

IN TRANSIT?

The socio-economic transformation of Burundi

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As Burundi prepares for its first democratic elections since the beginning of war in 1993, civil society expectations of the new government are set to rise. Violence that racked the tiny, land-locked country for so long has ceased to motivate the majority who voted in favour of the interim constitution in the recent referendum. The constitution, like the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accords signed between 19 political parties in 2000, is based on the principle of “power sharing” between the dominant Hutu and minority Tutsi and Twa constituencies, signalling a dramatic change in the structure of Burundian politics.

Nevertheless, the current pre-occupation with the ‘ethnic’ composition of Burundi’s government and institutions largely obscures the underlying structural causes of conflict, in particular the unequal access to and distribution of resources. Indeed, the links between poverty, underdevelopment and civil strife are so closely intertwined that civil war reflects not just a problem *for* development but a failure *of* development. Using this critical perspective, it is argued that the transitional government and the international community must urgently shift their current focus on political peace making to socio-economic peace-building to ensure a lasting peace for the people of Burundi.

While post-war economies are expected to be weak because of physical and human devastation, Burundi’s economy was in a fragile state even before the onset of civil strife.

Certainly the inequality of opportunities for economic development conflated perceived ‘ethnic’ differences and helped to motivate for the violent expression of discontent. Today more than 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and some 2 million people rely on aid to meet their basic food needs, representing a 40 percent increase in the number of beneficiaries since 2004. During an interview on a recent fieldtrip to Bujumbura, one Burundian expressed with indignation that, “donors and the international community are obsessed with elections, but why don’t they understand that we can’t eat the constitution?”

Extreme demographic pressure on land due to a population explosion, a single commodity export economy (reliant on coffee), and an entrenched culture of discrimination broadly encapsulate the most prominent challenges to the economic development of a democratic Burundi.¹ The central issue of land tenure and ownership will be briefly discussed below.

Questions surrounding land tenure and ownership are at the heart of the Burundian conflict. The historical feudal system helped to create a lopsided agro-economy that is echoed in the policies of the modern patrimonial state. With more than 93 percent of the population dependent on agriculture for subsistence, an annual population growth of 3 percent, and increasingly negative weather patterns, access to fertile land has become a prize commodity. In this context, “access” is the operative word, since there is no concept of

private property in Burundian law. Land tenure was, and remains, a complicated matter, largely defined by the length of time an individual has occupied the area, and is certainly influenced by political disposition. The all-powerful patronage endowed to politically connected individuals has even legitimated ownership of more than one piece of land. The legal and regulatory vacuum for registering formal land use has allowed the abuse of political power to continue unchallenged. For example, governors on the commune level often allocate land to individuals without communicating this to the central Ministry of Environment, who would in turn allocate that very same tract to someone else.

If we consider that land 'ownership' in the sense of access is passed on from father to son, it is unsurprising that the struggle to secure tenure is also passed down the generations. Add to this already volatile mix of factors is the steady return of thousands of Burundian refugees and IDPs (internally displaced people) with equal, if not more tenacious, claims to their 'piece of earth', creating what the ICG (International Crisis Group) described as a land 'time-bomb'. Complicating the matter further is the fact that some of these refugees fled Burundi as far back as 1972, and now face an arduous process of claiming rights to their lands.

Moreover, it is on the issue of land that gender inequality is particularly manifest. According to customary land tenure, subdivision can only be done between male heirs and women have no inheritance rights. This is because a woman was traditionally expected to leave her parent's home upon marriage, after which she would work on her husband's land. But the practical reality of post-conflict Burundi is not amenable to this neat categorisation. Widows make up a significant percentage of the population (two-thirds of IDP households are headed by women and children), and more than 79 percent of agricultural labour force is female. Yet, despite their strong involvement in the economy, Burundian women have been relegated to the margins of society through their socio-legal status.

In the face of these crosscutting problems, there is scarce evidence of progress on the revision of the Land Code as stipulated by the Arusha Accords. So, while repatriation and resettlement of the displaced has gained momentum

(with more than 50 percent of IDP camps already dismantled), the broader long-term question of reintegration has largely been ignored. It seems that the political compromise, between politicians who were 'allocated' to the two institutions tasked with reintegration, the newly created CNRS (Commission for the Rehabilitation of War Victims) or the already existing MRRDR (Ministry of Reintegration and Resettlement of Displaced and Repatriated Refugees) has been sufficient for both parties. This is despite the significant duplication of their mandates. Certainly, tensions between the two institutions have alluded to the fact that reintegration work will require massive amount of resources, and whoever holds the key to such resources is also likely to secure political allegiance in the upcoming elections. Yet, we must heed the example of the 1993 experience that demonstrated the fatal consequences of a political peace devoid of socio-economic redress.

The current status of the land question in Burundi reveals an underlying contradiction in the actions of the "transitional" government. On the one hand, there is a significant cooling down of violent hostilities between the major players, all of who have engaged in negotiations and dialogue, to the extent that even the 'terrorist' FNL (National Liberation Forces) has promised not to disrupt the election process.

This is certainly a welcome respite from the notorious stop-start pattern of peace initiatives that have characterised the Great Lakes region. On the other hand there are several worrying trends, from rising levels of youth banditry, frequent public sector strikes, increasing use of mob justice, to severe human rights abuses particularly against women and children. These trends point to a civil society still awaiting the dividends of peace, and who are completely disempowered by elite politics.

At this point it is pertinent to examine the 'transitional' nature of the current government. The term refers to a temporary state, in anticipation of another phase. But on the eve of Burundi's landmark elections, there is little to suggest that the future will be anything but more of the same. We have to ask of the current Burundian government, "from what to what?"

The lack of clarity on what should be the basis of building a new state leaves several questions

unanswered. What are the common socio-economic goals of the transitional government? How does power sharing enhance efforts towards these goals? How might the Burundian people contribute to a national dialogue on the issues facing them? What are the immediate priorities for the state and civil society after the elections? And finally, how will the need for reconciliation be balanced with justice and expediency demanded by a traumatised society?

It is evident that that Burundi's peacemakers and the international community must demonstrate a deeper commitment to transformation of power relationships between the Burundian state

and its citizens. An emphasis on socio-economic redress, and a vigorous national dialogue on the issues facing the marginalised majority will give real meaning to Burundi's democracy, making the dividends of peace more rewarding than those of war.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the socio-economic challenges facing Burundi as they relate to the implementation of the Arusha Protocols see M B Jooma, "We can't eat the constitution", ISS Occasional Paper 106, April 2005, <<http://www.iss.org.za>>