 2015, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) took the decision to authorise the deployment of a 5000-troop strong Africa Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi or *Mission Africaine de Prevention et de Protection au Burundi* (MAPROBU), the mandate of which was to 'prevent any deterioration of the security situation, [to] monitor its evolution and report developments on the ground [and] to contribute, within its capacity and in its areas of deployment, to the protection of civilian populations under imminent threat' (Communiqué of the 565th meeting of the PSC on the situation in Burundi). However, the Nkurunziza government rejected the call for deployment of the troops and challenged the legality of the PSC's decision, arguing that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution should authorise it. The decision to intervene was subsequently suspended by the African Union, on 26 January 2016, at the ordinary session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government. The decision to put on hold the troop's deployment to Burundi raised questions about the efficiency of the AU.

### **The instrumentalisation of information warfare**

The ongoing political crisis in Burundi has largely been depicted by mainstream media outlets as a repressive and authoritarian government aggressively stamping out any internal dissent. The government is perceived as dominated by Hutu, while democratic forces are often portrayed as Tutsi-led. However, this simplistic narrative fails to take into consideration the complex dynamics of Burundian politics. What has been ignored is that the leader of coalition of opposition parties

outside the country is Leonard Nyangoma, a Hutu who created the CNDD. Within this political movement, Hutu and Tutsi collaborate and share the same purpose of toppling the Nkurunziza regime. The conflict has therefore been largely political, with varying degrees of reference to ethnicity.

The range of reactions and contradictory declarations against or in support of the CNDD-FDD-led government illustrates the complexity of the crisis and the competing interests among the multiplicity of actors who have stakes in Burundi and the region. It hints at the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the Great Lakes Region, which is rich in natural resources and still attractive to a number of international corporations. Most importantly, it emphasises the ongoing information warfare that has characterised this political crisis since its inception in April 2015. For example, on 2 November 2015, in an attempt to maintain stability amid escalating violence, President Nkurunziza made a speech calling on people in possession of illegal weapons to hand them over to authorities. The government of Burundi reassured the international community and its citizens that the operation would respect international standards and that the collection would be carried out in a professional manner. In his interview on BBC Newshour on 7 November 2015, the foreign minister, Alain Aimé Nyamitwe, said that the ultimatum given to insurgents in possession of illegal firearms should be considered an opportunity rather than a threat. The government promised a two-week patriotic training course for those who surrendered their firearms, after which they would be free to return to their families. The minister of security, Alain Guillaume Bunyoni, even called on AU military observers already in Burundi to witness the disarmament operation which began in the Mutakura area, north of Bujumbura. However, the speech quickly led to strong condemnation from several fronts, calling the government's attempts to disarm the population a precursor to genocide.

Members of the opposition platform which convened to dispute the third term of President Nkurunziza, known as the Council for the Respect of Arusha Agreement and the Restoration of the Rule of Law (CNARED), swiftly spread this idea and narrative to the international community: that the government's disarmament was indeed a precursor to genocide. The United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, and Louis Michel, commissioner and member of European parliament, quickly called for action before it was 'too late'.

In her article published on the 4 November 2015 in the French newspaper *Liberation*, with the provocative title '*Au Burundi, c'est un génocide qui a commencé*' (In

Burundi, a genocide has started), Maria Malagardis suggested that the increasing death toll, which was gleaned from a single source (a member of Burundi's diaspora community), was indication that a genocide had already begun.

According to prominent analysts and several mainstream media outlets, such as *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, *Jeune Afrique* and Human Rights Watch, the president of the Burundi Senate, Reverien Ndikuriyo's November speech delivered in Kurundi contained the same coded language used to incite the 1994 Rwandan genocide. However, it now appears that his speech was mistranslated for the purpose of manipulating public opinion towards reaching certain conclusions.

Moving forward, the question still remains: To what extent can reports of imminent inter-ethnic violence be taken seriously? Are we indeed witnessing the unfolding of yet another genocide in the Great Lakes Region? What is really happening on the ground? Most importantly, what strategies should be deployed to address the current political crisis in Burundi and prevent further escalation?

## **The politics of 'naming' the Burundi crisis**

Several factors make the immediate prospects of a new genocide in Burundi unlikely. Firstly, the armed and security forces of Burundi are made up of 50 per cent Hutu and 50 per cent Tutsi personnel. This is in line with the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accords and the Global Ceasefire Agreement (28 August 2000 and November 2003) – considered a major breakthrough in security sector reform in Africa. This makes the prospect unlikely of such an army being used by one group or another to perpetrate genocide on a specific ethnic group. Similarly, the current government, the public administration and the parliament are also composed of Hutu and Tutsi to a rate of 60 and 40 per cent respectively. The same situation is evident within local government administrations. In the Senate, the Hutu and the Tutsi are equally represented. The representation of both ethnic groups in all spheres of social life significantly diminishes the prospect of one group effectively carrying out a mass killing of another group.

