Ethnic Relations and Burundi's Struggle for Sustainable Peace

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by

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Burundi's population is composed of three ethnic groups: Hutu (85 percent), Tutsi (14 percent) and Twa (1 percent). Ethnic relations have evolved and shifted throughout Burundi's history throughout the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary eras. Understanding the complexity underlying inter-ethnic co-existence is, therefore, essential to preventing the recurrence or intensification of inter-ethnic violence as Burundi negotiates the current electoral turmoil.

The Pre-Colonial Era

The pre-colonial Burundian people are considered to have been mostly a peaceful people. Ethnicity existed as a socio-cultural identity marker. But, due to intermarriages and other cross-cutting ties, ordinary Tutsi and Hutu were largely on equal social footing. This rendered Tutsi-Hutu distinctions on the basis of ethnicity, feudal power relations, or socioeconomic status difficult to make. One of the distinctive feature, although by no means exclusive, was occupation as Hutus were mostly farmers while Tutsi were mostly postoralists. Tutsis pastoralists established themselves as the dominant minority group or ruling elite. Yet, there was no widespread interethnic violence. Some historians posit that the potential for conflict between Hutu and Tutsi was contained by the existence of Ganwa, an intermediate princely class between the Mwami (King) and the population. Many scholars contend that racist Belgian colonial policies and practices crystalized Tutsi-Hutu ethnic borders, thus creating a context for polarized interethnic relationships.

The Colonial Era

Initially, German and later, Belgian colonial governments used "indirect rule" to govern what was then called Rwanda-Urundi. Both colonial governments, recognizing the feudal structure in place decided to govern Rwanda-Urundi through the existing traditional political structures of authority controlled by the minority Tutsi elites. Use of colonial indirect rule did nothing to erode or diminish minority Tutsi hegemony over the majority Hutus. Colonial rule, which lasted 68 years (1894-1962), bolstered/reinforced minority Tutsi dominance over the majority Hutu in both Rwanda and Burundi. Through indirect rule, the Belgian colonial government enabled the Tutsi minority in Burundi to retain control over political power and to enjoy great access to economic resources and opportunities. Sons of Tutsi aristocrats benefited extensively from the European-type educational opportunities made available through Catholic missionary schools. Once educated, the Tutsi elite filled in the top and middle level administrative positions in the Belgian colonial government. As a result, the Tutsi elite who were already dominant in the colonial administration were favored and promoted over the Hutus. Hence, Belgian colonial policies and practices constructed the Tutsi minority into an alien superior (ruling) Hamitic race, while the Hutu majority were constructed into an indigenous Bantu race, ruled by the Tutsi elite. Towards the end of their administration in the 1960s, the Belgians called for the creation of a representative plural society, which inevitably benefited the already well entrenched and advantaged Tutsi

minority elite. Racist Belgian colonial policies and practices reshaped and transformed Tutsi and Hutu ethnic identities into highly politicized racial identities with great potential for violent conflict. During the Belgian colonial rule in Rwanda-Urundi, Tutsi-Hutu ethnic identities were transformed into bipolar racial identities with profound social and political consequences.

The First Post-Colonial Phase: 1962 to 1992

Since achieving political independence from Belgium in 1962, Burundi has consistently experienced cyclical interethnic conflict and violence, the most notable being the 1972 genocide of the Hutu by the Tutsi-dominated government and military. The ethnic hatred between the minority Tutsi and majority Hutu that emerged during the colonial era erupted in open conflict and violence in 1961, following the assassination of Prince Louis Rwagasore, leader of the UPRONA nationalist and royalist political party.

The rift within the Burundian aristocracy over Burundi's independence from Belgium occurred at the same time political parties were being created to prepare the country for self-government in 1961.

