

**BURUNDI: MONTHS OF INCREASING VIOLENCE AMID  
CONTROVERSIAL ELECTIONS RAISE HIGH CONCERNS  
OVER SECURITY IN THE COUNTRY**

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A series of violent street protests, marred with police crackdown, shooting incidents and bomb attacks, that started in April this year, literally plunged Burundi into chaos. In a climate of widespread fears and intimidation and despite numerous calls for postponement from the international community, parliamentary and local elections took place on June 29. The prospect of a third 5-year term for President Pierre Nkurunziza puts in question security perspectives of the country, which has already a history of bloody ethnic conflict for more than a decade. Ahead of the presidential elections on July 15, the risk of an escalation of tensions remains high, reviving concerns over the possibility of a new civil war.

To recall, civil unrest erupted on April 26 in Bujumbura after the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party elected President Nkurunziza as its candidate for the June 26 presidential elections. This announcement triggered the current crisis and was rapidly followed by a failed Coup on May 13. Political opponents, civil society as well as the international community, considered President Nkurunziza's bid to run for a third mandate as a clear violation of the Burundian Constitution founded on the Arusha agreements, which put an end to the 13-year civil war, and only allowed 2 consecutive presidential 5-year terms.

In the aftermath of President Nkurunziza's statement of acceptance of his candidature, violent riots took place in the capital and continued on April 27, gathering thousands of people in the streets. Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa, a prominent member of the opposition and human rights activist, announced that the protests a day earlier in Bujumbura resulted in fatal casualties. Some of the victims were shot dead as police used live ammunition to disperse the mob while others were killed in an attack carried out by Imbonerakure. The UN described the Imbonerakure as a militia which indeed intimidated the population ahead of the election and threatened

everyone who might attempt to prevent Pierre Nkurunziza from stepping up as candidate for the next election. It is worth highlighting that the Imbonerakure (the Kirundi word for “those who see far”) is an armed group formed in 2010 and accused of beatings and injuries, extrajudicial killings, banditry as well as political killings. Furthermore, the same day, the police shut down 3 independent radios including the main radio station, Radio Publique Africaine (RPA), considered as being too close to the opposition. It was also reported that the army was deployed in the streets of the capital to calm down the situation.

As protests routinely continued, within less than 3 weeks, Burundi plunged into its worst political crisis since the civil war.

On May 13, a senior Burundi officer, Major General Godefroid Niyobare, a well-known figure and former intelligence chief who had been dismissed last February by President Nkurunziza, announced via a private radio station, Bonesha FM radio, that he overthrew the President. This Coup attempt occurred as the President was away in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, to meet East African Leaders to discuss possible solutions to the ongoing crisis.

Meanwhile, on the night from May 13 to May 14, while the coup was ongoing, the main private radios– RPA, Radio-Télé Renaissance, Bonesha and Isangarino - considered as pro-opposition, were attacked by pro-Nkurunziza forces. Heavy clashes erupted between the police and the army, securing the private radio Radio Publique Africaine (RPA) station. Grenades also targeted the headquarters of Radio-Télé Renaissance. At least one journalist was wounded during the clashes.

It should be mentioned that the army is largely seen as a more neutral force compared to the police which is mainly associated with the ruling party. Indeed, since the beginning of the political crisis and the protests, while the police was very violent with the demonstrators, reports said that the army intervened several times to protect people in the streets. The reason is that most of police forces are from President Nkurunziza’s ruling party CNDD-FDD (mostly from the Hutu community), while the army is more of an equal force made up of members from various parties (including members from both the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority).

The coup was rapidly thwarted and President Nkurunziza returned to the country. On May 15, President Nkurunziza was back at the Presidential Palace in Bujumbura. 3 Coup leaders including the number 2 of the putschist movement, Cyrille Ndayirukiye, were arrested. However, despite conflicting reports, the Coup leader Major General Godefroid Niyombare, still remains at large. However, there were speculations in local media indicating that the General allegedly took the lead of a rebel group, “Burundian National Movement” (MNB) made up of about 75 deserters. This rebel group was created in 1990 and Nyombare would be the 7th commander since it was created.

In the meantime, despite the Coup failure, protests resumed sporadically over the next weeks in Bujumbura and were dispersed by the police. Protesters kept opposing President's 3rd term bid and took the streets in Bujumbura in spite of the ban imposed by government.

On May 20, as protest continued in Musaga and Nyakabiga district as well as pressures from the international community increased, President Nkurunziza accepted delaying local and parliamentary elections initially planned on May 26 by one week to June 2.

Tensions and unrest in Bujumbura seemed to create favorable conditions for rebel groups to infiltrate the country. As it was mentioned by Rwandan Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo following the attempted Coup, rebels of the Hutu-dominated Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), had crossed into Burundi from DR Congo and might even get involved directly in the unrest. To recall, FDLR has been active in Congo since fleeing from Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, in which as many as 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

Following a month of violent protest, international media confirmed that at least 30 people were killed including a prominent leader of the opposition UPD-Zigamibanga party, Zedi Feruzi, who was killed on May 23 in a drive-by shooting perpetrated by unknown assailants.