Secondly, the geographical location of the armed resistance and demonstrations against the current government has been limited to some areas of the city of Bujumbura only. The upcountry has remained relatively peaceful, suggesting that the current political crisis is in essence elitist. Debate around the term limits

is a serious concern for the political elite but it is not the primary concern of the largely under-educated rural population. Attempts to engage rural populations in violent actions against the state have proven fruitless so far. The majority of Burundi's population has shown great resistance towards various calls to violence against the state or against one another. This could be a result of a war fatigue felt by a populace that has suffered several episodes of political violence. It could also illustrate a maturing of the Burundi population and the ability to resist political manipulation. This is perhaps why political entrepreneurs in the current conflict have specifically targeted vulnerable youth for recruitment into militias. However, of concern is whether the general population will keep this attitude long enough to avoid a serious escalation in violence into the categories of war crimes, crimes against humanity and, ultimately, genocide. The central challenge facing Burundi is one of resisting the war entrepreneurs. The absence of a leading figure calling for unity is yet another serious challenge in the resistance against generalised violence.

### **The spectre of external military intervention**

Any mass violence could rapidly trigger external military intervention. There are as yet only unsubstantiated allegations, but this would be a risky and an unwanted development within the incumbent regime. Rather, it is in the current government's interest to find a peaceful solution and thereby avoid an external military intervention which could result in their overthrow or at the very least a significant weakening of their position.

Collectively, the factors discussed in this policy brief problematise the prospect of genocide. The accusation that the security forces are already beginning to perpetrate genocide has been strategically deployed as a way of weakening the Bujumbura regime at the diplomatic level, while creating support for the opposition. Analysts need to be more nuanced in their approach to understanding this multifaceted crisis in Burundi. The comparison between the situation in Burundi and what happened in Rwanda in 1994 is misplaced. The historical trajectory of the two countries has been different since independence. Just one example may illustrate this: During the struggle for independence, in Rwanda the king, who was considered a Tutsi, was chased away during what was called the 1959 Hutu Revolution. At the same time, Burundi became a constitutional monarchy with the king seen as the father of the nation by all Burundians, Hutu and Tutsi alike.

The probability of massive atrocities will likely be a result of external factors, such as outside forces supporting

armed rebellions and violent attempts to topple the Nkurunziza regime. Additionally, undertaking his fifth term after 30 years in power makes President Museveni of Uganda a redundant mediator as far as Burundi's crisis is concerned. Fortunately, the appointment of former President Benjamin Mkapa from Tanzania as co-mediator may bring new hope in the search for a lasting and peaceful solution to the crisis.

### **Diplomatic action for Burundi**

Since the beginning of this 2016 year, the Burundian political crisis has been high on the international agenda. Heavy diplomatic machinery has been deployed to the country, with the objective of stemming the ongoing violence and engaging the Burundian government and the opposition parties in a genuine dialogue. The recent visits of UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, and of an AU High Level Delegation seem to have achieved some progress despite the pessimism of the opposition. Even though these diplomatic visits are often criticised for their political stage play, they have kept Burundi on the international agenda and have, at least so far, avoided a further escalation of violence.

The international engagement started with the visit of 15 ambassadors of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to Burundi in January 2016. This was the Council's second visit to the country in less than a year. It was followed by the 26th African Union Summit of the Heads of States and Governments (HoSG) held the same month in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, with Burundi as one of the top priorities on the agenda.

Another important rendez-vous was the visit of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, to Burundi. In a marathon trip, which also led him to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, Ban Ki-Moon met with different opposition leaders, selected members of civil society still operating in Burundi, and President Nkurunziza. In his statement at the end of the 24-hour visit, the UNSG announced that he was encouraged by the promises of President Nkurunziza to release 2 000 prisoners and to open two of the five radio stations that were destroyed during the failed military coup in May 2015. The promises also included the lift of arrest warrants for some members of the opposition accused of participating in the military coup.

