



BRIEFING PAPER

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Burundi: October 2019 update

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Background

Since independence in 1962 Burundi has been plagued by tension between the Tutsi minority, which makes up about 10-15% of the population and the Hutu majority, which makes up 80-85% of the population. There was a vicious civil war between 1993 and 2005, in which over 300,000 people died, and hundreds of thousands were displaced.

A 2000 agreement, the Arusha Accord, created a framework for building peace, culminating in a new Constitution in 2004. There were elections in the following year, which were decisively won by Jean-Pierre Nkurunziza and his party, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Hutu Force for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD).

The new Constitution enshrined a 60:40 ethnic quota between the Hutus and Tutsis across the major state institutions (parliament, government and the army), effectively entrenching a system of power-sharing. It also required that 30% of the government should be women.

Some rebel armed elements continued to fight on. But the first years of the new dispensation were not without achievements. There was greater political stability. Some refugees began to return home. But it was not long before there were international concerns about the government's authoritarian actions and mounting official corruption.

Over time, President Nkurunziza evolved into a conventional 'strong-man' African leader. He was re-elected in 2010 after a campaign widely regarded as neither free nor fair.

With the country's Constitution containing a two-term presidential term limit, many feared renewed instability if the president sought to run again in 2015.

These fears were realised. In April 2015 he used a legal technicality to run again and was elected for a third time in July. His move led to mass street protests, a failed coup attempt, a resumption of low-intensity conflict as rebel armed groups took up the gun again, and heavy government repression.

Since 2015, the authorities have been accused of arbitrary detentions, excessive force, torture and several political opponents have allegedly been 'disappeared'. Human Rights Watch describes the human rights record of the Burundi government as extremely poor, with the CNDD-FDD's youth wing, *Imbonerakure*, often to the fore.

Human Rights Watch [says](#):

Burundi's security services and members of the Imbonerakure, the ruling party's youth league, continue to carry out summary executions, rapes, abductions, beatings, and intimidation of suspected political opponents. ... Rule of law and the justice system are weakened as killings and other violent crimes take place with no investigations by authorities or consequences for the perpetrators. Local and international civil society and media are unable to work independently and have been banned, forced to close down, or are unable to criticize the government.

Recent developments¹

The government held a referendum in May 2018 in which changes to the Constitution allowing President Nkurunziza potentially to stay in office until 2014 were overwhelmingly approved. Once again, the run-up to the vote was marred by violence and intimidation. The referendum also paves the way for the ending of the 60:40 ethnic quota and power-sharing.

In October 2018, the government suspended the operation of international NGOs in Burundi, demanding that they fulfil stricter criteria in order to work in the country. The local and international media has also come under attack. In March 2019, the BBC's operating licence was revoked permanently.

The response of regional and international countries has so far been largely ineffective. The African Union was initially quite forthright, authorising a 5,000-strong military mission to stabilise the country, but it soon retreated from that commitment, ceding primary responsibility to the sub-regional body, the [East African Community](#) (EAC). However, there have only been six meetings under the auspices of its 'Inter-Burundi Dialogue'. The most recent such meeting was boycotted by the Burundi government and the initiative has fallen into abeyance.

The UN has been not much more effective. The Security Council agreed in 2016 to mandate a 220-strong police mission to the country but did not push back when Burundi refused to allow it to enter the country. In March 2019, Burundi closed the UN's Human Rights Office in the capital, Bujumbura, with little resistance from New York.

The UN Human Rights Council has established a commission of inquiry into the situation in Burundi. In a [report](#) published in September 2019, it questioned the viability of holding elections next year, saying that there remains a significant risk of "atrocities crimes" (war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide) in Burundi.

The position of the government today is that there is no crisis in the country and so no need for involvement by outside parties.

The next presidential and parliamentary elections are due to take place in May 2020. President Nkurunziza has said that he will not stand again, but few of his opponents believe him.

