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Burundi – on the brink of escalation?

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Bonn, 1 June 2015. Some 100,000 refugees, at least 20 people dead, a failed coup attempt and parliamentary elections postponed – as so often, it is not a good sign when a small, geopolitically insignificant country appears in German newspapers. So far hailed as a success story of post-conflict peacebuilding, the picture Burundi currently presents does not bode well. Although the coup attempt failed, the Central African country does not come to rest – to the contrary, the turmoil unsettling Burundi already for months increases in intensity while elections draw closer. The violent protests were triggered by President Pierre Nkurunziza's intention to run for a third term in the presidential elections scheduled for 26 June 2015.

Currently, critical and worried statements by diplomatic missions come thick and fast. Financial support to the elections was partly stopped; Belgium, France and the Netherlands suspended their cooperation in the security sector. Yet, why did Burundi's international partners not react more decisively before? A key factor which helps to explain their attitude is the prioritization of stability that dominated international engagement. Understandable in light of the devastating civil-war and arduous peace process, they were more preoccupied with preserving what they perceived as stability than with overcoming flaws in the democratization process. Yet, their strategy allowed path dependencies to develop, compromising the nascent democracy and narrowing the possibilities for further democratisation. The current crisis clearly shows the effects this can have not only on democracy, but also on stability itself. The monopolization of power exemplified by a potential third mandate of Pierre Nkurunziza risks causing a slide into violent turmoil once again.

Burundi faced no easy task in overcoming its violent past – over a decade of civil war that pitted the two main ethnic groups against each other, causing more than 300,000 deaths. Yet, compared to countries with a similarly violent history, Burundi has made remarkable achievements over the last decade. Until recently, it appeared to have successfully stabilized, with only minor incidents of violence surfacing since 2003. Critically to this success, the rebel groups have been dissolved through demobilisation and integration into reformed security services. Parallel to the peace process, in 2005 renewed democratization commenced promisingly: the population approved a new constitution by referendum and a series of elections were conducted successfully. The

largest rebel group, CNDD-FDD, effectively transformed into a political party and won a clear majority in 2005, forming the government since.

The fledgling democracy, however, was soon overshadowed by increasingly authoritarian tendencies of President Pierre Nkurunziza and his ruling party, seeking to monopolize power, also by resorting to intimidation and repression. The 2010 elections further exacerbated these tendencies. Although judged generally free and fair by national and international observers, ironically they constituted a major setback to democratization. When the main opposition parties suffered a devastating defeat in the communal elections, they complained of serious fraud and boycotted the later rounds of parliamentary and presidential polls. This way, they handed the incumbent party a landslide victory and enabled it to further consolidate its power and dismantle the opposition parties by instigating dissent and fractionalization.

The international community played a key role in Burundi's peace process, yet failed to react timely upon these authoritarian trends. Diplomatic engagement was instrumental for the conclusion of each of the numerous peace agreements. Once the situation stabilized, Burundi's international partners significantly assisted the peace and democratization process on all levels, not least by contributing over 50% to the national budget. Yet, they have not taken advantage of their political leverage to react upon the undemocratic manoeuvres of the ruling party with clear and unambiguous signals. In this way, they did not prevent the country from moving down a path that eventually led to the current situation where a democratically legitimated, but increasingly authoritarian government managed to further weaken the already frail opposition. In demonstrating early on that authoritarian, repressive tendencies would not be accepted, the international community (on whose financial contributions almost all national policies depend) could have prevented developments from taking such a detrimental turn.

For Burundi, the call for early action may come late – yet, in similar cases the international community should bear in mind that prioritizing stability at the expense of democratic norms might not only have direct negative effects on democracy, but also jeopardize stability in the long-run. Therefore, international partners aiming to support such processes need to promote peace and democracy gradually and in parallel, even in an unstable context.