Burundi became independent first as a monarchy in 1962 (same year as Rwanda) and was proclaimed a republic in 1966. Unlike in Rwanda where Hutus came to power after independence in 1962 (following the 1959 social revolution), in Burundi the Tutsi were in power before and after colonial rule. However, the Hutu revolution in Rwanda provided the nascent Hutu elites of Burundi with the 'model polity' they tried to emulate later. On the other hand, it gave the incumbent Tutsi grounds for their incipient fears of Hutu majority domination. Indeed, the Tutsi in Burundi controlled political power and the military. The initial split within the Burundian aristocracy and political tensions created during the politics of independence (between 1960 and 1962), did not lead to Tutsi-Hutu violence or massacres as was the case in Rwanda in 1959. However, the split within the Burundi aristocracy and political competition between UPRONA and PDC (caused by the Belgian colonial administrations' manipulations) gave rise to the early political conflict between Tutsi and Hutu in Burundi.

The first explosive violence against Hutus came in October 1965, when a group of Hutu military officers staged an unsuccessful coup d'état directed at the Tutsi-dominated government. The mutineers took a big gamble and lost. And the losses far exceeded the revenge Tutsis exacted upon the Hutu community. In addition to exterminating the entire first generation of Hutu military officers and political leaders, "an estimated 5000 Hutu civilians lost their lives in the capital (of Bujumbura) alone at the hands of local civilian defense groups organized under the supervision of the [Tutsi] army and governor". The Burundi monarchy, once the rallying point for moderate Tutsis and Hutus, could no longer sustain the status quo or prevent the worsening relations between the two ethnic communities as its authority had been greatly eroded. As previously indicated, the weakened monarchy was overthrown in 1966 by then Prime Minister, Captain Michel Micombero, who proclaimed Burundi a republic with himself as president. From 1966 until 1972, President Micombero headed a new government proclaimed of 'Unity and Revolution'. Although Micombero's government included Hutu cabinet ministers, the government firmly remained in Tutsi hands, with Tutsi extremists holding key positions inside and outside the army.   For some Hutu elites, the consequences of the failed 1965 coup attempt were clear. They realized that they had no alternative but to start an armed rebellion against Tutsi control of both the government and army.

In 1969, the Hutu tried another insurrection against Tutsi hegemony, but it failed with deadly consequences for the mutineers. According to Melady, "in the 1969 troubles, 67 Hutu leaders were accused of trying to overthrow the government; they were tried, and 26 were executed by firing squad in December 1969". Despite two failed attempted coups detat (in 1965 and 1969) with deadly consequences, "a majority Hutu uprising took place in 1972". In contrast to the two previous rebellions, the 1972 uprising was organized on a much broader and more violent scale. The former U.S. Ambassador to Burundi (1969-1972), Thomas Melady, described the 1972 Tutsi-Hutu strife as " . . . one of the worst bloodbaths of this century – and one of the least known". According to the U.S. Ambassador, "The severity of the Tutsi response was probably rooted in the fear that such a plot would result in the wholesale killing or expulsion of Tutsis". Indeed, it is reported that President Micombero and other Tutsi leaders felt there was a vast Hutu conspiracy to eliminate them once and for all.

Although the hatred and hostility on both sides was deep and personal, the "genocide by the Tutsi's against the Hutus in Burundi . . . exceeded in its horror the genocide by the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda ten years earlier". The massacres of Hutu by Tutsi were not only related to the immediate strife, but also to revenge motivated by deep-rooted hatred of Hutu.

Stavenhagen has described the horror of the Tutsi massacres of the Hutus in Burundi in 1972 this way:

"Within hours of its outbreak, a reign of terror was unleashed by Hutu upon the Tutsi, and then on an even more appalling scale by Tutsi upon Hutu. The killings went on unabated for several months. By then almost every educated Hutu element was either dead or in exile. Some conservative estimates put the total number of [Hutu] lives lost at 100,000, others at 200,000. Approximately 150,000 Hutu refugees fled to neighboring territories. "

The crises that occurred in Burundi between 1965 and 1972 were decisive in intensifying Tutsi-Hutu hatred and violence. The U.S. Ambassador characterized the hatred between Tutsi and Hutu in Burundi in the early 1970s this way:

While the animosity between the Hutu and Tutsi communities [in Burundi] had been evident to me [Sic.] from the beginning, I had underestimated how deeply rooted it was, like a malignant growth, spreading through all their relationships.

