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BURUNDI 1993–2023: DECADES OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2024-0019>

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 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3256-8074> j.bar@uj.edu.pl**Abstract**

Burundi's internal conflict has continued since independence in 1962. Its subsequent phase erupted in 1993 after the assassination of democratically elected President Melchior Ndadaye, lasted more than a decade, and resulted in the collapse of the country's economy. Democratic parliamentary and presidential elections were not held until 2005. The period under then-elected President Nkurunziza (2005–2020) will go down in history as marked by the difficult economic situation and the persecution of political opponents. The change of president in 2020 provided an opportunity to reverse unfavourable development trends, but the assessment of President Melchior Ndayishimiye's leadership does not provide grounds for optimism. The main purpose of this paper (conducted in the form of a case study) is to analyse the current socio-political situation in Burundi, along with an attempt to answer questions about the chances of ending the conflict, avoiding the threat of its internationalization in the region, and effectively rebuilding the country. Awareness of the state's poor condition constructs the main research hypothesis of the article, that the flawed leadership of the last two presidents is resulting in measurable negative effects on the state's post-conflict reconstruction processes and its economic development. The study, in accordance with the accepted premise of conducting qualitative research, has been prepared based on a critical analysis of sources, reports of institutions and non-governmental organizations, data from rankings of reputable think tanks, as well as based on the literature on the genesis and course of the internal crisis in Burundi. The study confirmed that the lack of stable governance and a responsible leader with the will to bring peace and a policy of stable development, translated into the country's dire economic situation and the low standard of living of its citizens.

Keywords

Burundi, civil war, conflict resolution, democratization, human rights, international security

Introduction

Burundi, a small (27,830 km²) country in East Africa, has for years remained outside the mainstream of researchers' interest. The subsequent phase of internal conflict, which broke out in Burundi in October 1993, following the fatal assassination attempt on the democratically elected President Melchior Ndadaye, was overshadowed by the scale of the genocide in Rwanda, while subsequent attempts to recover from the crisis went unnoticed due to both the development successes of neighboring Rwanda and the recurring moments of crisis in Burundi.

In theory, the peace process began on 28 August 2000, with the signing of the tripartite peace agreement between representatives of the Tutsi, and Hutu parties, and Burundian government officials. The agreement, which has gone down in history under the name of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi (2000), included provisions on the will for national reconciliation, political transition, and national reconstruction. The holding of democratic parliamentary and presidential elections was realised in July 2005. A few months earlier, in March 2005, the Constitution was promulgated.

In practice, a permanent ceasefire and an effective agreement to end hostilities was not worked out until May 2008, when the main opposition force of the time, the PALIPE-HUTU FNL, henceforth as the Forces Nationales de Libération, began the disarmament process and became actively involved in the political life of the state as an overt opposition party. However, the conflict between the authorities and the political opposition smouldered for the next decade (Human Rights Watch 2009).

President Pierre Nkurunziza (2005–2020) did not seize the opportunity offered by the agreement reached and the period of his leadership will go down in history as marked by the country's difficult economic situation and the persecution of political opponents. The change in the presidency that took place in 2020 and Evariste Ndayishimiye's assumption of power raised hopes that the new leader would begin the process of implementing the necessary processes of rebuilding the country after the conflict. So far, there is no sign of any improvement in the country's economic situation.

The analysis presented, a short case study, attempts to analyse contemporary political change in Burundi in the face of years of internal conflict and the need for deep reforms in the context of a broader process of democratisation, national reconciliation, and civil society building. Awareness of the state's poor condition constructs the main research hypothesis of the study, that the flawed leadership of the last two presidents is resulting in measurable negative effects on the state's post-conflict reconstruction processes and its economic development.

The main point of reference and the basic unit of analysis is the state, one of the fundamental subjects of research in political science and related disciplines (Hay 2002). The adopted research objective indirectly determined the choice of research method. A case study was chosen as a method dominated by a qualitative strategy, appreciating the importance of the broad contextualisation of events and the uniqueness of the object under study, combined with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the problem under study along with its complexity and uniqueness (Yin 2009, Gilpin 1981). The research process analysed contemporary political and social processes and related external threats; in line with the postulates of the neo-institutional trend, aiming to explain the mechanisms of political life through institutions, understood in specific national, historical,

social and cultural contexts (Hay 2002). This choice had a direct impact on the structure of the article and its chronological and problematic arrangement. The starting point of the analysis was the assessment of the leadership of Pierre Nkurunziza's (2005–2020); actions implemented (or rather neglected) for the restoration of peace, democratisation, and the rebuilding of civil society. It is worth noting that the author is aware that African societies differ in many important aspects from European societies, which is related both to their different historical traditions and the dominant – at least until recent years – model of the authoritarian state. A society is defined as civil when the activities and needs of citizens are developed within the framework of voluntary, spontaneously formed organizations and associations, free from state interference (Lexicon of Political Science 1995: 373). In Africa, the drive to build a civil society is still a new phenomenon and remains at the level of official rhetoric from the authorities rather than the actual activity of citizens, who not infrequently still place tribal, clan, or family identity above national identity – and its interests (Bar 2013: 36–37).

