Why Burundi’s Ongoing Political Tensions Risk Devolving Into Ethnic Violence

Julia Steers Thursday, Jan. 3, 2019

In early December, the tiny east African country of Burundi garnered international attention when its Foreign Ministry, at the request of President Pierre Nkurunziza, called for the closure of the U.N. human rights office in the capital, Bujumbura. The move was not altogether surprising from a regime once called one of “the most prolific slaughterhouses of humans in recent times” by former U.N. rights chief Zeid Raad al-Hussein. Still, it came as a blow to human rights activists who had pinned their hopes on the international reach of the United Nations.

After violently quelling resistance to his disputed third term as president in July 2015, Nkurunziza and his political allies methodically destroyed the capability of human rights groups, civil society organizations and media houses to operate in Burundi. Since then, the political unrest has given way to a long-term authoritarian crackdown. According to U.N. estimates, over 1,200 people have been killed and countless others are jailed or missing across the country.

Rights activists insist a true accounting of those disappeared and killed by state authorities is nearly impossible given the restrictions imposed on international NGOs and the media by Nkurunziza. Those who have escaped detention describe grotesque strategies of torturing perceived opponents of his regime in jails and in unmarked sites scattered throughout the country. In the face of sanctions from the U.S. and the European Union, Burundi became the first country to withdraw from the International Criminal Court in October 2017 after ICC judges authorized an investigation into allegations of government-sponsored murder, rape and torture.

A constitutional referendum last May to increase presidential terms from five to seven years was seen by many as yet another tactic by Nkurunziza to consolidate his power. The amendment was approved with 70 percent of the vote, following weeks of reports of door-to-door voter intimidation and coercion at the polls.

For Isidore Rufyikiri, the former president of the Burundi lawyers’ association, the government’s efforts last month to close the U.N. office is more of the same—what he sees as flagrant disrespect for the rule of law and human rights violations. “Throughout three terms, the regime has been a true predator of the rule of law, characterized by arrests, imprisonment and torture, killings and enforced disappearances, executions and hunting of alleged political or ethnic enemies,” Rufyikiri said in an interview.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights confirmed that it received a diplomatic correspondence on Dec. 5 from the Burundian government, known as note verbale, requesting the closure of the Bujumbura office. U.N. sources say they were given two months to leave the country.
A spokeswoman for the office declined to comment in detail, citing the sensitivity of the issue and the need to negotiate with the government, but she confirmed that talks with the Burundian authorities are ongoing. “We of course regret this [decision] and are keen to continue our cooperation with Burundi,” she added.

In response to criticism of the closure, the Nkurunziza government claims that Burundi has an adequate amount of national institutions to protect its citizens’ human rights and insists that they will continue to collaborate with the U.N.

“We have the constitution... we have the National Assembly... the national commission of human rights, the commission in charge of preventing genocide,” government spokesman Prosper Ntahogwamiye said in a public address in mid-December. “The situation and the reason which caused the U.N. human rights office to come to Burundi are no longer there.”

Nkurunziza’s administration clings to the narrative that the situation in Burundi has normalized following a brief period of political unrest. The African Union and the broader international community have been focused elsewhere in the region, on the peace process in South Sudan and the long-overdue elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The status quo in Burundi is seen by many regional watchers as a nascent autocracy, now on autopilot.

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But beyond the shrinking of the human rights sphere, there are signs of a deepening and perhaps increasingly ethnic crisis. Although the crisis is decidedly political in its origin, there is still concern that the simmering unrest could tip over into ethnic violence, if historic tensions are reignited by politicians.

Former President Pierre Buyoya, now a diplomat serving as the African Union special envoy to Mali, believes the regime is trying to “ethnicize” the tensions in the country to gain support ahead of an election in 2020, as he put it in an interview. Burundi’s ethnic divide is similar to neighboring Rwanda, with a majority of the population ethnically Hutu and a minority that is Tutsi. Over 300,000 Burundians were killed in a civil war between a Tutsi-dominated army and Hutu rebel groups that officially ended in 2005. Nkurunziza is the former leader of one of those Hutu rebel groups.

Earlier in December, the government issued 17 warrants calling for the arrests of military and civilian officials, including Buyoya, in relation to the 1993 assassination of then-President Melchior Ndadaye,
Burundi’s first Hutu head of state. Buyoya called the warrant “ethnic revenge.” The African Union warned Burundi that an issuance of international arrest warrants could jeopardize an already-stalled peace process initiated by the AU.

“The arrest warrants for the military would have been normal if they had been issued by a power recognized for its moral integrity and respect for the rule of law, [but] the Bujumbura regime has no moral or political credibility to make arrests,” Rufyikiri, the former president of the Burundi Bar Association, told me. “This decision is political because it comes at a time of high ethnic tension maintained by power.”

Buyoya describes the move as “another attempt to neutralize opponents... myself in mind. [And] to mobilize the Hutu population. The last referendum showed that the regime has some difficulty with its base.”

After winning another term in 2015, Nkurunziza vowed to leave office in 2020. But Buyoya believes that to be an empty promise, made to deflect international attention and to calm ambitions within his own party. He fears Nkurunziza will continue to employ dangerous tactics to hold on to power.

“The future of Burundi is uncertain. I don’t think Pierre Nkurunziza will leave in 2020. What worries me is precisely the return to ethnicization of society, with all the tragedies that this produces in terms of massacres and genocide in Burundi and in the region.”

Amid these fears that Burundi’s political troubles could tip back into another ethnic conflict, Nkurunziza continues to back away from the international community—not just the U.N. and Western countries, but also regional powers and neighbors. In a recent spat with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who serves as chair of the East African Community’s Regional Inter-Burundi Dialogue—a floundering series of consultations, begun in 2016, intended to bring the political opposition and government to the table to resolve the political unrest—Nkurunziza attempted to deflect from the need to intervene in Burundi’s political affairs. Instead, he charged that neighboring Rwanda is jeopardizing security throughout Burundi, accusing Rwanda of “complicity and support” for anti-government rebel groups and “troublemakers” in the country. Nkurunziza declared that he no longer considered Rwanda “a partner country” within the East African Community, “but simply as an enemy country.”

In response, Museveni reiterated that Nkurunziza cannot unilaterally declare an end to the talks to resolve the crisis in Burundi, since he only represents one party to the political standoff. While noting the need to address tensions between Rwanda and Burundi, Museveni refocused the attention on Burundi’s internal issues and publicly chastised Nkurunziza for failing to engage with his former enemies and political rivals.

There has been widespread skepticism that the dialogue will lead to any concrete resolution in
Burundi. But the two leaders’ exchange is a window into the Nkurunziza regime’s strategy, one that may deepen Burundi’s isolation regionally while perpetuating a climate of fear and repression at home.

*Julia Steers is an East Africa-based reporter covering politics and human rights. She has reported extensively on Burundi since 2015. Eloge Kaneza contributed to this report.*