

Burundi

Population: 6.1 million

Life expectancy: 46 years

National capital: Bujumbura

Independence from Belgium-administered UN trusteeship: 1 July 1962



Abstract

Burundi has been a colony of Germany and Belgium and it gained independence in 1962. Ever since, all societal power has been in the totalitarian hands of a Tutsi-Hima oligarchy, which did not hesitate to discriminate and use massive violence against the majority of their own people, mainly Hutu. The international community has only recently given up its sheer complete indifference towards the conflict in this tiny country, by pushing it towards democratization. However, it has not been ready to sufficiently assist the country in its transition period, and to try to prevent outbreaks of ethnic violence once more. Since mid-1998, serious negotiations are being held in Arusha (with the support of the international community), and there is some reason for hope. In August 2000, a part peace agreement was signed, but negotiations still have to continue to deal with some remaining burning issues and to involve all important stakeholders.

Prospects of Conflict Resolution in Burundi

Stefaan Calmeyn

Agents

The current civil war in Burundi is the result of antagonisms with deep historical roots and of a more recent but failed democratic transition. In general, it opposes two groups which have been identifying themselves and perceiving each other more and more on ethnic terms. Though the conflict is political, polarization, mobilization and manipulation have almost completely taken place along ethnic lines. This is quite understandable if we take into account the history of the conflict.

Since independence (1962), and especially since the breakdown of the monarchy and the institution of a republic (1966), all societal power has been monopolized by a small group. This group consisted of Tutsi¹ (more specifically Tutsi-Hima) mainly originating from one southern province (Bururi), and top positions were in the hands of the military. The security apparatus² has always played a key role in safeguarding the power in the hands of that small Tutsi elite. At this moment, this apparatus is still one of the key agents in Burundi. It is well-trained and well-equipped thanks to decades of military assistance by Belgium, France and the United States (only given up recently). After the coup of July 1996 that brought the current government of colonel Pierre Buyoya to power, the army incorporated the members of the Tutsi youth militia and mobilized secondary school graduates. It grew from about 17,500 to about 60,000 soldiers, which of course raises problems of discipline and training (the officer corps has remained the same). Its budget has risen from 46 million \$ in 1995 to 50 million \$ in 1996 and 60 million \$ in 1997. It controls the central as well as the local governments (provincial and district level).

¹ Although they share the same language (Kirundi) and religion, and although they always (until recently) have been living mixedly, the Hutu and Tutsi are considered as different ethnic groups. The Hutu make up about 85 per cent of the population, while the Tutsi are a minority of about 15 per cent. There is also a third ethnic group, the Twa, who constitute only about one per cent of the population.

² There is no clear distinction between the army, the police and the “gendarmerie”. They all share the same oppressive task, and they all are nearly mono-ethnic. We can call them the army altogether.

The present government, as it is illegitimate, has been isolated in the international arena. However, there is some implicit support by the Rwandan government, and there has been tolerance (in relation to the embargo) by the DR Congo, Congo (Brazzaville) and Zambia. A few western countries also regarded Buyoya as the least of all evils. Relations with Tanzania have been very tense from time to time, but no major clashes occurred.

Parties in the conflict are summarized in Table 1:

Acronym	Name	Established	Represents	Conflict with
	Buyoya government	25th July 1996	Longstanding Tutsi(-Hima) oligarchy	Hutu political forces (who won the elections of 1993) Regional heads of state (esp. Uganda and Tanzania)
FAB (army)	Forces Armées Burundaises		Tutsi(-Hima) powerholding elite (their life insurance)	Hutu rebel movements; has been an oppressive apparatus against the population
FRODEBU	Front pour la démocratie au Burundi	1992	Alternative (Hutu) elite; part of (mainly Hutu) peasant population (cfr. Elections 1993)	Spoilers of the democratization process (army) (radical) Tutsi leaders Internal divides
UPRONA	Parti de l'Union et du Progrès National	1960	Former single party (political instrument of Tutsi-Hima elite)	Lost the elections of 1993; struggle with Frodebu and other Hutu-affiliated parties, internal divides
CNDD	Conseil National pour la défense de la démocratie	1995	Wing of Frodebu which didn't want to tolerate the concessions made to the losers of the democratic elections	Spoilers of the democratic outcome Tutsi (political and military) elite Internal divides
FDD	Forces pour la défense de la démocratie	1995	Military wing of CNDD	FAB; clashes with other rebel movements
PALIPEHUTU	Parti pour la libération du peuple Hutu	1980 in Tanzanian refugee camp	Radical Hutu party (forbidden in the nineties), armed struggle to change power relations	Political struggle against Tutsi elite; armed attacks against military; clashes with other rebel groups
FROLINA	Front pour la Libération Nationale	End of eighties in Tanzanian refugee camp	Radical Hutu movement, striving for Hutu revolution	Political struggle against Tutsi elite; armed attacks against military, clashes with other rebel groups
PARENA	Parti pour le Redressement National	1994	Radical Tutsi party, under leadership of ex-president Bagaza	(Democratically elected) Hutu political forces "Too soft" Tutsi political parties and personalities (such as Buyoya)

