



# Unrest puts the Church in Burundi in a difficult position

Ashagrie Abdi



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

World Watch Research

July 1, 2015

[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

[www.theanalytical.org](http://www.theanalytical.org)

## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Context .....	2
The move by the Catholic Church and the call from the international community .....	3
Can the situation get worse? .....	4
What does this mean to the Church and Christians?.....	5

## Unrest puts the Church in Burundi in a difficult position

### Introduction

Burundi is on the verge of another new and (probably) deep crisis. Located in one of the most volatile regions of the continent, Burundi has gone through tough times. Some of the opposition parties in the country were among the factions that fought in Eastern Congo. The ongoing unrest in the country has brought a limelight to the country. There is a fear that the country might descend to another civil war. Thousands fled to neighboring countries. Dozens were killed. Senior government officials, including the vice-president fled the country saying he feared for his life. The elections were postponed. The presidential election set for June 26 was moved to July 15. The local and legislative elections scheduled for June 5 were postponed to June 29. The legislative election set for June 29 faced attacks on poll stations, yet went on. Regional and international governmental organizations call for dialogue. In its 7473<sup>rd</sup> meeting, the United Nations Security Council called for dialogue saying the current situation is “a grave threat to security in Burundi.”<sup>1</sup> How did we get here? What does it mean for the Church and Christians?

### Context

Burundi is a small landlocked country located in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. Since its independence from Belgium in 1962, the country has been facing what can be characterized as ‘an intractable conflict’ between the two main tribes: Hutu and Tutsi. With the population of just over 10 million, the country’s leadership has struggled to propel the development of the country. In 1993, there was, at least, a glimmer of hope that the country was entering a new era following the first democratically elected Hutu president, Mr. Melchior Ndadaye. However, the hope was dashed as the president was assassinated within months of his election. Following that, in 1994, the parliament elected Cyprien Ntaryamira, who was also Hutu, as president of the country. He was killed along with the Rwandan president in Kigali in the same year. As the situation in the neighboring Rwanda was spinning out of control, the parliament again elected another Hutu president Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, however the mainly Tutsi party, Union for National Progress (UPRONA), decided to withdraw from the government. The sequences of the events set things in motion whereby the country entered a period of ethnic conflict. The conflict led to a death of more than 300,000 people, mainly civilians.

The international community tried to help Burundi during the crisis. The African Union sent its force to the country. Named the African Union Mission in Burundi (AMIB), the force remained in the country for one year, and it was replaced by the UN force in 2004. The UN force was sent to the country after the UN Security Council decided under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter to establish the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB). The mission ended in 2007 and the functions of the ONUB were subsumed under the United Nations Integrated Office in Burundi United (BINUB). The country was gradually put on track following some dialogue among different factions as well as some legal and political changes. Following the 2005 constitutional vote, which favored power-sharing constitution, Pierre Nkurunziza, the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11946.doc.htm>

current president, was elected by both houses of the parliament. He is from the Hutu rebel Forces for Defense of Democracy (FDD).

The civil war destroyed the economy of the country. Even though there was some hope for an accelerated development after the Paris Club of creditor nations canceled all of the \$134.3m debt Burundi owed to its members in 2009, the country's development could not go as promised. According to the Africa Development Bank Group, Burundi's development has been less than 5%, which could be called low growth rate considering its neighboring countries like Rwanda

The current unrest that the country is facing mainly started during the 2010 presidential election. Human right groups and analysts thought that the ruling party put the country in a wrong direction in terms of citizen participation, space for civil society and rule of law. As the authoritarian attitude of the ruling party became visible, the opposition parties boycotted the 2010 presidential election. That meant the ruling party won the 2010 election without any contest. Following that, unlawful detention, killings of opposition members, sentencing opposition members to death, and restrictions on freedom of the press and the media have become more common. The situation became more severe when the president wanted to run for another term. In May 2015, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of president's Nkurunziza's decision to stand for a third term. There were reports that the judges were intimidated. That was followed by protests in the country, especially in the capital city, Bujumbura. A failed coup attempt further showed how the country is divided, and at the same time showed that the country's president has staunch supporters in the army and the security apparatus that aborted the coup.

The international community was following the situation closely since 2010. In 2014, the country declared a UN official a *persona non grata* after a UN report indicated that the ruling party was arming its youth members.

There have been responses to the current situation. The responses by the international community are directed towards a call for calm and restraint as well as reconsidering the election period. East African leaders call for delaying the elections. The regional leaders are also about to convene in Tanzania to address the crisis but Burundi's president said he won't attend the Summit. In the meantime, more than 20 people were reportedly killed during the protests.