This was followed by a presentation of the contemporary condition of the state and its society; the average standard of living and the level of respect for citizens' rights. Attention was then drawn to the dangers of internationalising the internal conflict due to the overwhelming number of refugees and instability in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The final point of the analysis will become an attempt to assess potential changes in state policy after 2000, following President Ndayishimiye's assumption of power.

The study, in accordance with the accepted premise of conducting qualitative research, was prepared based on a critical analysis of sources (desk research), reports of institutions and non-governmental organizations (e.g., the World Bank, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, UNHCHR, among others), data from rankings of reputable think tanks assessing the development processes of countries and the living standards of their citizens (e.g. Amnesty International, the Human Development Index, the EAC Data Portal), as well as based on literature on the genesis and course of the internal crisis in Burundi (Berahino 2011, Chrétien 1997, Lemarchand 1996, Ndulu 2007, Prunier 2010, Scherrer 2002, Strizek 1996, Uvin 2018, Watt 2008). It should be noted that there is no coherent study on contemporary Burundi in the academic literature, although there is no shortage of studies on the successive phases of internal conflict in the country and the region – with reference to the last decade of the last century, and more contemporary works of a contributory nature (Nindorera, Bjarnesen 2018). However, the topics they take up concern the period around the elections; the process of the elections and the related abuses and persecution of the opposition. Meanwhile, it is equally important to assess the policies of the country's leader in the period after the presidential oath, the vision of reforms and the real will to implement them. In addition to English-language texts, Polish publications (Bar 2021, Kłosowicz 2017, Konarski 2006, Lizak 2000; 2009, Pawełczak 2006), that are mostly unknown in the West, have also been added. The full set of literature on the topic that formed the basis for the preparation of this text is included in the bibliographical index.

The assessment of the leadership of Pierre Nkurunziza's (2005–2020)

The internal conflict phase that erupted in October 1993, following the fatal assassination of the democratically elected President Ndadaye, resulted in the deaths of close to half a million people and the collapse of the country's economy. Despite repeated attempts to end the crisis, the ceasefire and the holding of democratic elections were only realized in 2005. It was also at that time, that the new president, Pierre Nkurunziza, declared the start of the country's transformation process. The electoral victory gave the president and the victorious ruling party CNDD-FDD¹ the necessary ground to conduct reforms, the most urgent of which seemed to be reforms to the security sector and real power-sharing in the state.

2005 was the first year, after many, which allowed a bit of optimism about Burundi's future. Democratic elections were held, the process of disarming continued, more groups of political prisoners were released and refugees began to return to the country (Konarski 2006).

However, the repair of the state did not progress as expected, and the hopes placed in it, did not match the reality. Despite slogans of national harmony, and cases of arrests of government critics, pressure on the press and human rights violations continued. One of the serious obstacles to democracy was also the lack of real acceptance of opposition activities. Members of the political opposition, journalists, and activists working for peace and human rights were arrested, and the level of interference with the media increased. The intelligence services, police, and the military were responsible for extrajudicial executions and illegal arrests. The scale of the detentions was enormous. In the period up to April 2007, the new authorities were responsible for the detention of over a thousand people in the vicinity of the capital alone, held in detention for several months without being brought to trial (Amnesty International 2007).

Repression intensified in periods before and around the elections – in 2010 and 2015

In the 2010 elections, the rivalry between the ruling CNDD-FDD party and the opposition FNL² proved crucial. The repression for which the government party was responsible began as early as 2008. Between July 2008 and April 2009, at least 120 opposition party activists were arrested, 22 opposition members were expelled from parliament, and opposition party rallies and press conferences were banned. The authors of Human Rights Watch's report "Pursuit of Power: Political Violence and Vepression in Burundi" detail numerous cases of detentions, attacks on activists, and arsons on the headquarters of local party branches, for which both sides of the political rivalry were responsible in the period since December 2008 (Pursuit of Power 2009).

Most of the incidents took place on the outskirts of the capital and in rural areas, beyond the ability of international observers to monitor. Western diplomats reacted only in November 2008, speaking out against the arrest of opposition leaders without being able to prove the scale of violence perpetrated in the provinces. Using real options for action,

1 The National Council for the Defense of Democracy — Forces for the Defense of Democracy (French: Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie — Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie).

2 The National Forces of Liberation (French: Forces Nationales de Libération).

the work of the Independent National Electoral Commission was supported in an attempt to give it real independence and an important political position.

In June 2010, President Nkurunziza was re-elected, receiving 91.62% of the vote after the resignations of all six rivals. The CNDD-FDD party won highly in both parliamentary and local elections (Burundi. Inama Nshingamateka 2010). For many, a vote for it seemed to support the peace process. Opposition parties were considered to be blocking the peace process; in a way, it was rightly believed that their real electoral goal was to stay on the political scene and then consistently weaken the ruling party's position, which could lead to another wave of conflict. Violence continued after the elections, attacks conducted using firearms and grenades. The *Imbonerakure* militia, the youth wing of the CNDD-FDD party, then began its infamous activities on a wider scale. The level of interference against the media increased. The Media Act, passed in 2013, required journalists to disclose sources of news concerning the broader security of the state, and reports concerning the economy.

The 2015 elections followed a very similar course. Mutual pressure – the president towards the public and the public dissatisfied with the president's policies – increased with news of President Nkurunziza's desire to run for a third presidential term.

