



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Burundi crisis one year on: April 2016 update

By Jon Lunn

Inside:

1. The build up to the June/July 2015 Elections
2. Events since August 2015
3. The UK and Burundi



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. The build up to the June/July 2015 Elections</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Controversy as Nkurunziza seeks a third term	4
1.2 April 2015: mass protest erupts	4
1.3 Election results	5
1.4 Dimensions of the crisis	5
<b>2. Events since August 2015</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Human rights	7
2.2 Future prospects	8
<b>3. The UK and Burundi</b>	<b>9</b>

## Summary

Over the last year Burundi has been convulsed by a political and human rights crisis whose origins lie in the decision by President Pierre Nkurunziza to seek a third term in office. His opponents argued that the 2000 Arusha Agreement, which helped to bring Burundi's civil war (1993-2005) to an end, stipulated a maximum of two presidential terms. Nkurunziza and his supporters claimed that he had only been directly elected by the people for the first time in 2010, so he could stand again.

When Nkurunziza's candidacy was confirmed in April 2015, mass protests erupted on the streets of Burundi's capital, Bujumbura. These were met by fierce police repression. There was an unsuccessful coup attempt against Nkurunziza in May. In defiance of key regional and international countries, the presidential election took place in July 2015. The political opposition boycotted the poll. Nkurunziza won easily.

Violence has continued since the presidential election. There have been high-profile assassinations and major refugee flows to neighbouring countries. Western donors have called on the Burundian Government and its political opponents to launch a genuine and inclusive dialogue to end the crisis and, when this has not materialised, have imposed sanctions and suspended aid. At one point, the African Union indicated that it might be prepared to send in a peace mission even if the Burundian Government refused permission but subsequently it back-tracked. It is now talking in terms of sending human rights and military monitors. The UN has approved a police mission. Meanwhile, Nkurunziza has accused Rwanda of being behind a plot to destabilise the country. The International Criminal Court announced a preliminary investigation into alleged serious human rights violations by the Burundian Government since April 2015.

During April 2016 Nkurunziza made concerted efforts to convince the world that Burundi was returning to normal. There are set to be talks between him and his opponents in Arusha, Tanzania, in early May, but what they will achieve remains to be seen.

One observer has said that "power is now in the hands of a small hard core" and that a "system of repression" exists based on loyalist units within the security forces, plus the ruling party's youth militia – known as the *Imbonerakure*. This 'system' will likely continue to be a source of regular and serious human rights abuses. As for the international community, doubts have been expressed about whether it will be able or willing to exert enough pressure to change the behaviour of the Burundian Government.

The *Economist Intelligence Unit's* most recent country report on Burundi expects violence to increase during the rest of 2016. However, it anticipates that the ongoing withholding of aid by Burundi's main donors will force the Burundian Government to engage in some form of political dialogue by the end of this year. But it concludes that the situation in Burundi will remain fragile and unstable for years to come.

*Further background*

[The African Great Lakes region: May 2015 election update](#) (Commons Library blog)

Commons Briefing Paper 06/51, "[The African Great Lakes region: an end to conflict?](#)" (October 2006)

# 1. The build up to the June/July 2015 Elections

## 1.1 Controversy as Nkurunziza seeks a third term

The preparations for the 2015 elections proved highly contentious. In March 2013 the UN organized discussions whereby the Government and opposition parties were to come up with a road map for the 2015 polls. Following further discussions, an electoral code was adopted by Parliament in April 2014 by consensus, and in June 2014 the political parties adopted a code of good conduct. Meanwhile, in August 2013 a rebel National Forces of Liberation (FNL) leader Agathon Rwasa came out of hiding and declared that he would stand in the 2015 presidential election – raising hopes that, eight years after the official end to Burundi's civil war, the last remaining armed groups in Burundi might finally lay down their arms.

The political climate, however, remained tense. The opposition alleged that voter registration, which began in November 2014, was suffering from a number of irregularities. The private media continued to be targeted, with some journalists arrested. In March 2015 former party chairman of the ruling National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD—FDD), Hussein Radjabu, a strong opponent of President Pierra Nkurunziza, escaped from prison and fled the country.

The greatest controversy surrounded the question of the eligibility of President Nkurunziza to run for a third term in office. Citing an ambiguity in the Constitution, supporters of the President claimed that since he had been elected by Parliament in 2005 and not directly elected by the people, he could stand again. Opponents countered that the 2000 Arusha Agreement, which helped to bring Burundi's civil war (1993-2005) to an end, clearly stipulated a maximum of two presidential terms. In March 2014 a proposal to revise the Constitution to clarify the issue was narrowly defeated in the National Assembly.

## 1.2 April 2015: mass protest erupts

On 24 April 2015 the CNDD—FDD officially announced President Nkurunziza's candidacy in the presidential elections. CNDD—FDD members who voiced their opposition to this were expelled from the party. The Constitutional Court validated this decision on 4 May, yet the Vice-President of the Court fled to Rwanda and maintained that the Court decision had been made under duress and intimidation.