The AU High Level Delegation's visit to Burundi is the latest diplomatic effort. The members of the panel included President Jacob Zuma from South Africa, President Macky Sall from Senegal, President Ould Abdel Aziz from Mauritania, President Ali Bongo Ondimba from Gabon and Prime Minister Hailemariam

Desalegn from Ethiopia. The statement released by President Jacob Zuma, the leader of the AU High Level Delegation, seems to show that an agreement was reached on the deployment of 100 human rights observers and 100 unarmed military monitors. Members of the opposition have criticised these new steps as insignificant. However, the actions taken by the Burundi government can be regarded as a positive sign to be encouraged.

## Policy recommendations

Despite genocide being an unlikely occurrence in Burundi in the short term, increased levels of violence are a possibility, and under such conditions ethnic polarisation becomes a reality. The danger is in enabling the war entrepreneurs to achieve their agenda of extreme ethnic conflict. Therefore, there is much that still needs to be done to prevent the conflict from escalating. A sustainable solution has to be predicated on an inclusive dialogue, which needs to be supported by Burundi's partners and other stakeholders and neighbouring states at the regional and international levels. An important factor to ensuring a sustainable solution will necessarily include programmes which are aimed at reducing unemployment and creating opportunities for the youth. In fact, youth represent more than 60 per cent of the population, and are readily exploited by political entrepreneurs while being routinely left out of the political process. In order to create the required climate for a successful dialogue the following policy recommendations need to be adopted:

1. Preparations for inclusive dialogue should include transforming the way Burundi's protagonists perceive each other. This could be achieved at the diplomatic level, through facilitated proximity talks. The opposition does not currently recognise President Nkurunziza as the legitimate president. From the 26 August 2015, the opposition has maintained that Burundi had no president at all. Such a hard line, where even the incumbent government as an interlocutor is not recognised, does not augur well for the prospect of a trouble-free dialogue process. On the government's side, the opposition leaders perceived to have been involved in the military coup are to be excluded from any dialogue. International arrest warrants have been issued to extradite some of leaders of the CNARED. This situation further complicates the prospects of dialogue. These perceptions need to be challenged and transformed into more accommodative narratives.
2. The international community needs to show a significant degree of impartiality, which is necessary

for the success of a negotiated settlement. Efforts to promote dialogue will require the facilitating teams to have a degree of legitimacy to engage protagonists in a genuine and credible process aimed at finding sustainable solutions to the Burundi crisis. The Russell Tribunal's recent session on Burundi is one example of how international action can be counter-productive. (During its session in Paris on the 27 September 2015, the Russell Tribunal analysed only a selection of the crimes committed during the crisis of 2015/2016.) Investigating on crimes allegedly carried out by one side and by largely one ethnic group – the Hutus – is counterproductive. This contributes to widening the ethnic divide in Burundi and exacerbates tensions.

3. The situation on the ground shows that there is a divide between the majority rural population, where the incumbent president actually has significant support, and the urban population where he does not enjoy much popularity. A military intervention could radicalise the two camps and backfire, creating a Libyan or Syrian scenario in the Great Lakes Region of all-out war. The likelihood of this happening increases if one side to the conflict attempts to use foreign troops to its advantage. Consequently, the emphasis should be placed on avoiding this scenario.
4. The international community should investigate the channels through which the armed resistance obtains weapons, and look into the allegations of recruitment and training of refugees in camps located in Burundi's neighbouring countries. The violence fueled by opposition groups should be investigated too and be condemned openly.
5. Dialogue facilitation needs to work with the belligerents on both sides separately in order to prepare the foundation for talks. There is also a need for an independent dialogue facilitation team working within Burundi, and monitoring the situation as it evolves. The situation described by mainstream media differs considerably from what is observed on the ground.

## Conclusion

So far the prospects for dialogue in Burundi are not clear. The current chief mediator, President Museveni of Uganda, has not been proactive enough to drive peace talks in 2016 due to his own re-election campaign. This is probably the reason behind the designation of a co-mediator, the former president of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa.

As time goes by, the initial problem related to the third term is losing its momentum. Within two years, Burundians will already be preparing for the next elections scheduled in 2020. The question is: Will the conditions be appropriate then for an inclusive electoral process to take place? Will the political forces be ready to engage in such an important process?

It is therefore logical to ask if the focus of the expected dialogue should not be on preparing the ground in order to avoid another crisis once again in 2020. It is crucial to ensure that democratic principles are restored, that all political parties are able to campaign without hindrance, and that the media are able to operate freely. The new conditions will necessitate also allowing civil society to work again and to be able to monitor the protection or abuse of human rights. In the absence of these conditions, it is possible that the political crisis will deepen. In the volatile Great Lakes Region this scenario should be avoided.

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