In 2015, in the days leading up to the parliamentary elections one of Burundi's two vice-presidents (Gervais Rufyikiri) and the speaker of parliament (Pie Ntavyohanyuma) left the country. Both politicians in previous weeks had spoken out against the legalisation of Nkurunziza's third term of office. They were followed by a large group of activists and members of the opposition, fearing for their lives. Indeed, in the months that preceded and followed the 2015 elections, the activities of the *Imbonerakure* intensified, with its militants launching campaigns to terrorise opposition members, especially those who had the courage to speak out against the president's initiative. The main opposition candidate in the presidential election, Agathon Rwaso, was in hiding at the time, fearing arrest (Nindorera, Bjarnesen 2018).

Despite Gen. Godefroid Niyombare's attempted coup and ongoing violence, the presidential election was postponed by only a few days. Protests also continued for weeks after the elections, the bloodiest events taking place in December 2015, when protesters attacked military posts in Bujumbura. An alleged coup attempt contributed to the outbreak of a new wave of violence. Investigations by security forces at the time resulted in fatalities, the number of which will probably never be known. New anonymous graves appeared en masse in the suburb of Bujumbura. Accounts by human rights defenders of the acts of stealth at the time were subsequently supported by an investigation, conducted by representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), who provided evidence of killings, torture, disappearances, and sexual violence (UNHCHR 2015). In December 2015, the African Union announced its intention to send a contingent of 5,000 peacekeepers to Burundi, but the Burundian government did not accept the proposal.

On 15 November 2016, the ITEKA League, the oldest organisation dedicated to the defence of human rights in Burundi, together with the International Federation for Human Rights (*Fédération Internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme*, FIDH), published a report entitled "Repression and Genocidal Dynamics in Burundi" (FIDH 2016). It condemned the widespread human rights violations recorded in the country during the two years of investigation. In December 2016, the ITEKA League published several further investigative reports on the prosecution of the most serious crimes committed in Burun-

di; accusing the Burundian authorities of being responsible for both their commission and the impunity of the perpetrators. These publications led to the President banning the League and five other Burundian human rights organizations from further activities (FIDH 2017).

A similar message was sent in the dramatic reports of Human Rights Watch and a special commission of inquiry delegated to Burundi by the United Nations Human Rights Council. On 19 January 2017, a European Parliament resolution was adopted on the current situation in Burundi, stating that the country "...has been undergoing a dramatic political, social and economic crisis since its president, Pierre Nkurunziza, decided, in violation of the Arusha Agreement and the country's constitution, to run for a third presidential term in April 2015" (European Parliament 2017).

In response to criticism, the Burundi authorities imposed a six-month ban on the BBC and Voice of America radio stations, as well as two local broadcasters (Burundi bans BBC... 2018). The 2018 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders, ranked Burundi 159th out of 180 countries assessed for media freedom (RSF 2018). In 2018, the National Security Council of Burundi announced a three-month suspension of the activities of international NGOs, including those of a humanitarian nature.

It should be noted that Burundi had a presidential system from 2005 to 2018³. President Nkurunziza, while holding full power, bore full responsibility for all executive activities. Although he adhered to the basic requirements of the democratic system (the constitutionally preserved principle of the tri-partite division of power and the multi-party system, the timely holding of presidential and parliamentary elections), the low level of democratic standards of the electoral process calls into question the actual public consent for the policies he implemented, especially internally. And although formally the model of leadership he represented was not a dictatorship, understood as a non-democratic power not elected by society, in practice it remained one (Bankowicz, Kozub-Ciembroniewicz 2007). However, the concentration of power in the hands of an individual did not serve the state in this difficult period of post-conflict reconstruction, as the president, lacking personal charisma, aptitude, and a real will to conduct the necessary reforms, failed to carry out the processes of rebuilding the state and its economy.

In 2020, there was a change in the position of president. The decision of the ruling party to end their support for President Nkurunziza was conditioned by a kind of stalemate, linked to the state of permanent internal conflict, the dire economic situation of the state, and the refusal of foreign donors to support the regime.

Burundian society: standard of living and level of respect for civil rights

Burundian society is a society of young people, with 45.52% being children and young people under 14 years. The median age in Burundi is 17 years, the birth rate is 3.23%, statistically there are almost six children per woman. In 2018, the country's population was 11,844,520 citizens. The vast majority of Burundians live in the countryside, the country's urbanisation rate is only 13.4 per cent. The largest city remains the former capital Bujum-

3 On June 17, 2018, a constitution was promulgated that restored the office of prime minister, following the president's efforts to legally regulate the extension of the number of terms of office; Constitution de la République du Burundi, <https://www.presidence.gov.bi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/constitution-promulguee-le-7-juin-2018.pdf>.

bura, which had a population of 954,000 in 2019 (Index Mundi 2019). In 2017, Burundi's GNI per capita, calculated on a purchasing power parity basis, according to the The World Factbook, published by CIA, was only 700 USD, placing Burundi in the last place in the world (The World Factbook 2023). Extremely low incomes translate directly into adverse indicators of quality of life, health, and life expectancy. Poverty and lack of access to clean water contribute to chronic malnutrition, which affects around 60% of children. Access to health services remains very low. In 2016, there were only 0.05 doctors per 1,000 inhabitants (in Rwanda, the rate was 0.13 at the time and 2.4 in Poland). The lack of universally accessible health services prevents a reduction in infant and maternal mortality rates, which are among the highest in the world. Sustained high levels of AIDS mortality will continue to affect life expectancy and higher overall mortality rates. Addressing this problem is directly linked to improving the country's economic health, as neighbouring Rwanda, which has experienced steady economic growth for almost two decades, now not only has a low rate of new AIDS cases, but has also been successful in reducing mortality among people living with HIV and effectively preventing mother-to-child transmission (Index Mundi 2019).