Following the announcement that the President would run for a third term in office, there were mass protests in the streets of Burundi's capital, Bujumbura. These were unprecedented in their size, and lasted for several weeks. The protests were met by fierce police repression. Key regional and international figures condemned the violence and many

warned against a third term for the President. The EU and Belgium suspended their election aid, and the EU and the AU cancelled their election-monitoring missions. The Conference of Catholic Bishops also withdrew their support for the electoral process.

On 13 May 2015, while President Nkurunziza was in Dar es Salaam attending a regional summit convened to discuss the crisis, Niyombare led an unsuccessful coup attempt. Niyombare subsequently fled the country, and several of those implicated in the coup attempt were arrested. A subsequent East African Community (EAC) summit on 31 May called for the postponement of elections, but did not mention the issue of the third term.

### 1.3 Election results

Despite the inner turmoil and external criticism, legislative and local elections were held on 29 June 2015, but were largely boycotted by the opposition parties. The CNDD—FDD won 74.8% of the vote, equating to 77 of the 100 elected National Assembly seats; however, according to the UN electoral mission, the elections were neither free nor fair. Some high-ranking members of the political and military élite fled the country, including Second Vice-President Gervais Rufyikiri and Pie Ntavyohanyuma, the President of the National Assembly, both adherents of the CNDD—FDD.

Following the presidential election on 21 July, which was marred by violence and boycotted by the opposition, the electoral commission declared a victory for President Nkurunziza, who took 73.9% of the valid votes cast.

### 1.4 Dimensions of the crisis

During 2015 there was a series of assassinations of both senior government figures and leading opponents. For example, in August 2015 General Adolphe Nshimirimana, the former head of the national intelligence service and a close associate of Nkurunziza, was killed in a rocket attack on his car. In the same month, Jean Bikomagu, a former army chief of staff, and Pontien Barutwanayo of the FNL were also assassinated.

The crisis led to massive refugee flows to neighbouring countries as well as internal displacement. By August 2015 it was estimated that over 180,000 people had fled to neighbouring countries since April. An estimated 75,000 had fled to Rwanda and 89,000 to Tanzania, with the remainder entering the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda.

## 2. Events since August 2015

On 20 August 2015 President Pierre Nkurunziza was sworn in for a third term. Gaston Sindimwo of the Union for National Progress (UPRONA) was appointed First Vice-President, while Dr Joseph Butore of the CNDD—FDD became Second Vice-President. Agathon Rwasa, the leader of one FNL faction, became First Vice-President of the National Assembly despite having boycotted the elections. The new Government included five pro-Rwasa ministers

Local protests against Nkurunziza and the ruling CNDD-FDD resumed in earnest soon after the July 2015 presidential election. Armed violence against the security forces also rose markedly. Nkurunziza accused Rwanda of supporting the rebels. Museveni was appointed as a mediator by regional governments but he struggled to make much of an impact.

Violence increased further during the last three months of 2015. Corpses on the streets of the capital, Bujumbura, became a daily occurrence. International pressure on the authorities began to increase. In December, there was an outbreak of violence in the capital that left [at least 87 people dead](#) – the worst outbreak since May. For the first time since May, rebels attacked a military base. As a result, the US called on all of its citizens to leave Burundi.

The EU [imposed](#) travel restrictions and an asset freeze on three security officials and a former general close to Nkurunziza. It began to talk about suspending aid (Belgium had done so some time ago). The African Union (AU) adopted targeted sanctions, decided to launch investigation into rights violations in Burundi, called for peace talks outside Burundi and launched preparations for an African-led peace mission, suggesting that it might be sent even if the Burundian government refused it permission to come.

Nkurunziza continued to take a hardline stance and there was growing international concern about a resurgence of the kind of ‘hate speech’ seen during the run-up to the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda. The UN Secretary-General, Ban ki-Moon condemned “inflammatory rhetoric” and began to talk about a possible need for UN peace-keepers in the country. Until now, the UN has been scaling down its presence in the country. In mid-November 2015 the Security Council condemned the violence and urged the Government to convene an inclusive inter-Burundian dialogue. The EU and its member states evacuated all non-essential personnel from Bujumbura.

During January 2016, a delegation of envoys from the UN Security Council visited Burundi but came back with little to show for its visit. Nkurunziza warned that if the AU did try and send in a peace mission, Burundian forces would treat it as an invading force. At the end of the month, the AU abandoned the idea of a peace mission sent without permission. After this climb-down, Nkurunziza indicated some willingness to engage in dialogue with the opposition, although many continued to doubt his sincerity. During January, Amnesty International

reported that five possible mass graves had been identified around Bujumbura.

Following a visit by five AU heads of state in February 2016, the organisation announced that it would be sending 100 human rights monitors and 100 military monitors. The Burundian government has not yet said that it will accept this mission. There were worrying signs during March that the Burundian army was becoming increasingly fractured – there was another wave of defections.

The EU suspended direct budget support to the government in mid-March but said that it would maintain humanitarian aid. With an aid package worth some €430 million for the period 2015-2020, the EU is Burundi's biggest donor.

