

## Conflict early warning in Burundi

Silencing of domestic media limits data available for robust analysis of emerging patterns of repression and violence.

In May 2015, a military coup in Burundi failed to dislodge the incumbent president, Pierre Nkurunziza. Instead, it prompted a fierce backlash against his political opponents, many of whom fled to Burundi's central African neighbours along with thousands of fellow citizens. This has triggered one of the region's most severe refugee crises since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. It also spurred the renewal of Nkurunziza's ongoing attempts to silence domestic media, a process that is nearly complete. Six months after the coup, only one French newspaper continues to operate freely. Citizens have taken to social media to make visible the deteriorating security situation, but their efforts alone are insufficient to encourage political reform. The people of Burundi, a small country with a deeply troubled modern history, are struggling to make themselves heard in a crowded global media landscape.

*Sovereign Data* looks at the media crackdown in Burundi and assesses its effects on international transparency and policy engagement.

### Background

In April 2015, President Nkurunziza announced his intention to stand for a third term in office, an alleged breach of the Burundi national constitution and the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement (2000) that ended the country's last civil war. This provoked extensive civil unrest and dozens of civilians died in clashes with the police and military. On 13 May, senior military members announced a coup d'état led by Major-General Godefroid Niyombare, who was sacked by Nkurunziza in 2014 for his early opposition to the president's proposed re-election.<sup>1</sup> In the confusion that followed, heavy fighting was reported around government and private radio and television stations in the capital Bujumbura, as each side sought to promote its own ascendancy through broadcast media.<sup>2</sup> The coup collapsed, citing lack of military support, and Nkurunziza returned from Tanzania where he had been chairing a diplomatic summit to congratulate government forces for 'putting things in order'.<sup>3</sup> Opposition parties withdrew from the electoral process and Nkurunziza was re-elected in June, an election the United Nations (UN) condemned as far from 'free, credible and inclusive'.<sup>4</sup>

In the months since the coup, 210,000 Burundian refugees have entered neighbouring countries, adding to strained relations with Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Accusations of targeted killings, arbitrary arrests and torture have been levelled at government forces and the Imbonerakure youth militias allied to Nkurunziza's ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD). Government loyalists have accused the opposition of similar crimes. In autumn 2015, the European Union and United States made clear their concerns by

**Citation:** "Conflict early warning in Burundi," *Sovereign Data* Vol 1. No. 6 (December 2015).

**Keywords:** BURUNDI, CIVIL WAR, CONFLICT EARLY WARNING, GENOCIDE, PRESS FREEDOM

### Explanation of dates

Drafted: 2015-11-27

Information cut-off: 2015-11-30

Published: 2015-12-01

**Sovereign Data** is a journal of data, politics and risk in emerging markets

**Editor:** Michael A. Innes

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**ISSN:** 2059-075X

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Registered in England and Wales.  
Registration number: 7234402. VAT number: 135658985.

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imposing smart sanctions on two government officials and two coup plotters, including Niyombare.<sup>5</sup> Burundi responded by accusing the US government of defamation and claimed a conspiracy spearheaded by US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power,<sup>6</sup> a move consistent with Nkurunziza's rejection of outside assistance as 'neocolonial'.<sup>7</sup> The UN has admitted it is 'poorly positioned' to prevent a slide into mass killing, as government officials deploy language familiar to that used in the build-up to the 1994 Rwandan genocide.<sup>8</sup> Then, as now, ethnic Tutsis claim to be the targets of a Hutu regime, even though the latest troubles began as a political showdown between Nkurunziza and Niyombare, erstwhile Hutu allies.<sup>9</sup>

## Media crackdown

Prior to the coup, as protests grew over Nkurunziza's potential re-election, the president attempted to cut off public access to social media and closed down African Public Radio (RPA), the main independent radio station in Burundi and 'voice of the voiceless'.<sup>10</sup> Nkurunziza ordered the national telecommunications regulator, ARCT Burundi, to compel telecoms operators to block mobile phone access to online messaging services including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. The government claimed these were used to organise public protests and spread dissent. International digital rights groups petitioned the UN to condemn this 'network interference' as it breached Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protects freedom of opinion and expression.<sup>11</sup> NGOs have continued to document human rights abuses against journalists and activists reporting on the actions of security forces ignored by state-controlled media like *Télévision Nationale*.<sup>12</sup> Private radio stations remain closed, allegedly to protect evidence for a judicial investigation into their targeting during the coup attempt, an enquiry that has yet to report.<sup>13</sup>