So far, there is no indication of any breakthrough against these negative development trends. According to the data provided by the Human Development Reports, one of the most important measures of countries' socio-economic development, in 2022 Burundi ranks fifth from worst, with no change in development coefficients since 2020 (Human Development Reports 2022)

Many hopes were linked to the admission of Burundi into The East African Community (EAC), a regional intergovernmental organisation considered to be one of the most advanced in achieving its integration objectives. The experience of Rwanda, admitted to the Community in 2007, indicated that accession can effectively foster stabilisation processes. Moreover, it can contribute to economic growth, reducing poverty levels. In 2024, the commemoration of the genocide's round anniversary raised awareness of Rwanda's 30 years of peaceful existence and stable economic development. The country has made significant progress over the past three decades, expressed in an increase in development indicators, medium- and long-term development, and poverty reduction strategies have been developed.

Already in 2010, the World Bank's *Doing Business 2010* Report made Rwanda the first African country ever to be recognized as a reform leader for 2009 (Doing Business 2010), while in a ranking by *The Economist* magazine, it was among the world's fastest-growing economies, ranking 10th with annual average growth of 7.6% (United Nations Rwanda 2010: 3). Stable growth trends in the economy have continued to this day, maintaining a GDP growth rate of 8.2% (A New Era in Development. Annual Report 2023: 16). The country's political stability is equally highly rated; in the *Fragile State Index*, for 2023, Rwanda ranked better than Uganda and Kenya, remaining for the second year in a row outside the group of the world's forty most unstable countries (Fragile States Index 2023). In East Africa, only Tanzania has a better position.

The comparison is intended to highlight the importance of good leadership, considered one of the key factors in economic growth. Despite controversial assessments of the leadership of long-time Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the author of this text fully agrees with the message of a 2011 interview with the *La Liberation*, in which President Kagame said: "When voting for me, people choose security, economic development. They

talk about the lack of human rights. But more than 90% of children attend school and 92% of the population has health insurance. Are these not human rights? Voters can put blank ballots in the ballot box” (Hofnung, Marc Perrin 2014). This statement is well complemented by the aforementioned statistics on the achievements of Rwanda’s health service, while showing a clear discrepancy with the level of health services in Burundi. It is important to remember that a state is not a perfect entity anywhere in the world, and neither are their leaders, who make difficult choices keeping in mind that their primary duty is to look after the interests of the state entrusted to them.

President Nkurunziza has taken as the primary goal of his policy to stay in power as long as possible, pursuing it by forcefully combating political opposition, forgoing the opportunity to gain support in the population by ensuring the security of citizens and raising their standard of living. The benefits of joining the EAC have been used minimally, with citizens gaining automatic access to visa-free travel and the free market, but these opportunities have not translated in any way into stable economic development for the country, especially compared to the aforementioned Rwanda⁴.

In terms of civil rights and civil society activity in the broadest sense of the term, the most talked-about problem of recent years remains the consistent erosion of media freedom and the right to NGO activity.

In March 2018, three members of the organisation *Parole et Action pour le Réveil des Consciences et l’Évolution des Mentalités* (PARCEM) were sentenced to 10 years in prison (*Burundi in Denial*). In April 2018, human rights activist Germain Rukuki, a member of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT), was sentenced to 32 years in prison. In August 2018, Nestor Nibitanga, an observer for the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained Persons (APRODH), was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. The government banned the aforementioned organisations from public activities. In April 2018, Burundi’s National Communication Council (CNC) suspended the online readers’ forum of Burundi’s main independent newspaper “Iwacu” for three months. The following month, the CNC suspended the BBC’s Burundi radio station for six months after it invited human rights activist, Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, on the programme (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The reduction of the controlling role of the media made itself felt during the 2020 presidential election, as it had been in the previous two periods around the election, in 2010 and 2015. Freedom of coverage was significantly hampered by the provisions of the amended Press Law of 2018, in particular the provisions of the new code concerning the rules of activity for media and journalists during the election period, prohibiting the publication of information about the course of the election and its results – other than from statements from the State Election Commission. In addition, access to social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Yahoo Mail) was blocked across the country on voting day, restricting the exchange of information and the ability to post independent reports.

4 East African Community. Data Portal [online]. Available at <https://eac.opendataforafrica.org/apps/atlas/ranks/GDP-per-Capita?baseRegion=BI> [Accessed on 17 July 2024]. It is worth highlighting the value of the data posted on the mentioned portal.

Threat of internationalisation of the conflict

Burundi's contemporary political situation is largely conditioned by a history of conflict, the genesis of which, since colonial times, has been the instrumental use of the ethnic factor by politicians. The similar ethnic composition (about 80–90% Hutu, 10–20% Tutsi, 1% Twa) and the convergence of the historical destinies of Burundi and Rwanda meant that from the dawn of history the two countries were bound by close relations that were important to both their socio-political situation and their economic development, with instability in one causing unrest in the other. From 1965 to the end of the 20th century, ethnic strife in Burundi was almost always linked to ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, and it was exacerbated by the emergence of refugees, as Tutsi and Hutu forces from both countries cooperated against a common ethnic enemy (Prunier 1997, 378).

