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Freedom in the World 2009 - Burundi

Capital: Bujumbura
Population: 8,900,000

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 5
Status: Partly Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Burundi received a downward trend arrow due to the lack of progress on the establishment of an independent electoral commission as well as the authorities' crackdown on opposition political activity.

Overview

Burundi's tortuous progress toward political reconciliation and peace continued in 2008. In the spring, violence flared between government soldiers and the last rebel group, the National Liberation Forces (FNL). Nonetheless, FNL leader Agathon Rwasa returned to the capital in late May to participate in negotiations on the demobilization of his guerrillas and the transformation of the FNL into a political party. These discussions were complicated by complaints over repressive actions taken by the ruling party and counterclaims that the FNL was continuing to recruit military cadres. Concerns also grew over the failure of the government to appoint an independent election commission.

The minority Tutsi ethnic group governed Burundi for most of the period since independence from Belgium in 1962. The military, judiciary, educational system, business sector, and news media have also traditionally been dominated by the Tutsi. Violence between them and the majority Hutu has broken out repeatedly since independence. A 1992 constitution introduced multiparty politics, but the 1993 assassination of the newly elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye of the Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) party, resulted in sustained and widespread carnage.

Ndadaye's murder fatally weakened FRODEBU's hold on power. Negotiations on power sharing took place over the succeeding months, as ethnic violence continued to rack the country. Ndadaye's successor was killed in 1994, along with Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, when their plane was apparently shot down as it approached Kigali airport in Rwanda. This event triggered the Rwandan genocide and intensified the violence in Burundi.

Under a 1994 power-sharing arrangement between FRODEBU and the mainly Tutsi-led Unity for National Progress (UPRONA) party, Hutu politician Sylvestre Ntibantunganya served as Burundi's new president. He was ousted in a 1996 military coup led by former president Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi whom Ndayaye had defeated in the 1993 election. Peace and political stability within the country continued to be elusive as armed insurgents sporadically staged attacks and government forces pursued an often ruthless campaign of intimidation.

In 2000, negotiations mediated by former South African president Nelson Mandela resulted in an agreement in principle by most parties on a future democratic political solution to the conflict. Nineteen groups from across the political spectrum agreed to recommendations on the nature of the conflict, reforms for the nation's governing institutions, security issues, and economic restructuring and development. The specific form of the political institutions through which power would be shared and the reform of the military proved to be especially sensitive issues. In November 2001, a transitional government was installed, with Buyoya temporarily remaining chief of state and FRODEBU's Domitien Ndayizeye as vice president. The failure of key elements of two Hutu rebel groups, the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) and the National Liberation Forces (FNL), to participate in the transition resulted in both continued negotiations and violence.

By the end of 2002, most of the factions had agreed to stop the fighting and participate in transitional arrangements leading to national elections, initially scheduled for late 2004. In April 2003, Buyoya stepped down and was replaced as president by Ndayizeye. In October of that year, the FDD reached an agreement with the government. Progress continued in 2004, with an August agreement on the shape of new democratic institutions – designed to balance the interests of the Hutu and Tutsi populations – and on the holding of elections.

In 2005, Burundi achieved a major milestone by holding the first local and national elections since 1993. These resulted in a fundamental political realignment as the largely Hutu National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD), the political wing of the FDD, emerged as the country's largest party, eclipsing the traditionally dominant parties. Parliament subsequently chose Pierre Nkurunziza as president. Domestic and international observers generally regarded the local and national legislative elections as legitimate and reflective of the people's will.

Fragile attempts to develop democratic institutions received a boost in 2006 when a key faction of the sole remaining rebel group, the FNL, agreed to lay down its arms and participate in the political process. The country was rocked by political instability, however, as several senior figures, including opposition leaders, were temporarily arrested in connection with an alleged coup plot. In addition, the ruling CNDD party leadership showed increasing signs of intolerance toward opposition and independent viewpoints. A tentative ceasefire agreement was reached with the last significant FNL faction in June 2007, and in August, the head of a truth and reconciliation commission was named. Rival parties also signed an agreement to end a legislative boycott by FRODEBU and UPRONA that had threatened Burundi's nascent democracy.

In the spring of 2008, violence flared again between government soldiers and the FNL, which operated in territory near the capital. In addition, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of a government claim that a number of lawmakers should be replaced by government supporters. Nonetheless, FNL leader Agathon Rwaswa returned to Bujumbura in late May to participate in negotiations on the demobilization of his guerrillas and the transformation of the FNL into a political party. These discussions were continuing at year's end, but were complicated by complaints regarding repressive actions taken by the CNDD such as the arrest of a well-know journalist and opposition political leader in November, and counterclaims that the FNL was continuing to recruit military cadres.

