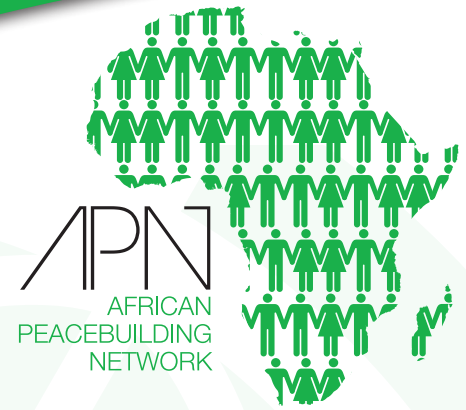




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The Prospects for Peace in Burundi: *Some Policy Options*

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POLITICAL DEADLOCK AND A HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

The current crisis in Burundi stems from an insistence by incumbent president Pierre Nkurunziza that he is eligible to run in the coming elections to retain his office. Despite a constitutional court ruling in May 2015 that upheld the president's position, opposition parties, civil society groups, religious leaders, and a section of the ruling party—the National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD)—disagree. Their view is that President Nkurunziza has served the two terms allowed him by the constitution and the Arusha agreement, which was signed in August 2000 to end the civil war that began in 1993. If he runs, it will be for a third term, which is unconstitutional.

A recent wave of protests rallying around a movement against a third presidential term crystallized and intensified after the president made his plan official and the National Elections Commission (CENI) subsequently cleared him to run alongside other candidates. Violent repression of protestors by police and the intimidation of citizens by a militia group linked to the ruling party have led to scores of deaths and an increasing number of refugees fleeing the country. A humanitarian catastrophe looms, internally and in neighboring countries, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Tanzania, which are receiving refugees from Burundi.

Even worse, a return to civil war, with all the costs associated with such instability, could greatly undermine efforts to attain stability in the Great Lakes Region, where several conflicts are underway in countries around Burundi, notably the DRC, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Uganda. Worst of all, militant ethnic solidarities between pro-regime groups in Burundi and a predominantly Hutu militia opposed to the Rwanda government based in the DRC could further escalate conflict in the region.

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POLICY MIXTURE FOR A POLITICAL SOLUTION

Political dialogue is the way to resume peace in Burundi, and the structure and agenda of such dialogue will determine its outcome. Already, political dialogue has failed (in 2012), and recent attempts spearheaded by the United Nations (UN) collapsed after the murder of opposition leader Zedi Ferusi. Some adjustments to the strategy are necessary.

First, the efforts by regional and international actors should be collaborative rather than hierarchical in nature. The East African Community (EAC), the African Union (AU), and the UN need to work together. The inclination to grant the lead to the proximate regional body (EAC) while others only “support” peacemaking ought to be resisted, as such proximity considerably constrains performance in the role. That is why the direct involvement of the UN is plausible; but it needs to be tied up with the efforts of the EAC and the AU, possibly under one banner of an international initiative for peace in Burundi.

Second, the EAC, AU, and UN collectively need to establish strong links with the people of Burundi through organized groups and communities. This will not only avail them of the first-hand experiences and views of the people; it will also provide a strong ground for international actors working to fend off political blackmail by parties to the conflict.

Furthermore, two crucial items will need to be on the agenda for political dialogue: the politics and (un)constitutionality of President Nkurunziza’s third term bid and the relationship between the Arusha agreement in 2000 and the country’s constitution. Specifically, the dialogue should revisit the sociopolitical and economic programs of the transition period and assess their successes and failures. The agenda for political dialogue needs to be framed in these broad terms, and all specific issues, including arguments for and against a third presidential term, must be weighed on this scale.

In sum, those building peace in Burundi will need to evaluate the progress of statebuilding on the basis of the Arusha agreement. But they will have to go beyond that to examine the internal political and social constraints on achieving the vision of nationhood, as partly elaborated in the agreement. Granted, urgent decisions will have to be reached and enforced in the short term to end the violence, address the humanitarian situation, and stop its further escalation while creating an environment conducive to political dialogue.

The ultimate objective, however, is a rejuvenation of the nation-building project in Burundi, with critical questions posed as necessary based on a good reading of the country’s history and present circumstances. To answer these, the people of Burundi will have to talk to each other candidly about the dividing lines among themselves, as well as individual and collective suspicions and fears, from a historical perspective. This can only happen if they organize themselves—within civil society and through other forms of people’s organizations—outside the political structures established by parties to the conflict.