

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	343
Land:	Burundi
Kilde:	UN Human Rights Council
Titel:	The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: An electoral campaign marred by spiral of violence and political intolerance
Udgivet:	14. maj 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. august 2020

13.5K

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The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: An electoral campaign marred by a spiral of violence and political intolerance

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Geneva, 14 May 2020 – The Commission of Inquiry on Burundi is alarmed that the official electoral campaign for the presidential, legislative and local elections of 20 May 2020, which was launched on 27 April and is slated to continue until 17 May, is characterized by an increase in political intolerance and numerous acts of violence and human rights violations.

Clashes between members of the two main political parties – the ruling party *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces de défense de la démocratie* (CNDD-FDD) and the *Congrès national pour la liberté* (CNL) – in the margins of election rallies are on the rise and have resulted in several injured and even casualties in both camps; hate speech and incitement to violence against political opponents, mainly from CNDD-FDD members, are circulating unrestricted ; a large number of women and men who are CNL members, including candidates to the legislative and local elections, were arrested and detained whereas those close to the ruling party continue to enjoy almost total impunity for their abuses, including those responsible for violent acts.

For several months now, based on the analysis of multiple risk factors, the Commission has warned the Burundian authorities and the international community on the risks of such an aggravation of political intolerance and violence on the eve of the elections. In particular, the Commission stressed that the shrinking democratic space and the numerous violations of public liberties such as the freedom of information, association and peaceful assembly were important risk factors in the current electoral context.

The lack of independence and impartiality of the Independent National Electoral Commission - *Commission électorale nationale indépendante* (CENI), the official guarantor for the proper conduct of these elections, represents a growing concern, particularly in light of the alleged irregularities in the distribution of voting cards and the non-disclosure of the final voters' rolls. The use of the judicial system as a tool against the opponents of the ruling party, the absence of independent election observers and the lack of trust in the independence of the constitutional court, the main avenue for appeal in the event of a dispute over the elections results, exacerbate the mistrust and the doubts of several politicians from the opposition and part of the population about possible electoral fraud and therefore towards the integrity and the credibility of the electoral process.

Hence, the Commission is concerned that under these conditions, the conduct of the electoral process and/or the announcement of the official elections results scheduled for 4 June 2020, could become triggering factors of a new and deeper cycle of political violence.

Therefore, the Commission reiterates its appeal to the Government of Burundi to stem this spiral of violence by taking the necessary measures to restore the confidence of all Burundians in the credibility of the ongoing political process, particularly by ensuring the respect and the protection of public liberties. To that end, there is need to end the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of human rights violations, in particular those close to the ruling party, sometimes in senior positions of authority, as well as Imbonerakure and local administrative authorities.

The Commission also recalls that the political party leaders from all fronts have the responsibility to prevent acts of violence and must step up their efforts to peacefully resolve the tensions in the run-up to the elections and ahead of their conclusion. Failing this, they should be aware that they will be held criminally responsible for their actions and, in some circumstances, for the actions of their militants.

Therefore, the Commission invites all competent jurisdictions, including those outside the Burundian judicial system, to consider instituting criminal proceedings against those who bear most responsibility for gross human rights violations committed in the context of the ongoing electoral process.

Furthermore, the Commission urges all political parties to refrain from using children for the purposes of electoral propaganda and to ensure that children's rights are respected and protected throughout the electoral process.

The Commission takes note with concern of the decision by the Burundian authorities not to apply the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations on social distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus during the electoral campaign, while thousands of people interact on a daily basis during political rallies. The decision of the Burundian Government of 12 May 2020 to declare *persona non grata* the country Representative of WHO and three of its experts and ordering them to leave Burundi before 15 May is particularly regrettable in the present circumstances. In this respect, the Commission recalls its recent [statement](#) in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and reiterates that transparency, respect of international standards and humanitarian assistance are indispensable to combat the pandemic.

In conclusion, the Commission stresses that the elections of 20 May 2020 will only be able to usher in a new era of stability in Burundi if the electoral process is conducted in a peaceful and secure manner, with total transparency and independence to ensure that its results are considered credible and accepted by all. The Commission stresses once more the need for the international community to follow the human rights situation in the unfolding electoral context in Burundi with the utmost vigilance.

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