To get back to the interior scene, this growing mobilization and militarization of part of the Burundian population should serve the defeat of the Hutu rebel movements that are a recent but persisting phenomenon in Burundian politics. Here we enter the realm of the

second large group, that of the Hutu majority which has been politically and socially marginalized for decades.

In the wake of the democratization process in the beginning of the nineties (instigated under pressure from the international community), the charismatic Melchior Ndadaye founded the Frodebu, which, despite its moderate character and its openness towards the (poor part of the) Tutsi population, has become a rallying force of Hutu conscience building and of Hutu political (non-violent) action. In the elections of 1993, Ndadaye beat the (also then) president Buyoya and the Frodebu obtained an overwhelming majority in the new parliament. The former unionist party Uprona, symbol of the powerholding Tutsi elite, was left in shambles.

In turn, the military coup of October 1993, during which Ndadaye and his constitutional successors were murdered, almost decapitated and certainly paralysed the new (Frodebu) regime. Then followed a (institutionally) very insecure period during which the process of democratization was turned upside down. The former elite tried to turn the clock back with the help of terror and oppression. This process culminated in the coup of July 1996.

In the mean time, some people within Frodebu reacted and took up the armed struggle to fight this reversal of the democratic outcome. The CNDD was founded and organized a military wing, the FDD. The FDD are the most severe opponent of the military regime and got a lot of support from the former Mobutu regime (in the area of Uvira). Now they prefer to operate in Burundi itself. Older and radical Hutu movements (founded in the refugee camps in Tanzania in the eighties), such as the Palipehutu and Frolina, also gained momentum. The size and organizational structure of these three rebel movements is not really known. Estimates vary from 3,000 to 5,000. What is very clear, though, is that they resort to guerrilla tactics and that they have substantial damage capacities. Regular attacks on military and strategic goals occur. After the recent split from the CNDD leadership, the forces of the FDD do not feel engaged in the actual negotiation process in Arusha at all (mainly led by political representatives), and fighting still continues. The most acceptable estimate of the number of deaths since October 1993, is

between 200,000 and 300,000 people. On top of that, there are still 280,000 (mainly Hutu) refugees in neighbouring countries (265,000 of them in Tanzania), and 540,000 internally displaced or regrouped people within Burundi itself³.

Motivation

The root causes of the conflict are political and have to do with the history and character of the country. Burundi is a densely populated, small and poor country. It has no precious natural resources and no developed industry, and is rather land-locked and isolated, so it cannot immediately set up huge commercial activities either. The only thing it has, is agriculture. Indeed, 90 per cent of the population lives from the combination of subsistence agriculture and of cropping the main export products, coffee and tea.

The main dividing line in Burundian society has always been the one between the poor and marginalized peasant masses (Hutu and Tutsi) and an urbanized and educated elite (mainly Tutsi). The postcolonial state has been the instrument in the hands of this small elite to impose and maintain a profound (and oppressive) control over the peasant majority. The agricultural surplus nurtured this state, and access to the state has always been the one and only way to get access to income, wealth, status, luxury. The political power guaranteed the economic power and was itself guaranteed by the military power. The structural violence towards its own population was widely (though maybe unconsciously) supported by the international military assistance and development community⁴. As the (agricultural surplus) base of the state income was rather limited and volatile (prices of coffee are highly unstable), the competition for that access to the state has always been very harsh.

³ In the months following October 1993, the army tried to protect the (rural) Tutsi population from Hutu anger and set up camps to do so. The Tutsi living there are referred to as “déplacés”. As a part of the strategy in the civil war in the following years, the army installed huge camps where the rural Hutu population was brought together in order to control them and to prevent them from supporting the rebels. These are called the “regroupés”. At a certain moment, more than 300,000 people were gathered in such camps under terrible living conditions. Growing international pressure pushed the government to start closing them down in 1999 but the problem still remains.

