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Freedom in the World - Burundi (2007)

Population:
7,800,000

Capital:
Bujumbura

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

Ratings Change

Burundi's political rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the government and ruling party's increased repression of the opposition.

Overview

In 2006, Burundi's fragile attempts to develop democratic institutions received a boost as the final rebel group, the National Liberation Forces (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 arrested in August in connection with an alleged coup plot. Critics claimed that the supposed plot was a fabrication, and the vice president resigned in September, in part to protest the arrests. In addition, the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) party leadership showed increasing signs of intolerance toward opposition and independent viewpoints through, for example, the arrest of print and radio journalists.

The minority Tutsi ethnic group governed this small African country 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 until his ouster 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 within the country continued to be elusive as armed insurgents sporadically staged attacks and government security forces pursued an often ruthless campaign of intimidation. The search for peace eventually led to an agreement to allow increased authority

for Parliament, which had a FRODEBU majority, and the beginning of negotiations in Arusha, Tanzania, in 1998.

In 2000, the 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 organized 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 October 2001, the National Assembly adopted a transitional constitution, and a transitional government was installed the next month, 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. Demobilization of former combatants continued, and some refugees returned, especially from Tanzania. However, sporadic fighting also continued near the capital, Bujumbura.

In 2005, Burundi achieved a major milestone by holding the first local and national elections since 1993, in June and July, respectively. These resulted in a fundamental political realignment as the largely Hutu former guerrilla movement, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), emerged as the country's largest political force, eclipsing the traditionally dominant parties and taking 59 out of 100 seats in the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament. FRODEBU took 24 seats, and UPRONA won 10 seats. Parliament subsequently chose Pierre Nkurunziza as president, handing him 151 of the 162 votes cast. Domestic and international observers generally regarded the local and national legislative elections as legitimate and reflective of the people's will.

In August 2006, the FNL agreed to lay down its arms and participate in the political process. The country was rocked by pp Ndayizeye, and former vice president Alphonse Marie Kadege, of the opposition UPRONA party, were arrested in late July and early August in connection with an alleged coup plot. Critics claimed the supposed plot was a fabrication. Vice president Alice Nzomukunda, of the ruling CNDD resigned in September to protest the arrests as well as credible allegations of government fraud. In addition, the ruling CNDD party leadership showed increasing signs of intolerance toward opposition and independent viewpoints, and began to heavily criticize the independent press.

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 function with greater freedom than previously. Burundi currently has representative institutions at the local, municipal, and national levels in the legislative and executive branches of government.

While the lower house of the Parliament—the 100-seat National Assembly—is directly elected for a five-year term, locally elected officials choose the Senate, also for five years. 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 also are 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.

Governments must include all parties that have won at least 5 percent of the votes cast in parliamentary elections. 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 of Parliament. CNDD-FDD members currently hold 13 out of 20 cabinet positions, and 7 of the cabinet ministers are women.

There are more than two dozen active political parties, ranging from those that champion radical Tutsi positions to those that hold extremist Hutu positions. Most are small in terms of membership. Many Tutsis have now joined formerly Hutu-dominated parties. Five political parties are represented in the current government. In addition to FDD, UPRONA, and FRODEBU, there are also ministers from two small Tutsi-oriented parties, PARENA and the MRC.

Some government revenues and expenditures have not been regularly listed on the budget, which has contributed to corruption problems. Faced with mounting criticism over graft, in September 2006 President Pierre Nkurunziza demoted his finance minister, who had come under suspicion for his role in the allegedly improper sale of the presidential plane in July. As a result, the World Bank has postponed the release of \$35 million to support economic reforms. Burundi was ranked 130 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 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 coverage, as well as the only newspaper that publishes regularly. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service, Radio France Internationale, and the Voice of America are available on FM in the capital, Bujumbura. Several private radio stations exist, but they generally have limited broadcast range. In September 2006, the CNDD chairman made a widely publicized speech in which he attacked Burundi's independent media. Since then, tensions between the CNDD-FDD and the country's independently owned radio stations have increased. In November, for example, authorities detained the head of a private radio station over broadcast information deemed to threaten state and public security.

Print runs of most newspapers are small, and readership is limited by low literacy levels. Access to the Internet remains limited to urban areas.

Freedom of religion is generally observed. For many years the ongoing civil strife and the Tutsis' social and institutional dominance impeded academic freedom by limiting educational opportunities for Hutus, although there are indications that this may be changing under the CNDD government.

The constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association, although past transitional governments occasionally restricted this right 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 Organization of Free Unions of Burundi has been independent since the rise of the multiparty system in 1992. Most union members are civil servants and have bargained collectively with the government. In April 2006, nurses staged a three-week strike over wages.

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. Many crimes go unreported. Conditions in prisons continue to be poor 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. In October 2006, the bar association threatened to go on strike over the arrest of one of its members for complicity in the alleged coup plot.

Amnesty International and other national and international human rights organizations have previously criticized the practices of the security services in Burundi and report that those opposed to the CNDD-FDD are particularly at risk of torture. In August 2006, the UN representative in Burundi expressed concern for those detained in relation to the alleged coup plot, urging the Burundian authorities to respect the human rights of its citizens, particularly with regard to torture. The Burundian League of Human Rights (Ligue Iteka), family members of those detained, and the minister in charge of human rights confirmed in August that several of those arrested had been tortured.

The government's release since January 2006 of some 3,000 detainees linked to the 10-year civil war has increased the urgency of establishing mechanisms to try them and others still in custody. The detainees, many of whom were charged with violent crimes, were released after they were categorized as political prisoners by a government commission created under the 2000 Arusha Accords governing the transitional postwar period. According to Burundian officials, those released have been granted "provisional immunity" but will eventually be held accountable for any alleged crimes by a yet-to-be-created special court or truth and reconciliation commission.

As part of the peace agreement, the composition of the national security forces must have an equal ethnic balance. The process of integrating former guerrillas into the armed forces continued in 2006.

With the improvement in the political environment, many of Burundi's internally displaced and refugee populations began returning home in 2006. The UN High

Commissioner for Refugees predicted that close to 100,000 refugees would return in 2007. Especially in the first half of 2006, before the FNL agreed to disarm, Burundians continued to be subjected to arbitrary violence, whether by the government or guerrillas. Most of the abuses occurred in the provinces of Bujumbura Rural and Bubanza, the main areas of FNL activity.

An annual per capita gross domestic product of \$700 ranks Burundi among the poorest countries in the world. About 93 percent of the workforce is engaged in agricultural production, and 68 percent of the population lives below the poverty line according to 2002 data in the CIA's 2006 *World Factbook* . According to statistics published by the Central Bank in Bujumbura, most economic indicators sharply declined with the advent of widespread insecurity in 1993. Access to basic social and health services has been severely diminished. According to two leading human rights organizations, Burundian state hospitals routinely detain patients who are unable to pay their hospital bills. The patients can be detained for weeks or even months in horrific conditions.

Women have limited opportunities for advancement in the economic and political spheres, especially in rural areas. As part of the current negotiated political agreement, the parties agreed that 30 percent of parliament members would be women. Only 5 percent of eligible females are enrolled in secondary school. Widespread sexual violence against women continues to occur, according to Amnesty International.