The situation was similar in the 1990s, but in Rwanda, despite the incomparably larger scale of the problem, the situation stabilised much more quickly⁵. From the mid-1990s onwards, Rwanda has maintained political stability, but the problem of illegal migrants who have remained on both sides of the borders remains a constant threat to mutual relations.

In 1994, Burundi faced the need to take in more than 200,000 refugees from Rwanda. Their arrival violently upset the shaky balance between Burundian Hutus and Tutsis, leading to another phase of conflict, culminating in a political upheaval in 1996 and the seizure of power by President Pierre Buyoya (Bar 2013; 2021). Fear of upsetting the shaky ethnic balance has been one of the most important factors determining domestic policy directions in both countries, both in the past and in the last three decades.

The events of the spring and summer of 2015 caused the Burundian refugee population in Rwanda to double in a short period of time. In March 2016, the number of Burundian refugees residing in countries in the region (Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia) exceeded 250,000 (Dobbs and Gaynor 2016). The refugee camp in the Tanzanian town of Nyarugusu, located in Kigoma province, in the western part of the country and a short distance from the border with Burundi, was ranked ninth largest refugee camp in the world at the end of 2015 with 68,197 refugees (Kłosowicz 2017, 227–228). Around 70 000 Burundians have taken refuge in Rwanda. The largest group of refugees, close to 50 000, was in Mahama camp, established in Kirehe district, in the south-east of the country. At the end of 2015, allegations emerged, directed at the Rwandan authorities, accusing them of recruiting refugees for the Burundian opposition and military training to prepare them to fight for the overthrow of President Nkurunziza (Uwiringiyimana 2016).

Paradoxically, when Rwandan President Paul Kagame announced the start of negotiations on the need to relocate refugees to other countries in the region, recognising that their ever-increasing numbers and prolonged stay in Rwanda posed a potential threat to the stability of his country, this decision was met with protest from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which recalled that Rwanda is bound by international agreements to protect refugees, keep its borders open for them, and not carry out forced deportations.

5 It is worth paying attention to the study by B. Ndulu under the telling title "What lessons Liberia and Burundi for example learn from Mozambique's and Rwanda's transformation from conflict to being among the fastest growing countries in the world?" In: B. Bosworth, S. Collins, *The Empirics of Growth: An Update* 2003.

However, experts familiar with the local realities are aware that the Rwandan authorities should pursue an active, but at the same time extremely cautious policy towards Burundi, as any internal conflict in one of these countries threatens the stability of the other. In a situation where the conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi so far have either been strictly ethnic in nature or where the ethnic factor has been used instrumentally in political conflict, it is not surprising that President Nkurunziza (Hutu), too, has used ethnic rhetoric to achieve short-term political goals.

Despite the fact that the contemporary anti-presidential opposition in Burundi has united both Tutsi and Hutu politicians, there have been statements in the media by a spokesman for the Burundian government using the terms opposition – terrorists – Tutsi – invaders. It is therefore fully understandable that deliberate attempts to turn a political conflict into an ethnic one must have been disturbing in Rwanda, where, since the 1994 genocide, the authorities' priorities have invariably been to eliminate the ethnic element from public life and to build a national civil state across ethnic divides.

The unrest in Burundi also translates into the situation in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire), where, starting in July 1994, with the arrival of a two-million-strong wave of Rwandan Hutus, a period of permanent crisis began, the effects of which are still being felt today⁶. The Burundian authorities at the time actively participated in attempts to resolve the conflict (in order to secure their borders from rebel Hutu groups using eastern Congo as a base to attack targets in Burundi); along with Rwanda, appealing to the UN, the OAU, and the Zaire authorities to relocate refugee camps away from the shared border, and later supporting Laurent Kabila in overthrowing President Mobutu's regime. In the years that followed, the volatile provinces of the eastern DRC became a safe haven for a succession of opposition rebel groups, whose fighters also served as mercenaries in the Congolese army (Meredith 2011: 480–482). The same was true in 2015, when, after a failed coup, deserters from the Burundian army, formed a new rebel organization, the Republican Forces of Burundi (*Forces républicaines du Burundi*, Forebu) which have consolidated themselves as the strongest Burundian opposition armed group operating in the DRC, with 300–500 fighters.

The vast majority of the group's fighters consisted of deserters who left the Burundian army when President Nkurunziza conducted a major reorganisation in the military after the failed coup in 2015. It is also noteworthy that most of the officers and soldiers expelled at the time, who subsequently joined the ranks of Forebu, were ethnic Tutsis (Anderson 2017) who received unofficial support from opponents of President Nkurunziza's regime. Indeed, a group of UN experts reported that the rebels were not only buying food from local Congolese, but were also recruiting among Burundian refugees residing in the Lusenda refugee camp in Congo's South Kivu province. This may have suggested a liaison with the Congolese military and President Joseph Kabila, whom the opposition at the time accused of fostering unrest in the state, in order to justify further delays in the presidential elections. Although the rebel organisations did not become more active regionally in the following years, they did not cease to exist, and reports of clashes between RED-Tabara fighters and Burundian government forces were still emerging in spring 2020, on the eve of the next presidential elections (Taarifa Rwanda 2020). As mentioned, the situation in

6 The origins and course of the crisis in eastern Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo are discussed in detail in the monograph by G. Prunier, *Africa's World War. Congo, the Rwanda Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*, Oxford 2010.

the eastern provinces of the DRC has not stabilized to this day. The experience of the past 30 years, recalling that this condition was exploited by rebels acting against the legitimate authority in Bujumbura, indicates how dangerous this condition is for the stability of the Burundian state.