### **The move by the Catholic Church and the call from the international community**

The Catholic Church says, "After considering the manner in which the elections have been organized and the way they are evolving," the church will no longer support the election. In a statement transmitted by Catholic Media, the church says, "[the church] cannot endorse an election riddled with shortcomings."<sup>2</sup> The Statement continues, even though people should vote in the elections, they should not go to election polls "by threat or intimidation, or because they have been bought in one way or another. In the eyes of God, that would be slavery to

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-burundi-politics-eu-idUSKBN0OD1VX20150528>

evil.” This action by the Catholic Church was followed by the announcement of the European Union who decided to withdraw its observers from monitoring the June elections. EU foreign policy Chief Federica Mogherini says, “according to our reports the election process continues to be seriously marred by restrictions on independent media, excessive use of force against demonstrators, a climate of intimidation for opposition parties and civil society and lack of confidence in the election authorities.”<sup>3</sup> The African Union, the US government and the East African Community called for calm and postponement of the election dates.

## Can the situation get worse?

Considering previous history and the volatile nature of the region, the situation in Burundi might flare ethnic tensions. Yet, even while the ethnic aspect of the crisis is visible, the international community has not seen the matter from that angle.<sup>4</sup> The following could be considered:

**Firstly, neighboring countries might interfere.** The situation would get worse should Paul Kagami, Rwandan President, decide to meddle with the situation in Burundi. Kagami is known for various involvements in his neighboring’s affairs as long as Rwanda’s national interest is protected. If that happens, it is going to be another bloodshed as it would definitely pit the Tutsis against the Hutus. A Rwandan party, Rwanda People’s Party, has already indicated its position by calling for the president of Burundi to step down. In its press release, the party says the move by the president is “in direct contravention of the 2000 Arusha Accord for Peace and National Reconciliation...” The only optimism is that as a president from the minority, Kagami might anticipate that it is not worth risking all.

**Secondly, a boycott by opposition parties might flare up the heat further.** The political parties in the country might also decide to make a statement amidst the outrage by the general population and the concern of the international community. Boosted by the steps taken by the European Union and the Catholic Church, Burundi’s most prominent opposition figure says his party is boycotting the election. The leader of the National Forces of Liberation (FNL), Agathon Rwasa, told the media that he does not feel safe to go around and campaign. According to him, credible and peaceful elections cannot be held in the midst of the ongoing unrest that the country is experiencing. This move by the opposition party might divide the country into factions, the worst being a division that might take ethnic lines. Such a division in a country that has suffered significant civil war in the past decades can easily bring the old memories back.

**Thirdly, instability in neighboring countries.** It is also important to underline the fact that the instability in Eastern Congo might tempt some Burundians to use East Congo as a base to wage war against the government of Burundi, as they have done it before.

**Finally, refugee crisis.** Due to the ongoing violence in the country, at least 50,000 refugees fled the country since mid-April, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-burundi-politics-eu-idUSKBN0OD1VX20150528>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/crisis-in-burundi-the-missed-ethnic-dimension>

for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>5</sup> If the violence continues, more people are expected to leave the country. This might create another humanitarian crisis in the region.

Considering all the above four issues, the situation might get worse in the country. It has to be underlined that there are activists and think tank groups who are calling for freezing foreign aid to the government of Burundi and channel the aid towards helping the refugees instead. In a country where a government depends mainly on foreign aid for basic budgets to administer and run development programs, suspending aid might also have another profound effect, especially on basic services. If things continue as they stand, the political crisis might become a humanitarian crisis.

### **What does this mean to the Church and Christians?**

The church in Burundi has been under scrutiny for a while. In July 2014, the parliament passed a law that puts certain restrictions on church registration. Citing a survey that was conducted in 2013, which confirmed the existence of 557 “practicing Christian denominations” in the country, the parliament underlined that there should be some requirements to be met. Accordingly, in order to register as a legitimate church, it is stated that locals must have 500 members. Foreigners are even held for a stricter requirement - 1,000 members.

Coming back to the relationship between church and government or church and conflict, it is vitally important that the situation in Burundi should be seen with the lessons we can learn from Rwanda. In its neighboring Rwanda, the relationship between the government and the church has been low since the 1994 atrocities in the country. In Rwanda Priests of the Roman Catholic Church have been accused of participating in the 1994 genocide in different forms. On its April 8, 2014 edition, the Guardian carried an article under the title of “The Catholic Church Must Apologize for its Role in Rwanda’s Genocide.”<sup>6</sup> According to the newspaper, “After the genocide, a network of clergy and church organizations brought priests and nuns with blood on their hands in Rwanda to Europe and sheltered them. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) indicted and tried some of the Catholic priests. That gave the government an excuse to interfere with the church affairs in the country, and the church is paying for that.

Thus, it is imperative that we learn from the history of Church and government in Rwanda. In such a delicate situation, it is always very crucial not to endorse or support any candidates or political parties, while at the same time it is the duty of the church to condemn evil and injustice. This is always walking a tightrope.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/554c83d46.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/catholic-church-apologise-failure-rwanda-genocide-vatican>