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Looming polls raise Burundi's risk profile

BUJUMBURA, 17 April 2014 (IRIN) - If high-level engagement by outside parties is a measure of political risk, Burundi is a country to keep a close eye on as it approaches elections next year.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has had talks with President Pierre Nkurunziza. The US sent a senior envoy to speak to him in person. The UN Security Council has publicly voiced its concern. And these are just the lead players in a chorus of growing disquiet.

As the country gears up for elections at some yet-to-be-determined date next year, several issues are setting the crisis needle twitching: politically-instigated violence; restrictions on opposition activities and the press; the erosion of a power-sharing peace deal; and the president's allegedly unconstitutional bid to run for a third term.

Meanwhile, relations between the government, led by the Hutu-dominated National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party, and the UN Office in Burundi (BNUB), which are supposed to be partners in a process of post-war stabilization, have very publicly soured over a leaked BNUB cable alleging weapons had earlier this year been distributed to members of the CNDD-FDD's notorious youth wing, the Imbonerakure. The government has dismissed the report as absurd and dangerous.

Burundi turned the page on a civil war less than 10 years ago. Ignited in 1993 just after the country's first presidential election, it was a conflict that pitted the country's Hutu majority against a then-dominant Tutsi minority - mainly over access to political power.

After a visit to Burundi earlier this month, US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, the first American cabinet member ever to travel to the central African country, said she was prompted to make the trip because of a variety of "alarming signs".

These included, she said, "the decision to end [at the end of 2014] the UN mission at a time when there's significant political volatility, to the very swift trials of 21 members, young people who were members of one of the leading opposition parties, to restrictive media laws, to moves to change the constitution."

On 21 March 21 members of the opposition Movement for Solidarity and Democracy (MSD) were sentenced to life in jail and 26 given other prison terms after a demonstration in Bujumbura turned into a confrontation with security forces. MSD leader Alexis Sinduhije has also been charged in relation to the incident, but is in hiding.

"If you take a political crisis on the one hand and combine it with armaments on the other, those are precisely the ingredients for the kind of violence Burundi has managed to avoid now for a good few years, and it would be terribly tragic after all the progress that Burundi has made if it slipped into a large-scale political crisis, and certainly of course if it descended into violence," Power said.

Tussle over Arusha Accords

On 10 April, members of the Security Council issued a [statement](#) in which they "recalled the urgent need for the

Government of Burundi to address impunity, while respecting the right of due process, and for all the political parties to publicly condemn all political violence and acts of incitement to hatred or violence, in line with the Constitution of Burundi and the Arusha Agreement.”

Signed in 2000 after years of negotiation, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement - often referred to as the Arusha accords - was designed to end the civil war and set out power-sharing arrangements between different ethnic groups as the basis for durable peace and stability. The ruling CNDD-FDD was not a signatory.

Jean-Marie Ntahimpera, professor of political science at Bujumbura's Lumiere University, blamed the current crisis on the government's desire to demolish the Arusha deal, which he described as “the source of stability in the country”.

He said this desire was reflected in the major [constitutional amendments](#) the government has been trying to push through without any discussion with the opposition or civil society.

“Clearly there is pressure from supporters of the CNDD-FDD, who are trying to increase the number of their [government] posts. They reckon that the Arusha accords give enough posts and weight to the Tutsi, when they are a minority, and they want to bury these accords so that their supporters without jobs can get some.”

In a country where the private sector is tiny, the government remains the most significant source of formal employment.

“The country has been stable in recent years and it must remain stable. To achieve that these accords must be respected, other political parties must be allowed to work normally, democratic procedure must be accepted and the constitution respected,” said Ntahimpera.

“It would be terribly tragic after all the progress that Burundi has made if it slipped into a large-scale political crisis”

For Yolande Bouke of the Institute of Security Studies, upsetting Burundi's balance of power could create a danger, even if remote, “that the military might try to get involved.”