The years 2015–2020 were also a difficult period for Burundi in extra-regional relations, as the authoritarian tendencies and illegal actions of the president negatively affected the ability to actively represent the country's interests in the international arena. The conciliation dialogue that started in 2014 at the initiative of the East African Community stalled due to the inability to exert effective pressure on the Burundian President. The possibility of obtaining development aid has also been frozen. One of the most important programmes from which Burundi was excluded at the time was the preferential African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a 2000 US trade law aimed at increasing access to the US market for sub-Saharan African countries, and eligibility for this programme was conditional on, among other things, respect for the rule of law and core employment standards. All member countries of the EAC were beneficiaries of AGOA until the end of 2015; Burundi lost this status in January 2016 (AGOA.info 2023).

As previously mentioned, a European Parliament resolution on the current situation in Burundi was adopted in January 2017. Its findings resulted in the European Union also suspending direct financial support to the country.

The issue of Burundi's internal situation was also discussed during the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in 2018, even though the Burundian government, in September of that year, recognised the members of the UN Commission of Inquiry as *personae non gratae*. Although in April 2018, the Burundian government cancelled the visas of three UN experts commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to gather information on abuses by local judicial authorities, the UN Security Council continued to regularly address the situation in Burundi, although the real possibility of assistance was paralysed by the lack of cooperation from the country's authorities (Human Rights Watch. 2019). No less important for the low intensity of this cooperation was also the fact that Burundi, due to its geopolitical location and the general political situation in the world during this period, was not a priority for UN Security Council action, if only in view of the development of the conflict in Syria.

The beginning of the presidency of Melchior Ndayishimiye

The presidential election 2020, like the previous, was conducted in an atmosphere of violence and restrictions on media freedom. The largest opposition party, the National Congress for Freedom (Congrès National pour la Liberté, CNL), formed in February 2020 and whose candidate, Agathon Rwasa, won only 24% of the vote, has made a number of allegations, including the arrest of opposition candidates, intimidation of voters and electoral commission members, falsification of results, including by voting using the identities of deceased voters.

Although the elections were conducted without the participation of foreign observers, the allegations were confirmed in reports by observers from the Catholic Bishops' Council of Burundi, publications by Human Rights Watch and in commentaries by the foreign press (Human Rights Watch 2020). It was also significant that the opposition's position was also published in the press organ of the East African Community ('The EastAfrican'),

although the EAC remained customarily loyal to the official authorities (Burundi court 2020).

During the pre-election period, the first cases of Covid-19 were reported. However, the development of the epidemic did not significantly affect the electoral process, as those implementing the pre-planned schedule were determined that the epidemic would not affect the elections. The Covid-19 epidemic thus became a kind of emblematic backdrop to the process of political change in Burundi, demonstrating the position of society in an authoritarian state in which those in power pursue their own interests first and society is used instrumentally in the face of the policies implemented, even when external circumstances, in this case the epidemic, pose a threat to the safety and lives of citizens. This policy was also conditioned by the fact that the development of the epidemic limited the ability of members of the diaspora to cast their votes in embassies, due to the measures taken in many countries of the world to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The latter circumstance certainly had a negative effect on the performance of opposition candidates, as it prevented refugees, most often those supporting opponents of the current government, from casting their votes (Bar 2022, 101–116).

President Ndayishimiye's policy turnaround is also telling, when, following his party's victory, he took over full power in the state and launched a widely promoted fight against the Covid 19 pandemic, realising that publicly expressed concern for citizens would be the best recommendation of his person to Western donors (AFP 2020). The activities, which were propagandistic in nature, had the desired effect and gained financial support from Western donors and opinion-forming institutions such as the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, the Pandemic Emergency Fund and The United States Agency for International Development, USAID (UNICEF 2020). In December 2020, the UN Security Council removed Burundi from its political "blacklist", citing the holding of "peaceful elections", while encouraging potential donors to resume development assistance (United Nations 2020).

It is clear that the subject of the relationship between the acquisition of development aid and successfully conducted processes of economic and political transformation is very complex. This has already been recognized by Witold Kieżun, a Polish economist, who, while in Burundi as a UN expert in the late 1980s and early 1990s, judged the World Bank's forcible implementation of the idea of a cabinet-parliamentary system and the rule of competitive elections to be a lack of understanding of local social specifics (Kieżun 2013: 106.) A decade later, the topic of the impact of neoliberal policies on the economic structure of sub-Saharan Africa has become the subject of extensive scholarly discourse among Western experts (Williamson 2014). This policy, often referred to as the "Washington Consensus," with its emphasis on social aspects, such as democracy and human rights, imposed as preconditions for the support provided, has begun to be seen by African leaders as patronizing, even linked to neocolonialism. Recognizing donors' self-interests, in the context of Burundi linked to competition for access to Congo's natural resources, the "Beijing Consensus" is increasingly being invoked on the African continent, emphasizing investments that spur rapid economic development, resulting not from the imposition of governance structures associated with liberal democracies, but from economically sound "win-win" exchange scenarios (Mboya 2023).