The government has called on exiled opposition parties, many of which have come together in the 'National Council for respect of the Arusha Accord and for reconciliation in Burundi' (CNARED), to return to the country and take part in the vote. But the authorities have given them no guarantee of their personal safety or that the election will be free and fair. However, in August, some member parties of CNARED said that they would participate in the 2020 elections. Others continued to refuse to participate.

¹ This briefing draws extensively on a June 2019 report, "[Running out of options in Burundi](#)", by the International Crisis Group.

Some parties have remained in the country but few of them pose a significant electoral threat to Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD. The most credible threat from within the ranks of the internal opposition is widely viewed to come from the National Congress for Freedom (CNL), led by Agathon Rwaswa. Both were Hutu armed insurgencies during the civil war and have competed for Hutu support since then.

The government has been harassing supporters of Rwaswa's party in recent months. In July dozens were arrested across the country. There were clashes between the *Imbonerakure* and CNL supporters in August.

Also in August, Tanzania and Burundi signed an agreement under which all Burundi refugees in Tanzania will be returned. Humanitarian agencies have [urged](#) both countries to reconsider, pointing out that forcible return is illegal under international law. There are about 200,000 Burundi refugees in Tanzania.

The Catholic Church in Burundi has been highly [critical](#) of Nkurunziza, claiming that there remains a "climate of fear" in the country. Nkurunziza, who is an evangelical Christian, accuses it of scaremongering.

The International Crisis Group [argues](#) that the current EAC-led mediation has failed and that the time has come for the AU and UN to re-engage more actively, with the minimum objective of facilitating the return of the exiled opposition and its participation in the 2020 elections. But it is not optimistic that this will happen.

The EU [imposed](#) an asset freeze and travel ban on four individuals linked to the Burundi government in 2015. They remain in force but are due for renewal this month. It also withdrew direct budget support to Burundi in 2016.

The US [implemented](#) similar sanctions in 2015. France and Belgium suspended parts of their bilateral aid programmes that were being channelled through the government. In late-2018, France resumed some of the bilateral support it had stopped.

Burundi's economy has been in recession since 2015. But this has not so far led to a significant softening in the Burundi government's stance.

UK-Burundi relations

The UK's mission on Burundi is set out on the government's website:

In Burundi, the UK aims to encourage the development of a more democratic, well-governed and peaceful country, playing a positive role in the region, particularly in terms of its contribution to peacekeeping and the fight against terrorism. In doing so, we are contributing to the fight against corruption, which in turn will help open opportunities for British business and investment.

Speaking about Burundi at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2019, a senior official from the [UK Mission to the UN in Geneva](#) "called upon the government of Burundi to remove restrictions on political space and enable an independent media environment."

In 2012, the UK [decided](#) to phase out its bilateral aid programme in Burundi, leaving the EU, France and Belgium to take the lead on development issues:

As part of the global review of all DFID bilateral programmes, it was decided that from 2012, DFID will focus exclusively on of Burundi's integration into the East African Community (EAC). We believe this is the single most important factor in the country's medium-term growth.

While the bilateral programme will be phased out, DFID remains strongly committed to making EAC integration in Burundi a real success.

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Our support will be channelled through the newly established Trade Mark East Africa (TMEA) office in Burundi, which will help the Government of Burundi implement changes required by regional integration; support the creation of an independent and effective Revenue Authority; improve transport and trade; and building the capacity of civil society and the private sector to adapt to regional integration.

TMEA is an institution created by DFID to manage support to EAC integration in each of the five EAC countries.

The decision to end the bilateral aid programme was [criticized](#) by the International Development Committee in 2012.

[£12.3 million](#) of UK aid is being spent by DFID over the period 2017-19 through UN agencies and international NGOs on humanitarian assistance to Burundi.

UK aid is also being spent in Burundi currently because it is considered a country at risk from [Ebola](#). There is a major Ebola outbreak in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

In recent years, UK aid funds have also been spent in Burundi through the [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#).

In May 2019, the FCO published an economic [factsheet](#) on Burundi.

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