⁴ See for a profound analysis of this phenomenon the book by Peter Uvin.

As already mentioned, a small group of military people within the group of Tutsi has succeeded in monopolizing this political and economic power since the sixties. The price to pay was a permanent struggle between all sorts of factions, and a gradual exclusion of the Hutu majority from political, economic and social life in Burundi⁵. Apart from the constant terror and oppression, the (educated) Hutu have been victims of more than one outbreak of massive violence and repression by the army. In the eighties (especially when missionaries are targeted), even the international community notices the authoritarian nature of the regime. It is under pressure from its positive conditionality (development aid, SAP) that president Buyoya, who had come to power after a bloodless coup in 1987, tolerated a democratization process. For the first time, the rural (mainly Hutu) masses took up a little bit of self-consciousness under the guidance of the Frodebu party. For the first time, there grew something like hope and aspiration. For the first time, people were asked to vote.

Can one imagine the frustration and anger of the Hutu majority and of their incumbent elite, when, a few months after a democratic victory, the newly elected president gets killed and a few Tutsi extremists spoil the whole democratization effort to safeguard their political and economic privileges? The international community has enthusiastically welcomed the democratization process, but hasn't done anything substantial to help the new regime overcome its huge challenges (e.g. the return of the refugees) or to protect this new regime from the damaging capacity of a few Tutsi radicals. Can it surprise that in a country with such a tradition of political violence and oppression, a few among the Hutu grasp the possibility of their increased organizational strength to start a violent struggle for their share of the cake ?

So we can observe a damaging civil war on top of the deteriorating economic situation since the end of the eighties. Indeed, the sharp drop in the coffee price⁶, together with the social consequences of the structural adjustment program, seriously influenced the

⁵ Despite the nearly mono-ethnic character of the higher echelons of the state apparatus, the Tutsi Burundian authorities have never resorted to an ethnic or racist discourse. On the contrary, the existence of different ethnicities was officially neglected and even denied ("we are all Burundians").

⁶ In 1989, the United States refused to extend the mandate of the International Coffee Agreement and prices dropped by 40 per cent. There have been more ups and downs during the nineties.

economic well-being of the Burundian population. Young and desperate boys are very easy to manipulate and to recruit into the radical militia.

Instruments

Although the conflict in Burundi is in fact a political conflict, and although the main problem at stake is the more equal distribution of power among the whole population (marginalized Hutu, Tutsi and Twa alike), polarization at this moment runs completely along ethnic lines. During the recent history of Burundi, there has been a growing tendency towards ethnic mobilization. We can even observe a relative ethnic segregation. Most of the Hutu have fled Bujumbura and the other cities, and most of the Tutsi have fled their hills to end up in the cities or in protected camps. Both groups constitute real communities. The one fears and distrusts the other, there are stereotyping and hate campaigns⁷. There is permanent reference to past events. Each group has its own interpretation of history and uses it to justify the image of the other as untrustworthy and murderous. The Hutu refer to the long-lasting oppression and the outbursts of violence of the Tutsi army (1965-66, 1969, 1972, 1988, 1991, 1993-99). The Tutsi stress that the Hutu want to exterminate them and that the military apparatus is the only life insurance they have. They refer to the repressed Hutu insurgencies (1965, 1972), to the outburst of anti-Tutsi violence after the assassination of Ndadaye (October 1993 and following months) and to the current rebel movements. Both groups create myths of the other as devils who want to exterminate them. On top of that, in the present war situation, moderate elements are marginalized (and even physically eliminated) and there is a lot of compulsion and social control on both sides.

The warring parties are not directly represented in the current negotiation process in Arusha, and there are no other channels of communication between them either. It is also hard to know what happens exactly in the field, as (foreign) journalists, monitors or researchers are not allowed or too afraid to enter the conflict zones. Moreover, the

⁷ The more or less independent press that came up in the beginning of the nineties has provided many examples.

national media are under the perfect control of the government, and there is a lot of self-censorship.

Arms are widely present in the country, especially on the side of the army, but the rebels dispose of enough light weapons (rifles, mines, grenades) to undermine security. Apart from the general embargo, imposed on Burundi by the neighbouring countries from July 1996 until January 1999, there have been no efforts to restrict arms supply towards the country⁸. Both conflicting parties have been able to arm themselves freely on the international market⁹. The disarmament and demobilization of the army and the rebel forces will be a major task in the settlement of the conflict. First of all, there should be a thorough inquiry into the presence of arms throughout the country. The international community will have to play a large (sponsoring) role there.