Today, therefore, the topic of development aid should also be analyzed in relation to non-Western players; but the multifaceted nature of such an analysis is expressed beyond the rigidly defined framework of this text.

There is no doubt, however, that skillfully used, development aid supports the process of a country's development, as the oft-cited example of Rwanda confirms. The example of Burundi, on the other hand, shows the inability to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the potential benefits of aid programs.

When it comes to assessing President Ndayishimiye's ability to properly use development aid, the period of illusions ended in September 2022, with news of the circumstances surrounding the change of Prime Minister in Burundi, justified by the need to prevent a prepared coup (Africanews 2022).

This information provided a convenient opportunity to reflect more deeply on the composition of the President's immediate entourage. By presidential decree, General Gervais Ndirakobuca, formerly Minister of the Interior, a close associate of President Nkurunziza in the previous term, under Western sanctions since 2015 and bearing the nickname: Ndakugarika, meaning 'I will kill you with a stone' in the Kirundi national language, was appointed as the new Prime Minister (Le Monde 2020).

The former Prime Minister, Alain-Guillaume Bunyoni, like his successor, associated with President Nkurunziza's regime, was seen as the leader of the proponents of forceful solutions, deciding the actual policy directions of the regime (Amnesty International 2023).

Burundi's main opposition party, the National Council for Freedom (CNL), was suspended in June 2023, which neutral observers rightly link to the approaching date of the 2025 general elections (Africanews 2023).

These events confirm that there has been no change in the balance of power in the state, ruled by the authoritarian regime of President Ndayishimiye, supported by an alliance of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, *Imbonerakure* youth militias and government security services. The incumbent president has failed to liberate himself from the informal control of the military who elevated him to the position, thus he will not be able to significantly alter the real objectives of his policy aimed at maintaining power by a team burdened with responsibility for almost 20 years of developmental stagnation in the state.

President Ndayishimiye, who was one of the most influential figures in Burundi during Nkurunziza's presidency, as former head of the interior and security ministry, was certainly aware of the specific activities of the services under his authority. In public opinion, however, he was not linked to the most dramatic abuses of power; on the contrary, he was considered to be a more outspoken politician than the other senior politicians of the ruling party and thus predisposed to initiate the necessary reforms.

The credit of trust bestowed upon him was exhausted halfway through his presidency. The reports of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documenting repeated cases of persecution of opposition members and widespread violations of human rights became an eloquent image of the true nature of his leadership (Hurtado 2023).

Conclusions

Over the last half-century, one of the most serious problems facing Burundi, like many other African countries, has been the lack of stable governance and a responsible leader with a vision and, above all, the will, to establish peace and a policy of stable development. Policies in Burundi have for years been determined by interest groups, most often linked by a common ethnic background, and political parties recruit their members not because

of the programme but because of the opportunity to get a job and develop a political career. This circumstance in turn translates into the lack of competence of public sector officials and decision-makers, where positions are filled not by professionals but by party careerists. The drive to build a civil society is a recent phenomenon and remains more at the level of official rhetoric by those in power than actual activity by citizens, who often still prioritize tribal, clan, or family identity over national identity. Nation-building across ethnic divides and at the same time a modern society remains one of the most important tasks facing African leaders.

There was not enough space in the above article to discuss the complex ethnic situation of Burundi, the author considered that these issues have been covered by almost all the studies on Burundi cited above. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that one of the most important issues to be resolved remains the question of the ethnic division and mutual claims of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. For while theoretically the ethnic diversity of states is not in itself a direct cause of internal conflict, this statement does not apply to states where only two or three ethnic groups are parties to the conflict. Unlike in Rwanda, in Burundi no leader has so far declared a binding intention to remove the issue of ethnicity from the political and public spaces, only a rigid distribution of seats in parliament has been defined, and politicians continue to be defined by ethnicity. While Rwanda has had a consistent policy of nation-building across ethnic divides for a quarter of a century, Burundi has recognised the existence of separate ethnic groups for an indefinite 'transitional period' and this division has been institutionalised as helpful to the peace-building process (Pawelczak 2006, 742).

It is widely acknowledged that one of the obstacles to building democracy is the lack of acceptance of the opposition's actions. In Burundi, this lack of acceptance has existed uninterruptedly since the dawn of independence. Nowadays, however, many scholars are increasingly drawing attention to the fact that in sub-Saharan Africa, the lack of well-functioning mechanisms of representative democracy does not necessarily imply that state institutions are weak, and that their presence on the political scene is not always a necessary condition for the stabilisation and economic development of the state (Lizak 2009, 382). The experience of the last two decades, among other things in East Africa, shows that state governance according to the principle of consensus, referred to as 'consensus democracy', is successfully promoted. This solution is often placed in opposition to the functioning of the state according to the principles of 'confrontational democracy', which does not always work in states whose social structure is based on ethnic divisions (Shyaka 2012).