Noting that the political violence of recent years was not carried out across party rather than Hutu-Tutsi lines, Bouka warned that if those in power “chip away at Arusha there is a risk of re-ethnicizing the power struggle... if the government goes too far and fractures the military, with [Tutsi] officers feeling they stand to lose a lot...

“There is more of a threat to the Arusha accord now than there was a few years ago. The government is bolder than it was,” she added.

“Put all this together, and it seems as if they are trying to hold on to power by all means necessary,” Bouka told IRIN.

One key political development came in February when the country's vice president, Bernard Busokoza, of the Tutsi-dominated Union for National Progress, the only opposition party represented in parliament, was dismissed from his post. This prompted the resignation of three Uprona government ministers, who were replaced by members of a pro-government Uprona faction not recognized by the main wing of the party.

Opposition incensed

Léonce Ngendakumana, chairman of the opposition Alliance of Democrats for Change-Ikibiri, has been particularly vociferous in his criticisms of the “authoritarian” government, warning in a 6 February [letter](#) to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that the country was heading towards a “politico-ethnic genocide”.

Echoing [longstanding findings of human rights activists](#), he said the government had carried out “extrajudicial executions, moral and physical torture, the detention and harassment of opposition supporters and leaders and of civil society and the media.”

Speaking to IRIN in mid-April, Ngendakumana said: “No other party is allowed to hold meetings when members of the presidential party regularly hold meetings...”

“Weapons are being distributed like beans in the countryside to youths affiliated to the CNDD-FDD,” he added.

Denial

On 15 April, the government stepped up its vigorous denial of this allegation in a 1,700-word [statement](#) which accused BNUB, because of its confidential communication of the claim to UN headquarters in New York, of undermining relations with the government and the country's very stability.

The statement called on the UN to investigate the claims, and to ensure they were not part of a campaign to

"cover up the entry of weapons into the country to undermine security, and create chaos that could sabotage the elections".

(The government maintains Ngendakumana is "allergic" to elections because the opposition has no chance of winning them. The opposition says its chances are seriously undermined by a skewed playing field.)

The statement also said "appropriate measures" should be taken against those responsible "so as to restore a climate of confidence" between BNUB and the government of Burundi.

For its part, BNUB has denied it was "conducting a campaign to tarnish the image of the country", insisting "dialogue has always been at the centre of relations with the authorities of Burundi."

"The United Nations have no other interest than to see the aspiration of Burundi for a prosperous, stable and peaceful nation, where democratic values flourish fully achieved," it said in a statement.

Politically driven media?

The opposition's Ngendakumana also said the government had monopolized state media, using it to broadcast political messages well ahead of the official election campaign period.

"The president himself initiated the amendment of the constitution [narrowly defeated in March] to illegally run for a third mandate. What he has done is illegal. The constitution limits the head of state's number of mandates to two. Even the Arusha accords are clear on that."

But senior government officials have argued that Nkurunziza's first term does not count towards this limit as it was won not by popular vote but by a ballot limited to members of the national assembly.

Drawing a clear parallel with the murderous messages broadcast by Radio Television Milles Collines during the Rwandan genocide 20 years ago, opposition politicians have alleged Rema FM, a private pro-government station, has urged its listeners to "remain vigilant".

According to IRIN's own monitoring of the station, some Rema broadcasters call on listeners to be "vigilant" of those dissatisfied with the government's activities, people it described as "saboteurs" who should not be allowed to get ahead.

A prominent civil society leader has sued Rema FM for equating his criticisms of the government with rebellion; the station, for its part, is suing over the Rwandan genocide comparison.

Political scientist Ntahimpera dismissed talk of genocide as overblown. "Opposition politicians use the word to show that things are serious. But there are no signs of genocide. Rather there are cases of human rights abuses linked to the restriction of the opposition's political space. It is better to define things as they are rather than exaggerate."

Now, he added, the international community "regrets what happened in Rwanda in 1994 and is trying to stop Burundi exploding".

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