Between 1972 and 1987, "only Tutsi elements were qualified to gain access to power, influence and wealth". In contrast, the Hutu were systematically excluded from the army, civil service, economy and higher education. As a result, the Hutu were increasingly reduced to the hopeless status of a vast underclass in their own country. In 1976, a military coup d'état brought Colonel Jean-Baptiste Bagaza (from the same Southern Bururi Province as Michel Micombero) to power. Although President Bagaza proclaimed a government of "National Unity", he "did little to alter the stranglehold of Tutsi elements" within the government and army.

For the next three years (1976 to 1979), Burundi "remained firmly under the control of a Supreme Military Council consisting of 30 officers, all of them Tutsi". And the UPRONA political party, once a moderate nationalist movement with its membership cutting across ethnic and regional lines, became a stronghold of Tutsi extremist interests. The regime of

Bagaza fell in 1987 after yet another military coup d'état led by Major Pierre Buyoya, a young Tutsi military officer from the south of the country. In 1988, Buyoya was faced with a significant Hutu rebellion in northeast Burundi.   In the same year, a local incident of Tutsi abuse and impunity in a rural commune triggered an explosive Hutu violence directed at Tutsi supremacy. The incident inevitably provoked a confrontation with the Tutsi dominated army, with deadly consequences for the Hutu community. Stavenhagen observes that, "although the exact number of Hutu victims remains a matter of speculation, estimates suggest that 15,000 may not be too wide a mark."

It is reported that soon after the 1988 massacre, the Buyoya regime introduced several constitutional and political reforms including increasing the number of Hutu cabinet ministers from six to twelve and naming a Hutu Prime Minister. However, because these reforms lacked Tutsi support or Hutu trust, they had no impact on the Tutsi-Hutu relations. To underscore the ineffectiveness of the reforms on Tutsi-Hutu relations, "renewed killings occurred in November 1991, with an estimated 3,000 Hutu killed by [Tutsi] government troops."

For a period of thirty years after Burundi achieved political independence from Belgium (1962-1992), the minority Tutsi held political power and controlled the army. During the same period, Hutu were excluded from the control of power and reduced to a vast underclass. Repeated massacres over three decades led to thousands of Hutus killed or forced into neighboring countries as refugees. And educated Hutus in government, higher education or the military were either exterminated or exiled.

The Second Post-Colonial Phase: 1993 to 2005

This period is marked by a 12 year civil war primarily ethnic nature. As a result of the first free and fair elections in decades, held in June 1993, FRODEBU unseated the long ruling UPRONA government. Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, was elected president. He affirmed his strong commitment to eliminating Burundi's "ethnic virus" and formed a government composed of one third Tutsi and a Tutsi Prime Minister. Despite this commitment, three months after his inauguration, the Tutsi military staged an attempted coup d'état that led to the assassination of President Ndadaye, the speaker of the National Assembly and several senior Hutu members of the FRODEBU government. Ndadaye's assassination unleashed massive anger among Hutu populations against Tutsis across Burundi, which was met with unselective reprisal and killings of Hutus by the Tutsi military. Hundreds of thousands, both Hutus and Tutsi, perished during the civil war.

An internal peace process which started in June 1998 prepared ground for the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement in August 2000. Though both events were considered major political breakthroughs, ethnic violence persisted and many issues remained unresolved. The historic Arusha Peace Agreement was signed by nineteen political organizations and movements

The Third Post-Colonial Phase: Pierre Nkurunziza's Government and Uneasy Interethnic Partnerships (2005 to 2015)

Burundi's cyclical interethnic conflicts and violence are the result of decades of struggles between Tutsi and Hutu over political power and economic control. The smallest ethnic minority, the Twa, have mostly remained isolated and exploited by both the Hutus and Tutsi.