On May 25, violence continued to escalate as protests started to erupt outside Bujumbura. One protester was killed in streets protests in Bururi, about 60 km from the capital, in the south east of the country.

On June 2, a second summit in Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, was held to attempt to solve the crisis. Its main outcome was the agreement to demand to delay Burundi elections for one month and a half. But the President Nkurunziza third term bid issue was not mentioned.

On June 7, President Pierre Nkurunziza signed a decree which scheduled the local and legislative elections to be held on June 29 and the presidential ones on July 15. This announcement followed pressure from the European Union (EU), the United Nation (UN) as well as the East African Community (EAC) to hold polls when security would be improved. However, although the situation in the country remained tense, the elections were planned to be held.

Meanwhile, the crackdown on the media was highly condemned by international institutions. Besides, the EU warned Burundi it might impose sanctions on those responsible for violence and consider other steps against the aid-reliant nation. The

EU, Belgium and the Netherlands cut some aid flows, mainly related to supporting the elections.

After continuing violent protests, on June 18, a first death toll was revealed by the main Burundian human rights organization Aprodh. According to Aprodh President, Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa, at least 70 people were killed, at least 500 others people were wounded and between 800 and 1000 more would be detained in prison since April 26. In this alarming death toll, most of those killed would be civilians. However the government denied and lowered the protesters' death toll claiming that it was not exceeding 30. Furthermore, more than 100,000 people fled the violence to neighbouring countries, mainly into Rwanda.

On June 21 and June 22, ahead of the controversial elections, tension resumed after a period of relative calm. A series of grenade attacks was carried out over the weekend, raising fears the violence could further escalate ahead and after the election's days across the country. At least 3 grenades attacks took place in the north of Bujumbura along with Ngozi town. These attacks left at least 4 people dead and about 30 wounded. Additionally, on June 20 and June 21, another string of grenade attacks targeted several police stations and police vehicles in the districts of Citiboke, Nyakabiga, Musaga, and Jabe in Bujumbura. 11 police officers were injured in the blasts. It remains unclear who was behind the grenade blasts since security forces accused the anti-government opponents to have carried out the attacks in order to prevent the elections from being held while opponents blamed police.

On June 24, Burundi's second vice President and member of the CNDD-FDD ruling party, Gervais Rufyikiri, fled the country to Belgium. It should be mentioned that he was not the only senior Burundian official to flee in recent weeks as the Vice-President of the Constitutional court as well as the Vice-President of the Independent Electoral Commission (Céni) also left Burundi after pressures from the government in May.

On June 27, an arson attack targeted an election building. Besides, the representative of the main opposition candidate for the election, Agathon Rwaswa, from the party National Liberation Forces (FNL) was arrested in Citiboke district, in Bujumbura.

On the eve of local and presidential elections, in the wave of the crisis, the opposition parties announced the boycott of Burundi's elections. Several polling centers were attacked within and outside the capital.

On June 29, despite the extremely tense climate, the controversial local and parliamentary elections were held. As the voting started, another grenade attack took place in the neighbourhood of Musaga, in Bujumbura. The grenade targeted some policemen but no casualties were reported.

After the elections, on July 1, 6 other people were killed in a clash with police.

On July 7, as the international community called for a new postponement of the presidential elections as violence continued, one of the putshists, Leonard Ngendakumana, the right-hand of General Godefroid Nyombaré, claimed responsibility for the June grenades attacks in an interview given to the Kenyan TV (KTN). The General vowed to continue the fight to force President Nkurunziza to resign.

On July 8, 7 days ahead of the presidential elections, according to the official results released in Burundian media, President's Nkurunziza's ruling party CNDD-FDD has swept an overwhelming victory in the controversial parliament elections that were boycotted by the opposition. The CNDD-FFD won 77 out of 100 elected seats in parliament.

As described above, following several months of violent political tensions and street protests, President Nkurunziza remains in power while the country is balancing on the edge of a new civil conflict. A peaceful resolution seems highly unlikely. Nothing is certain at this stage but fears increase that the current crisis could plunge the impoverished, landlocked central African nation back into a civil war.

In the prospect of the Presidential elections on July 15, two plausible scenarios can be outlined. The first one might be that the presidential side manages to crush the opposition and to hold the elections as planned without any credibility. In this situation, the opposition would go into exile and a regime born out of illegitimate elections would be internationally isolated. The second plausible and worrying one would be a new phase of protests that would provoke a split within military authorities. Some of them would join the opposition camp. Therefore, an armed insurgency might spread across the country, triggering a spillover of clashes and forcing thousands more refugees to flee from the country.

Hence, both scenarios are possible for Burundi today, and both of them would be dramatically harmful for the national security and development.

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