Most formal media platforms are suspended, but attempts to suppress social media have been only partly successful. More than 30 per cent of Burundians have mobile internet access and reports suggest that for at least one in three the internet is their primary news source.<sup>14</sup> Banned news providers like RPA have turned to social media applications to distribute news segments, and 'citizen journalists' have received assistance from third-party applications that allow people to distribute news and opinion from across Burundi.<sup>15</sup> While the online media are notoriously unreliable, offering many opportunities for disinformation and propaganda, they now provide most Burundians with their only access to news. Social media has also been beneficial to Burundians who have left the country since the coup, and who have formed a movement in exile that has reportedly gained the positive attention and support of the activist group Anonymous.<sup>16</sup>

In November 2015, the Burundian government suspended ten non-governmental organisations (NGOs), some with human rights remits, which the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein described as an attempt 'to silence dissenting voices and to limit the democratic space'.<sup>17</sup> For Burundian news outlets, democratic media space has become almost obsolete as non-state broadcasters have been forced to close. Aggressive attempts to silence the one remaining independent newspaper, *Iwacu*, 'Les voix du Burundi', have seen its director, Antoine Kabaruhe, hauled before a judge to answer allegations of a connection to the attempted coup.<sup>18</sup> Once regarded as a regional example of media freedom, Burundi now ranks 145th of 180 countries listed in the World Press Freedom Index, below Ethiopia and Myanmar.<sup>19</sup> Nkurunziza initiated this decline in 2013 through the introduction of a controversial media law which prohibited reporting on economic and 'national security' issues, a move described by Reporters Without Borders as one that would set the country back twenty years.<sup>20</sup> More recent moves to suppress Burundian media should be viewed as a continuation of that process.

## Outlook

The media ban has affected Burundians the most, who are forced to use illegal means in their search for information. It has also had a more insidious impact. Wire services and their stringers still operate in Burundi, and many mainstream media organisations carry syndicated reports on in-country developments. But the strangulation of legitimate media operations has contributed to what one South African commentator has described as a 'gaping hole of information around Burundi'.<sup>21</sup>

This has two principal effects. First, that the situation in Burundi is globally under-reported, resulting in limited public awareness. This is not a new dynamic in central Africa's relations with the world, as the post facto hand-wringing over Rwanda's travails in the 1990s attests.<sup>22</sup> Often forgotten in critiques of the lack of media attention given to the 1994 Rwandan genocide is that a round of mass slaughter in Burundi during the same period 'continued virtually unrecorded by the world media [and] created no international resonance'.<sup>23</sup>

The second key consideration is that a dearth of quality reporting on Burundi risks allowing frames of 'genocide' to dominate news that does emerge. Nkurunziza may be playing a dangerous game of ethnic politics, but political and military power in Burundi are more equally distributed since the 2000 peace accords than at any time in its modern history. One transitional justice expert has warned, for instance, that international 'alarmist rhetoric' about impending genocide 'could become complicit in fanning the flames of further violence'.<sup>24</sup> This is no idle warning in a region plagued by internecine conflict, often imbued with corrosive ethnic inflections. Nor does it pay to ignore the sociopolitical dynamics implied in René Lemarchand's formulation of Rwanda and Burundi as 'the genocidal twins' of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Burundian society, like Rwanda, has changed significantly in the last two decades, and the current situation stems from a battle for political power, not ethnic supremacy.

## Conclusion

The aftermath of the Rwandan genocide occasioned much reflection on the utility of conflict early warning and prevention systems. Such systems failed Rwanda in 1994 in part because genocide (and the genocidal process that led to it) was misrepresented as civil war. Burundi should not be failed in 2015 by allowing civil war to be misreported as genocide. As working concepts, it is unwise to wholly decouple genocide and civil war; in the Great Lakes region, the situation requires identification of political dynamics that provide opportunities for constructive policy engagement and appropriate international intervention. Not least, regional mediation is needed to de-escalate a worsening situation and provide frameworks for dialogue and reconciliation. The Burundian government's repression of domestic media constrains those prospects by limiting the data available for analysis and early warning. International pressure is building on Burundi to resolve its internal conflicts, but in the absence of democratic accountability supported by free media, Burundi's citizens may face a long and bloody wait for any such resolution.

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## Notes

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