The conflict in Burundi will never be solved without a structural solution to the many conflicts in the region (Rwanda, DR Congo). There is huge potential for all sorts of destructive alliances and interference, and the demonstration effect of the one conflict towards the other is catastrophic. The confidence between Hutu and Tutsi is permanently undermined by events in neighbouring countries that give rise to hardening positions.

Still, the region has got the opportunity from the international community to deal with the Burundian conflict¹⁰, and it has fully taken it. As a reaction to the coup and the illegitimate and unconstitutional regime of Buyoya (July 1996), the regional leaders have adopted a complete economic embargo. As such, Tanzania and Uganda have urged the Burundians to negotiate and find a peaceful way to stabilize the country. Of course, both countries have their own agenda of supremacy in the region. But with the financial assistance of the international community, first Julius Nyerere, and after his death in October 1999 Nelson Mandela, have been mediating negotiations between 18 parties on

⁸ A proposal from Belgium in the EU (February 1997) to install an arms embargo towards Burundi, was rejected by other European partners (especially France and the UK).

⁹ For details, see the report of Human Rights Watch.

¹⁰ As it has been called: "Africa for the Africans".

a regular basis in Arusha. The peace agreement is scheduled to come about at the end of August 2000.

Still, many questions arise, as to the representativity of the negotiators and as to their will to forget about personal or group interests for the sake of the future of the whole country. Some essential problems are specifically hard to tackle, such as the composition of the transitional government and of the post-conflict national army.

After helping to bring the parties in the Burundian conflict to a certain consensus, the international community will have to provide the necessary guarantees and means for the reconstruction of the society. It will also have to rethink its relations with this poor and dependent country. Here we think of the debt problem, the use of socially destructive adjustment programs, the orientation of development aid and the danger of military assistance¹¹.

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¹¹ For a detailed list of recommendations, see the study by Luc Reychler *et al*, ii.

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Chronology

- **September 1987:** Buyoya comes to power after a palace coup against Bagaza
- **August 1988:** outburst of violence in the North of Burundi; approximately 20,000 Hutu are killed by the army
- **1990-1992:** President Buyoya instigates a process of national unity (charter of national unity, new constitution, multipartism)
- **November 1991:** ethnic tensions flare up; 3,000 to 5,000 Hutu are killed
- **June 1993:** presidential elections; Ndadaye beats Buyoya by 64.8% against 32.5%. Later also parliamentary elections: the Frodebu obtain 65 seats (with 74.4% of the votes) and the Uprona 16 (24.4%).
- **October 1993:** Military coup: the president and his constitutional successors are killed; in the following chaos about 50,000 people are killed all over the country, Hutu and Tutsi alike.
- **April 1994:** The newly appointed president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, gets killed in the plane crash above Kigali together with his Rwandan colleague Habyarimana. The genocide starts in neighbouring Rwanda
- **September 1994:** the convention of government (a sort of compromise agreement) is signed after negotiations between the Frodebu and Tutsi parties
- **1995-1996:** the situation deteriorates heavily: Bujumbura is the scene of ethnic strife and ethnic cleansing; insecurity reigns in the country; part of the Hutu leadership engages in an armed struggle
- **November 1995 and March 1996:** summits of regional heads of state on the Burundian conflict in Cairo and Tunis under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, designation of Julius Nyerere as prime mediator
- **May and June 1996:** talks in Mwanza (Tanzania) under leadership of Nyerere
- **June 1996:** first regional summit on Burundi in Arusha, president Ntinbantunganya (who followed Ntaryamira) asks for regional military assistance
- **July 1996:** military coup, Buyoya is appointed by the army as interim president; the regional leaders react harshly and install an embargo on Burundi
- **March 1997:** signing of negotiations agenda between Buyoya government and CNDD in Rome (under auspices of San Egidio community)
- **August 1997:** complete failure of negotiation round in Arusha (with Nyerere as mediator); the impasse is total and fighting continues to reign in the country
- **June/July 1998:** internal successful negotiations between the government of Buyoya and parliament (mainly in the hands of Frodebu) on new institutional agreements
- **June/July/August/October 1998 and January 1999:** hopeful negotiation rounds under leadership of Nyerere
- **January 1999:** suspension of the embargo by regional leaders