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Burundi: from instability to escalation

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Bonn, 28 April 2015. Thousands of people are currently fleeing the central African state of Burundi on a daily basis. The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, on 26 May and 26 June respectively, have the potential to spark major conflict in a nation which, ranking 180th out of 187 on the *Human Development Index*, is already one of the poorest in the world. The political situation is now deteriorating rapidly in the run up to the elections after President Pierre Nkurunziza from the ruling CNDD-FDD party (the main rebel group during the civil war which lasted until 2005) was nominated for a third term in office, despite the constitution permitting no more than two terms. Following his official nomination last Saturday, people now fear a wave of violence.

The events of recent weeks had already made it clear that large segments of the population are not prepared to simply stand back and allow the constitutional spirit to be violated in this way. And this weekend is not the first time that the government has responded to the protests with police violence, leading to fatalities. Groups of marauding paramilitary youths close to the ruling party have caused the violence to escalate rapidly, sending the country into a fresh state of crisis. The fact that some 3,000 individuals are fleeing to Rwanda on a daily basis is a clear and above all sad indicator of the high levels of fear within the Burundian population. The security forces are preventing refugees from leaving Burundi. Other people are staying at home, afraid of losing their possessions, while they attempt to get their children out of the country.

Burundi has already experienced repeated periods of instability over the last decade. It is possible to identify three major problems. Firstly, while the first elections after 12 years of civil war in 2005 ran smoothly, at an overall level, the country seemed to lag somewhat behind when it came to following the democratisation trend taking hold in various sub-Saharan African countries (at the time). Additionally, the President and ruling party showed time and again that much of Burundi's democracy is at best a fragile façade. Politically motivated violence and the systematic intimidation of opponents and civil society (which persists to this day) were already a standard feature of Nkurunziza's policy in the past.

Secondly, the country has barely made any progress

to date in preventing its politics being divided along ethnic lines. The governing party continues to be regarded as a Hutu party, and most of those fleeing to Rwanda are Tutsi. Opportunities for participating in political processes and accessing wealth are largely determined by group identity. The persistence of these patterns, the ethnic affiliations of the parties and the potential for using political conflict to stoke ethnic tensions remain some of the main areas of volatility in the nation.

Thirdly, Burundi has failed to achieve tangible social and economic progress over the last ten years, remaining one of the world's poorest countries. The government's lack of emphasis on development, widespread corruption among the elite, and a President who is known more for his keen interest in football than for his convincing political strategies have all played a role in ensuring that Burundi has done little more than plod along for the last decade.

Development cooperation, which continues to be important to the functioning of the country, has faced and still faces a dilemma in Burundi. On the one hand, it is necessary to do everything possible to ensure that, with the civil war behind it, the nation does not end up descending into the chaos of another one. As such, the international community has been (and continues to be) keen to make a peace dividend tangible for the country and provide all of its groups with an incentive to invest in dismantling its conflict structures. On the other hand, this assistance has helped enable the ruling elite to abdicate their own responsibility for promoting Burundi's development. At the same time, the unequivocal message from the international community that it will not support an unconstitutional third term for the President has had little impact, even with the country dependent on foreign donors. The Burundian Government is also aware of the donor dilemma, but is ultimately hoping that the international community will simply come to terms with what is happening in the nation.

Donors will continue to face this dilemma in the coming weeks and months. The first priority for the international community is probably damage limitation: If President Nkurunziza is already standing for a third term, then let him at least bring an end to the tolerated, state-sponsored violence against political opponents and ensure free and fair elections.