



Burundi blues: the road to violence & back

by Erwin van Veen

In 2015, Burundi descended into political turmoil and bloodshed not seen since the end of its civil war. It joined ranks with Mali and South Sudan as another case of post-conflict recovery that was based more on hope than reality. Mirroring events in the DR Congo, Uganda and Rwanda, the politics and legality of the candidature of President Pierre Nkurunziza for a third mandate dominated the year. He and his inner circle co-opted, intimidated and killed to suppress popular protests, political opposition parties, the media and dissent within Burundi's ruling party itself (the *Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDD-FDD)). President Nkurunziza's new mandate was ultimately realised at the cost of about 1,200 fatalities and 450,000 refugees. It likely is only the beginning of further instability.

In retrospect, the writing was on the wall. Chains of events started as early as 2010 when local elections were boycotted by the opposition for alleged fraud. This created a situation of CNDD-FDD single-party dominance of the Burundian state. It also allowed the party to strengthen its hold on state institutions and expand its networks of patronage and intimidation. In 2011-2012, for example, credible reports emerged of the *Imbonerakure* (the party's youth wing) being trained and equipped with renewed vigour.

Since the 2015 crisis, a small group of individuals around President Nkurunziza effectively runs the

country. They are all former-FDD generals who allegedly have done well for themselves in the aftermath of the civil war. They share the experience of years of jungle fighting, personal trauma as well as a political worldview that includes a belief in majoritarian rule and a Hutu 'right to rule' after decades of Tutsi domination. It is made up of individuals such as Evariste Ndayishimiye (the party secretary-general), Alexis Barekebavuge (a key member of parliament), Etienne Ntakarutimana (national intelligence), Alain Bunyoni (public security) and Prime Niyongabo (army chief of staff).

Similarities and differences with the past

Paradoxically, the present situation presents a number of similarities with the three decades of Tutsi rule that preceded Burundi's protracted civil war (1993-2006). Once more, a small group of individuals rules the country for largely personal benefit through networks of informal patronage and influence behind the façade of formal state institutions.

Another echo of the past is that, again, a group of high-ranking officers with a militarised outlook on politics runs Burundi. They see politics as an all-or-nothing endeavor and negotiations as a sign of weakness. One of the major achievements of the Arusha agreement, which brought Burundi's civil war to a partial end in 2000, had been to open up political competition and provide more equitable access to the state and its resources. This has been undone.

Yet, there are also significant differences. A key contrast is that the CNDD-FDD proved internally divided to the point that President Nkurunziza's third mandate was far from a given. Party members of Burundi's different regions, diaspora members and former rebels, civilian and military factions, as well as moderate and more radical intellectual elements were pitted against each other. The resolution of these internal divisions in favour of President Nkurunziza was accomplished through threats, expulsions and intimidation that significantly diminished the party's diversity, capacity and talent pool.

Another difference with the past is that the CNDD-FDD could not use the army to impose its will, but had to rely on a hybrid of selected police forces, national intelligence and *Imbonerakure* elements to intimidate and repress. The failed coup of 13/14 May 2015 was not so much an army mutiny as a continuation of internal CNDD-FDD divisions by other means (a dissenting FDD-general's bid to block a third mandate with army elements loyal to him was thwarted by another FDD-general). Still, the general level of neutrality and professionalism of the army remains one of the greatest successes of the Arusha agreement.

And a final difference is that ethnicity has so far not been an effective rallying cry for popular mobilisation. The rhetoric of leading CNDD-FDD members indicates this is not for want of trying.

The role of the international community

Against this backdrop, the international community's diplomatic and developmental responses can be summarised as 'too little, too late'. Its understanding of both internal CNDD-FDD divisions and the party's power acquisition strategy has been woefully inadequate. Statements by the president himself provided clear signposts of the upcoming mandate crisis in the early 2010s, as did the 'resurgence' of the party's youth wing. All were ignored. Compounding matters, responses have been generally reactive. For example, it was predictable that the third mandate controversy would end up in front of the constitutional court, but no one provided support to this body to help it withstand the inevitable political pressure.

Finally, some responses have not been adequately thought through. While the EU's article 96 decision to suspend aid to the Burundian government was more or less in line with the Cotonou agreement, it also ruptured relations with the CNDD-FDD (both hardliners and moderates), cut support for the entire state apparatus (beyond the executive) and set, arguably, unrealistic benchmarks for resuming aid. The decision may have been right from a values perspective, but its effectiveness from a crisis management

angle is doubtful. Today, international divisions in the UN and East African Community prevent meaningful collective action from mediation to military intervention.

Looking ahead, the least negative scenario is that the CNDD-FDD will put constitutional amendments to a parliamentary vote in late 2017/early 2018 to remove restrictions on presidential term limits. But it may also try to scrap other provisions of the Arusha agreement pertaining to ethnic representation in political, administrative and security bodies. For now, the divided and poor state of the Burundian (armed) opposition makes it unlikely that it will be able to resist such developments politically or militarily. However, another round of CNDD-FDD infighting is entirely possible as such amendments are easily interpreted as solidifying the power of a few party members over many others. Such infighting could escalate or acquire an ethnic dimension if a palace coup were to turn violent or something were to befall the president.

How can the international community – and especially the EU – prepare for such eventualities?

- To begin with, it needs to reflect on its objectives. In the short-term, restoration of Burundi's multi-party democracy is not realistic. Hence, a primary objective should be to support moderates within the CNDD-FDD to regain control over the party. Once this has happened, pathways towards more inclusive governance might gradually be discussed. A longer-term aim should be to find an acceptable way of excluding current and former senior military officers from top civilian executive, legislative and judicial posts.
- On this basis, Burundi's top donors should increase their understanding of the inner dynamics of CNDD-FDD politics. This requires restoring dialogue and expanding diplomatic networks. In turn, this demands greater in-country presence and better use of external expertise.
- Finally, non-CNDD-FDD dominated and/or non-executive institutions of the Burundian state should be supported in ways that provide space and encouragement for CNDD-FDD moderates. This requires finding an elegant way out of the EU's article 96 deadlock, for example by supporting selected legislative, judicial or administrative institutions via international (civil society) organisations rather than directly.

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