The struggles have occurred within the context of Tutsi dominance, political repression and economic deprivation of the Hutu majority.

The third post-colonial phase is characterized by interethnic collaboration, mostly as a result of the political framework that was created by the Arusha Peace Agreement. The Agreement established a power-sharing structure, which in turn helped to shape Burundi's new constitution. Power-sharing could foster interethnic peaceful coexistence, which was the underlying spirit of the Arusha Peace Agreement. However, a number of questions can be raised about the nature, scope, and motives of interethnic partnerships formed this phase. To what extent are interethnic partnerships grounded in shared visions for improving the wellbeing of all Burundian people? In what ways do personal motivations weaken the potential for meaningful and transformative interethnic partnership? How can healthy interethnic partnerships be sustained in a context that lacks spaces for courageous interethnic conversations about the past, present, and future?

Moving Forward: Preventing Interethnic Violence

Over the years, concerted efforts by internal and external actors to construct political solutions to the ethnic problem in Burundi have been largely undermined by deep rooted hatred and distrust compounded by mutual fears of annihilation on both sides of the conflict, which are further exacerbated by a culture of impunity. Additionally, the lack of shared national visions of societal reconstruction will continue to fuel the undercurrent of ethnic conflict and violence in Burundi. The negotiations and political compromises upon which national decisions are made have so far failed to take into consideration the fractured social fiber of the country, and instead focused on individual, even egotistical gains and benefits with little concern for the general population and the countless families that have been victimized by the decades long cycle of interethnic conflict and violence.

Therefore, for Burundi to avoid continued or renewed interethnic violence, people from all ethnic groups must develop their consciousness of the critical role that individuals and groups must play in the peacebuilding and social reconstruction processes in their nation. To this effect, opportunities must be afforded the people to share their narratives of war to facilitate mutual understanding and compassion for one another, thus empowering them to understand the critical nature of their civic responsibilities towards fostering social cohesion.

Hence, the following concrete recommendations are articulated to help prevent or curb further interethnic violence.

First, the intergroup openness and honesty that led to the articulation of the historic Arusha Agreement must be sustained among all Burundians and across all development sectors to create and sustain a society grounded in sharing and collaboration and defined by the common good. Second, a focus on the common good should inspire and shape people-centered reforms in all sectors to help reduce the growing gap between the elite, particularly government officials, and the masses. If left uncontrolled and untamed, the growing economic disparities will jeopardize the country's quest for peace. Third, leaders of the various political parties must critically reflect on their motivations and articulate national visions that transcend individual benefits so that they can best serve the people of Burundi. In the absence of this re-envisioning, individual interests will continue to blind stakeholders and fuel intergroup conflicts.

Fourth, education is a key path forward towards the reconstruction of communities that are united through shared principles and practices of Ubuntu. For this purpose, moving forward

implies empowering the youth to become reflective citizens. In this context, reflective citizenship is to be understood as "the re-examination, deconstruction, and unlearning of the hegemonic discourse of dominance and oppression that pervades our individual and collective lived experiences and dispositions. It is about understanding that as human beings, we are all forever bound in a destiny that only we can define"(Ndura, 2006, p.199).

Fifth, to frame and lead the way forward through education that promotes youth peaceful engagement and reflective citizenship, teacher education curriculum reform is needed to develop educators' capacity to practice peace pedagogy across all subject areas at all levels. Therefore, educators' professional development must be grounded in Ubuntu and social responsibility frameworks, and focus on constructive reflection; instructional materials evaluation, adaptation and development; student-centered pedagogy; conflict resolution; and community engagement (Ndura & Mimuraba, 2013).

Henceforth, context-grounded social realities in theory, policy and practice across curricula must drive the missions and goals of all education, teacher education and professional development programs.

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