It is also worth noting another regularity that many of the contemporary problems of sub-Saharan African states have their main source in the weakness of state institutions (Wedge 2011, 204). Burundian subject matter expert, Charles Berahino, confirms this thesis, stating that the history of long-standing internal conflict; the forcible seizure of power, and the persecution of political opponents is testimony to failed governance and weak state institutions. The contemporary condition of the state and society in Burundi, on the other hand, is a component of the poverty of the citizens, the politics of exclusion, and the competition for control of the limited resources available to the state (Berahino 2011, 48,55).

Strong state institutions are only effective in fulfilling their statutory functions if they enjoy the support of the public and gain legitimacy for their power from elections held in accordance with democratic standards.

In Burundi, for the vast majority of the independence period, relations between the government and the people were forged in an atmosphere of violence, ethnic hostility, and pervasive corruption. There was also a lack of a strong and responsible leader who had the chance for peaceful governance and the opportunity for deep reform and state repair. Subsequent decades of internal conflict and brutal civil war have led citizens to perceive those in power as corrupt, potentially dangerous, and always untrustworthy.

Internal stabilisation, followed by the strenuous construction of a political and social environment based on the rule of law, the search for social consensus, and the participation of civil society in the definition and implementation of national policies would certainly be an important part of a strategy to rebuild the state and society after years of internal conflict. It is impossible to change this situation without the will and decisive action of the state authorities.

If, in the future, the authorities decide to undertake wide-ranging reforms, Burundi will have embarked on a process of social and political transformation three decades behind most countries on its continent, as the wave of democratisation that swept the first African countries in the 1990s, another multi-year phase of civil war in Burundi was beginning, launched after the failure of the reform attempt. However, this circumstance may prove favourable if it allows decision-makers to learn from the mistakes made by the pioneers of these undoubtedly very difficult processes. Particularly valuable, would be the continuation of close cooperation with Rwanda, whose contemporary authorities underwent an almost identical transition process in the second half of the 1990s, and whose internal stability and economic successes of recent years are considered as exemplary. So far, the lack of willingness to reform has translated into Burundi's absence from valuable pilot aid programmes (*e.g.*, 'Delivering as One – One UN'), which have benefited Rwanda and Tanzania.

Enabling the return of educated emigrants, providing them with personal security, jobs and decent wages would certainly play a significant positive role in the economic development of the state. While the economic development of the state certainly requires an end to internal conflict, economic stabilisation, let alone an improvement in the living standards of citizens, could prevent the outbreak of future conflicts in the future.

For years, Burundian society has been waiting for deep reforms, including in terms of a broader process of democratisation and national reconciliation. Building a nation across ethnic divides and, at the same time, a modern society has become one of the most important tasks facing the leaders of African states. While the economic development of a state requires an end to internal conflict, economic stabilisation, and improvement in the living standards of citizens, could prevent the outbreak of future conflicts.

Following the example of neighboring Rwanda and many other African countries, a government economic development program, entitled Vision Burundi 2025, was developed in 2011 in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program in Burundi (UNDP). Regardless of the nature of this program's propaganda goals, it should be noted that the country's potential future economic development could be based primarily on solid support for domestic agriculture and processing industries, the construction of hydroelectric power plants, and the start of extraction of strategically important minerals such as copper, cobalt, nickel, uranium and vanadium (Burundi also has small deposits of gold and platinum). Nor should we forget the often-underestimated advantages of Burundi's geopolitical location, offering access from the south to the central part of the conti-

nent via Zambia and Lake Tanganyika, and further transit to other landlocked countries in the region: Rwanda and the DRC.

Its location in the central part of the continent places Burundi in a geostrategic position from the standpoint of being able to take advantage of the routing of international transit routes. For landlocked countries, investment in transport links to ports is of utmost importance; with not only roads and railroads, but also specially dedicated port facilities in coastal countries, as well as facilitation of cross-border traffic control points, being essential. This correctness in the case of Burundi should be complemented by making the best use of access to the Lake Tanganyika transport routes, which offer access to ports in the DRC, Tanzania, and Zambia. The bilingualism of Burundi, which has been francophone for 100 years, lends the country an intermediary role between the East African Community and the francophone countries of central and western Africa.

Burundi's future depends not only on the internal situation of its own country. Rwanda's stability will certainly have a positive impact on the condition of its southern neighbor, as will the peace prevailing in the DRC and Tanzania. The East African Community also certainly plays a stabilizing role, both because of the Community's deliberate stabilization programs and the direct economic gains from membership.

In contrast, instability in the region could adversely affect the stability of Burundi. In this case, too, the situation in Rwanda will be of paramount importance. The fact that the languages of these nations share a common word for peace – *amahoro* – may be considered symbolic. However, almost as dangerous could also be the potential increase in the level of destabilization in the eastern provinces of the DRC, where rebels who have been acting against the legitimate authority in Bujumbura have found refuge and financial support for years.

On a cross-regional scale, a threat to stable post-conflict state reconstruction could be an attempt to escape Western sanctions leading to an alliance with the Russian Federation, which has been intensively seeking political allies and economic partners from among African states since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. While Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Burundi in May 2023 is in the tradition of mutual contacts, particularly strong in the 1980s (Kieżun 2013), it, like previous ties, does not portend any real consequences beyond the deterioration of relations with Western countries. However, this is the subject of a separate analysis.

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