Meanwhile, Nkurunziza was escalating his claims that Rwanda is behind a plot to destabilise Burundi. A former Rwandan minister who had been arrested in December 2015 for spying, died in custody at the end of the month. By March, the number of Burundian refugees in neighboring states had reached 250,000. There are [reports](#) that rebel groups have been recruiting from amongst the refugees. There are also reports that pro-government vigilantes have infiltrated camps and are attacking people residing there.

On 1 April 2016, the UN Security Council approved the idea of a UN police mission to monitor the security situation in Burundi. The Burundian government has said that it will accept this mission.

Just how fragile the situation in Burundi remains was underscored a few days ago when Brigadier General Athanese Kararuzza, a [senior military figure](#) close to the regime, was assassinated in Bujumbura.

Over 400 people are estimated to have died since the crisis flared up a year ago. A faction of the FNL remains in a state of rebellion and new armed opposition groups have emerged. Targeted attacks such as that against Brig-Gen Kararuzza have recently been on the increase.

### 2.1 Human rights

On 25 April, the International Criminal Court announced a preliminary investigation into alleged serious human rights violations by the Burundian Government since April 2015.<sup>1</sup>

Human Rights Watch provides this [overview](#) of the current human rights situation in Burundi:

Political upheaval and widespread killings by the security forces and armed opposition groups gripped the country, after demonstrations broke out in April 2015 in response to President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to seek a third electoral term. Police used excessive force and shot demonstrators indiscriminately. Killings escalated after July's disputed presidential election that returned Nkurunziza to power. Government forces, armed opposition groups, and unknown assailants killed hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> "ICC to investigate violence in Burundi", *Legal Monitor Worldwide*, 26 April 2016

people. The authorities arrested hundreds of suspected opponents, in many cases arbitrarily. The government launched a crackdown against civil society activists and journalists. It closed the four most popular private radio stations and suspended the activities and froze the bank accounts of ten civil society organisations. Leading human rights activist Pierre Claver Mbonimpa was seriously injured in an assassination attempt in August 2015.

The group has published two reports on Burundi in recent months:

[Burundi: Government Investigations Ignore State Abuses](#) (April 2016)

[Burundi: Abductions, Killings, Spread Fear](#) (February 2016)

For recent Amnesty International material on Burundi, click on this [link](#).

## 2.2 Future prospects

During April 2016 Nkurunziza made concerted efforts to convince the world that Burundi is returning to normal. It has been announced that he and at least some of his political opponents will hold talks in Arusha, Tanzania, between 2-6 May.

However, optimism would be premature. It remains to be seen how far there is a genuine commitment to an inclusive dialogue. One observer has said that, on the government side, "power is now in the hands of a small hard core" and that a "system of repression" exists based on loyalist units within the security forces, plus the ruling party's youth militia – known as the [Imbonerakure](#).<sup>2</sup> This 'system' will likely continue to be a source of regular and serious human rights abuses for the foreseeable future.

A diplomat has been quoted as saying that: "In light of the divisions within the international community, nothing is pressurising the government to act swiftly", adding that there is no immediate prospect of meaningful negotiations with the opposition starting any time soon. According to the diplomat, provided that Nkurunziza and his supporters avoid anything with strong echoes of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the international community is unlikely to mobilise effectively against him.<sup>3</sup>

The *Economist Intelligence Unit's* most recent country report on Burundi expects violence to increase during the rest of 2016 but also anticipates that the ongoing withholding of aid by Burundi's main donors will force the Burundian Government to engage in some form of political dialogue by the end of this year. But it concludes that the situation in Burundi will remain fragile and unstable for years to come.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Trouble boils in Burundi after year of chaos", *Agence France Presse*, 13 April 2016

<sup>3</sup> "Trouble boils in Burundi after year of chaos", *Agence France Presse*, 13 April 2016

<sup>4</sup> "Outlook for 2016-17: political stability", *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1 May 2016

### 3. The UK and Burundi

The UK Government has consistently called for an end to the violence in Burundi and for a genuine and inclusive political dialogue between the Burundian Government and its opponents based on respect for the 2000 Arusha Agreement, which helped to end Burundi's civil war. It has been working with other countries in pursuit of these goals.

There was an [adjournment debate](#) on Burundi in the House of Commons on 10 December 2015. Amongst the issues discussed was whether the UK should establish a full diplomatic mission in Bujumbura and re-establish a [bilateral aid programme](#) (it ended in 2012) if a genuine political settlement is achieved. The UK has bilateral aid programmes with neighboring Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo. The previous International Development Committee was [critical](#) of the government of the day for deciding to close the UK's aid programme in Burundi.

In June 2015 the Government appointed a special envoy to the African Great Lakes, Danae Dholakia.

Since the beginning of 2016, the UK government has issued two further press releases on Burundi:

[Statement on violence in Burundi](#), 26 February 2016

[UK concern at treatment of prisoners in Burundi](#), 6 April 2016

Burundi is a 'human rights priority country' for the UK Government. Below is its latest report on the human rights situation in the country:

[Burundi - Human Rights Priority Country](#) (21 April 2016)

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