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Burundi: Burundi parliament rejects disputed draft constitution

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by Esdras NDIKUMANA

BUJUMBURA, March 21, 2014 (AFP) - Burundi's parliament failed Friday to adopt the government's highly controversial measures to revise the constitution, which could have threatened a delicate ethnic balance in a nation still healing from decades of conflict.

Lawmakers blocked the changes by a single vote, parliamentary speaker Pie Ntavyohanyuma said, adding that the "draft revision of the constitution is therefore rejected".

It also bars the head of state from seeking a third term in office, likely to enrage President Pierre Nkurunziza, who was expected to campaign for a third mandate in elections scheduled for next year.

Opposition parties boycotted the vote, including the main Tutsi party Uprona and the Front for Democracy (Frodebu) party, but the bill still failed to pass as the 84 lawmakers from Nkurunziza's ruling CNDD-FDD party were just one short of the quorum needed.

The bill needed four-fifths of all 106 elected lawmakers to back it to pass.

The bill will now be sent back to the presidency, and cannot be put back before "parliament for one year", Ntavyohanyuma said.

Civil society groups and opposition parties welcomed the decision, which comes amid growing tensions between the opposition and the government in the central African country.

- 'Victory for democracy' -

The government had argued that its proposed changes were but a simple and minor "tweaking" of the constitution, but critics accused Bujumbura of seeking to bolster power in the ruling party.

The opposition had warned that the move risked awakening old ethnic demons which have plagued the small country, torn in the past by civil war, rebellion and massacres.

Uprona leader Charles Nditije said they were pleased with the outcome, telling AFP that the ruling party now had "no choice but to return to the table to talk".

Vital Nshimirimana, co-ordinator of the civil society coalition Forsc, which includes some 200 organisations, said it was "a great victory for democracy in Burundi".

Had the proposed changes to the constitution been approved, it would also have ended a power sharing agreement set down in the Arusha Peace Agreement of 2000, the foundation stone of a 2006 deal that ended 13 years of civil war for the country in which at least 300,000 people were killed.

That deal ensures the power balance between the Hutu majority -- 85 percent of the population and now in power -- and the Tutsi minority, making up 14 percent, but led the country for much of its history since independence.

Burundian Interior Minister Edouard Nduwimana defended the blocked bill and said he "regretted the rejection of the text".

"It does not matter, the text will return to the presidency, and the constitution gives the head of state alternatives for its

adoption, through means of a referendum, for example," Nduwimana told AFP.

Nkurunziza has said he will run for a third time if his party nominates him, but that it will be for the party and constitutional court to decide.

Some party members say he could stand even without a change to the constitution, arguing that he was for his first term in office elected by parliament, not by all the people.

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