An annual per capita gross domestic product of \$700 places Burundi among the poorest countries in the world. Food prices increased sharply during 2008, with the cost of beans and cassava rising by 52 and 22 percent, respectively, over 2007 prices.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Burundi is an electoral democracy. In 2005, citizens were able to change their government democratically. Restrictions on political parties were lifted, and parties and civic organizations now function with greater freedom than previously. Burundi currently has representative institutions at the local, municipal, and national levels, in both the legislative and executive branches of government. The electoral commission that organized the 2005 elections was later dissolved. Observers expressed increasing concern about the scheduled 2010 presidential and parliamentary elections in light of the inability of the government to appoint a new independent electoral commission.

While the lower house of Parliament – the 100-seat National Assembly – is directly elected for a five-year term, locally elected officials choose members of the Senate, also for five-year terms. Each of Burundi's 17 provinces chooses two senators – one Tutsi and one Hutu. Carefully crafted constitutional arrangements require the National Assembly to be 60 percent Hutu and 40 percent Tutsi, with three additional deputies from the Twa ethnic minority, who are also allocated three senators. In both houses, a minimum of 30 percent of the legislators must be women. Former presidents also hold Senate seats; apart from this provision, there are no rules to increase the size of either chamber by adding nonelected members. In June 2008 the ruling CNDD party successfully pressured the Constitutional Court to permit the removal of 22 dissident lawmakers and their replacement with loyal party members.

Both houses of Parliament elect the president to a five-year term. The president appoints two vice presidents, one Tutsi and one Hutu, and they must be approved separately by a two-thirds majority in the lower and upper houses. Governments must include all parties that have won at least 5 percent of the votes cast in parliamentary elections. The current cabinet includes 14 Hutu and 6 Tutsi ministers, and 6 ministers are female. There are more than two dozen active political parties in the country, ranging from those that champion radical Tutsi positions to those that hold extremist Hutu positions. Most are small in terms of membership. Many Tutsi have now joined formerly Hutu-dominated parties.

Corruption is a significant problem. Some government revenues and expenditures have not been regularly listed on the budget. In August 2007, the head of the Burundi Central Bank was arrested on charges of embezzling \$23 million. Burundi was ranked 158 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech is legally guaranteed and exists in practice, with some limitations. For example, the media have been subject to self-censorship and periodic government censorship. In recent years, the media have presented a wider range of political perspectives, and the opposition press does function, though sporadically. Radio is the main source of information for many Burundians. The government runs the sole television station and the only radio station with national reach, as well as the only newspaper that publishes regularly. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio France Internationale, and the Voice of America are available on FM in the capital. Several private radio stations exist, but they generally have a short broadcast range. Print runs of most newspapers are small, and readership is limited by low literacy levels. Access to the internet remains largely confined to urban areas.

Freedom of religion is generally observed. For many years the ongoing civil strife and the Tutsi social and institutional dominance impeded academic freedom by limiting educational opportunities for the Hutu, but there are indications that this may be changing under the current government. In March 2008, university students demonstrated to demand an increase in their university allowances.

The constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association, although past transitional governments occasionally restricted these rights in practice. There is modest but important civil society activity with a focus on the protection of human rights. Constitutional protections for organized labor are in place, and the right to strike

is protected by the labor code. The Confederation of Burundi Trade Unions has been independent since its establishment in 1995. Most union members are civil servants and have bargained collectively with the government.

The judicial system is seriously burdened by a lack of resources and training, and by corruption. Given Burundi's recent history, there are far more pending cases than can easily be handled by the current judiciary, and many of them are politically sensitive. The government has yet to establish a special tribunal called for by the United Nations. Many crimes go unreported. According to Amnesty International, conditions in prisons continue to be "subhuman" and at times life-threatening. Despite extensive negotiations and discussions regarding the establishment of some form of broad-based truth commission to address past human rights violations, no such body has yet been created despite the naming of its head. Several national and international human rights organizations have previously criticized the practices of the security services in Burundi and have reported that individuals opposed to the CNDD are particularly at risk of torture or worse. The Constitution's Article 257 mandates that the national security forces must have an equal ethnic balance.

With the improvement in the political environment, many of Burundi's internally displaced and refugee populations began returning home in 2006. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 300,000 Burundians returned from Tanzania between 2002 and 2008. Since 2004 UNICEF has assisted the demobilization of 3,013 child soldiers. However, in May 2008 more than 200 former child soldiers escaped from detention camps in the town of Gitega and went on a rampage, alleging that they were being neglected. Thousands of others are still in rebel ranks.

Women have limited opportunities for advancement in the economic and political spheres, especially in rural areas. Only 5 percent of eligible females are enrolled in secondary school. Doctors Without Borders received an average of 1,346 complaints of violence against women annually between 2004 and 2006, and a 2007 study by Amnesty International and a Burundian partner organization found that minors are the victims in 60 percent of reported rapes in the country.

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