The Burundi Crisis: Risks on the Road Ahead

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Introduction

This is a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 22 May 2015, at which Dr Devon Curtis discussed the current political situation in Burundi. Dr Curtis presented her assessment of the crisis and prospects for a return to calm, and set out options for securing durable stability. She also explored regional implications of the crisis.

This meeting was held on the record. This document is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Devon Curtis

Dr Curtis explained that an attempted coup resulted in multiple protests, imprisonments and allegations of torture. An estimated 100,000 people fled to neighbouring countries, and private radio stations were closed. There were instances of intimidation in rural areas.

The protests that began when President Pierre Nkurunziza sought to run for a third term of office intensified when the constitutional court endorsed his right to seek a further mandate. The court’s vice-president resigned, citing pressure to agree. The Burundian constitution is ambiguous concerning terms in office: the president may only be elected by universal suffrage for two terms, but in 2005 Nkurunziza was elected by the national assembly and senate, not the people.

There are additional deep-rooted reasons for the political situation, including divisions within the ruling party, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (NCDD-FDD), that were apparent even during the civil war. A power-sharing agreement in 2005 meant that many people joined the party because of political ambition rather than ideology. The result was a multi-ethnic NCDD-FDD, and infighting between military and civilian personnel. The opposition is also divided, and is weakened by repeated intimidation and voter registration problems.

Burundi’s model of governance is also a potential reason for the uprising. The Arusha Peace Agreement was inclusive at the time but is increasingly being viewed as dated, with the Rwandan and Ugandan models of governance often suggested as alternatives. Alongside these factors have been changes in the views of the population. The NCDD-FDD traditionally had strong support in the countryside, but by January 2015 some 62 per cent of the rural population was in favour of the president stepping down. This was for a variety of reasons, including economic problems, the failures of the land commission, the presence of militias in the countryside, and the Catholic church’s condemnation of Nkurunziza’s bid for a third term. The president is also losing popularity in Burundi’s cities, in part because of the clampdown on media freedom. Thus, some within the ruling party have come to view Nkurunziza as a liability.

There are four potential future scenarios for Burundi. First, elections may be postponed and the four regional heads of state visiting Nkurunziza in the coming days (the leaders of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda) may be able to persuade him to step down. Second, the elections will be postponed but the president not persuaded to step down. In this scenario, the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) may re-involve themselves through an inclusive political dialogue. It is uncertain whether the Arusha process would remain intact; there would likely be change to the constitution which would end in violence. Third, elections would occur without EU or AU monitoring. In this event, the opposition would
likely boycott the election, civil servant salaries would be reduced, the election result would be questioned, and the AU could suspend Burundi, resulting in more divisions. In the fourth scenario, potential regional conflict involving militias from the Democratic Republic of Congo would provide Rwanda with a pretext to intervene.

To reach the best possible outcome, dialogue must be encouraged, the private radios must reopen, Rwanda cannot be allowed to intervene, the AU must discourage blanket sanctions in favour of targeted ones, and ethnic fears must not be exacerbated.

Summary of Question and Answer Session

Questions

What is the likelihood of Rwanda intervening? Would this be a short- or long-term intervention, and would Rwanda act alone or in conjunction with other states?

Will the post-Arusha institutions hold without the galvanizing figure of President Nkurunziza?

What incentives or messages should the international community give to President Nkurunziza? Who is best placed to give them?

Devon Curtis

There have been worrying statements from Rwanda that suggest intervention. The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) has links with the NCDD-FDD. While Rwanda is likely to maintain that any intervention would be temporary, it is unclear how this would be received in Burundi. Intervention could exacerbate ethnic tensions.

There is no clear leader for the post-Nkurunziza period. Major-General Godefroid Niyombare was considered capable of uniting the party, but following the coup attempt it has been proven otherwise.

The United States was the first country to condemn Nkurunziza’s attempt to run for a third term. However, if bold messages are given, these need to be backed by genuine consequences should they be ignored. AU leaders should be encouraged to be strong, though it is worrying that the AU has been discussing blanket sanctions and a possible intervention force.

Questions

What could have been done to avoid this situation, given it was well predicted?

What is the situation in the countryside?

Is it likely that there will be an uprising from the military in the coming days?

Devon Curtis

Everybody knew a crisis was looming, but there was a concern that public discussion of it would create a self-fulfilling prophecy or exacerbate ethnic tensions. It is difficult to pressurize Burundi, as a sovereign country.
Intimidation in the countryside has been occurring for several years, particularly in opposition support areas.

There is a real risk of uprising within the military. This needs to be addressed urgently, as the failure of the recent coup was solely due to tactical errors.

Questions

Is Hussein Radjabu, the Burundian politician recently escaped from prison, planning to re-enter politics?

To what extent is Burundi superficially surviving on the post-Arusha process instead of dealing with the underlying issues?

Refugees arriving elsewhere have been known to say they left Burundi due to land issues, not political ones; can you comment on this?

How determined are the protesters?

Devon Curtis

Radjabu has been silent since his escape, though it is widely assumed that he resides in Tanzania and may have played a role in the coup. He is known to have good relations with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), Tanzania and Saudi Arabia, and he may be waiting for an appropriate time to re-enter politics.

While there are underlying problems and fears, after the Arusha process people felt safe to hold opposition meetings and for opposition banners and posters to be advertised. This is major progress.

The land problems in the countryside are underemphasized. The National Commission on Land has been criticized and there is not enough land to divide among the returning refugees.