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Freedom in the World - Burundi (2010)

Capital:
Bujumbura

Population:
8,303,000

Political Rights Score: 4 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Partly Free

Trend Arrow

Burundi received an upward trend arrow due to the integration of the last remaining rebel group into the political process and the establishment of an independent electoral commission.

Overview

In 2009, the last rebel guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Forces, laid down its arms and was recognized as a legal political party. Also during the year, an electoral code was adopted, and an independent election commission was appointed to prepare for presidential, parliamentary, and local elections due in 2010.

The minority Tutsi ethnic group governed Burundi for most of the period since independence from Belgium in 1962. The military, judiciary, education 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 ethnic violence.

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 fighting in Burundi.

A 1994 power-sharing arrangement between FRODEBU and the mainly Tutsi-led Unity for National Progress (UPRONA) party installed Hutu politician Sylvestre Ntibantunganya as Burundi's new president, but he was ousted in a 1996 military coup led by former president Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi whom Ndadaye had defeated in the 1993 election. Peace and political stability remained elusive, as insurgents sporadically staged attacks and government forces pursued a campaign of intimidation.

In 2000, 19 groups from across the political spectrum agreed in principle on a future political solution to the conflict, and in 2001 a transitional government was installed, with Buyoya temporarily remaining chief of state and FRODEBU's Domitien Ndayizeye serving 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 additional 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 held the first local and national elections since 1993. The largely Hutu National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD), the political wing of the FDD, emerged as the country's largest party, and Parliament chose Pierre Nkurunziza as president. Domestic and international observers generally regarded the voting as legitimate and reflective of the people's will.

A key faction of the sole remaining rebel group, the FNL, agreed to lay down its arms and participate in the political process in 2006. The country was shaken, however, when several senior figures, including opposition leaders, were temporarily arrested in connection with an alleged coup plot. In addition, the CNDD 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, but violence involving the group flared again in the spring of 2008. 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 Rwasa 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 complicated by complaints regarding repressive actions taken by the CNDD, such as the arrest of a well-known journalist and opposition political leader, and counterclaims that the FNL was continuing to recruit military cadres.

The talks finally bore fruit in 2009, when the rebel group laid down its arms and was recognized as a legal political party. In April, an independent election commission was sworn in to prepare for presidential, parliamentary, and local elections due in 2010, and a new electoral code was adopted in September. Political uncertainty and tension remained, however. Opposition parties harshly criticized an alleged attempt by the government to manipulate the electoral process, and a leading anticorruption campaigner was murdered in April under mysterious circumstances.

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 relative freedom. Burundi currently has representative institutions at the local, municipal, and national levels, in both the legislative and executive branches of government. In 2009 a new independent election commission was appointed, although it suffered from tense relations with the government, which at one point withheld funding. In elections set for 2010, the

president will be directly elected by popular vote for a five-year term; Parliament had elected the president in 2005. 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.

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. In 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.

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 views. Most are small in terms of membership. Many Tutsi have now joined formerly Hutu-dominated parties. According to Human Rights Watch, both the ruling and other parties have sometimes employed violence and intimidation against opponents and internal dissent.

Corruption is a significant problem. Some government revenues and expenditures have not been regularly listed on the budget. In April 2009, Ernest Manirumva—the deputy head of Burundi's main anticorruption organization, the Anticorruption and Economic Malpractice Observatory (OLUCOME)—was killed by unknown assailants at his home in the capital. OLUCOME alleged that high-ranking government officials were complicit, and called for an international investigation. Burundi was ranked 168 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech is legally guaranteed and exists in practice, although journalists have been subject to self-censorship and occasional government censorship. The media have presented a wider range of political perspectives in recent years, and there is an opposition press, though it functions sporadically. Print runs of most newspapers are small, and readership is limited by low literacy levels. Radio is the main source of information for most 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 radio in the capital. Several private radio stations exist, but they generally have a short broadcast range. 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 this situation has improved in recent years. In June 2009, university students demonstrated to protest increases in administrative fees.

The constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association, although past

governments occasionally restricted these rights in practice. There is modest but important civil society activity with a focus on human rights. Constitutional protections for organized labor are in place, and the right to strike is guaranteed 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. Most of Burundi's doctors, who earn an average of \$100 per month, went on strike in May 2009 to focus attention on their calls for salary increases.

The judicial system is seriously burdened by corruption and a lack of resources and training, and crimes often go unreported. There are far more pending cases than can easily be handled by the current judiciary, and many of them are politically sensitive. According to a June 2009 Human Rights Watch statement, the government has stalled on the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission to address past human rights violations, and has failed to adequately investigate or prosecute such crimes. Amnesty International has reported that prison conditions continue to be "subhuman" and at times life-threatening.

With the improvement in the political environment, many of Burundi's internally displaced and refugee populations have returned home in recent years. 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, and the last had reportedly returned home by May 2009.

A new penal code adopted in 2009 criminalizes same-sex relationships. Women have limited opportunities for advancement in the economic and political spheres, especially in rural areas. According to UNICEF, only 12 percent of eligible females were enrolled in secondary school in 2008. 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. Albinos face a particular threat from discrimination and violence; eight murderers of Albinos were convicted and sentenced to prison in 2009.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*