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Growing Violence: A Call for Mutually Reinforcing Protection Strategies in Burundi

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Abstract

This study addresses the potential avenues for civilian protection strategies in Burundi. Recent reports note the prevalence of violence against civilians, who are at further risk with the upcoming 2020 presidential election. Although engaging the state government and international actors is key for mitigating civilian harm, the most practical strategies involve civilian self-protection. Depending on the forms of violence present, and the level of social cohesion among communities, civilians should either pursue a strategy of neutrality or flight.

Key Words: Burundi, protection of civilians, human rights, civilian self-protection, protection strategies

The Issue

> "There are some Burundians who have strayed and still think that division can get them some benefits and other favours based on hypocrisy. We hereby tell them openly that all their channels are closed and they have nowhere to pass. We hereby request them to untie themselves from this mess and to move from hell to life. Let them understand that things are no longer the way they used to be; old solutions no longer apply to new problems."
>
> - President Pierre Nkurunziza (BBC Monitoring 2018)

Speaking on the strength of national unity, President Nkurunziza issues a warning to political opposition: conform or face the consequences. Throughout the speech, subtle threats undermine his optimistic rhetoric. Rather than national unity, Burundi exemplifies a dangerous culture of impunity, where civilians experience daily cases of forced disappearances, torture, sexual abuse, and killings (FIDH 2017). With Burundi's history of civil war and genocide, Nkurunziza's words need revision. Old solutions die hard.

The situation in Burundi is dire. For many years a beacon in the region, the small landlocked country is moving closer to civil war. Human rights abuses are increasingly common, and show little sign of slowing. This study seeks to address the potential risks civilians face, and the strategies necessary to mitigate civilian harm. Burundi is an unusual case for civilian protection given the absence of civil war. The country is transitioning towards violence, and therefore represents an opportunity to identify and address protection strategies to alleviate existing violence, while expecting more. The most applicable policies require understanding a theory of violence that considers armed actors and civilians, alongside examples of current protection strategies to identify best practices for Burundi. The most viable protection strategies in Burundi involve civilian self-protection, but also implore the Burundian government and the international community to take action.

Cycles of Violence: A Short History

To grasp the current crisis, it is important to understand the history of violence in Burundi. A former Belgian colony, Burundi is similar in size and cultural makeup to its better-known neighbor, Rwanda. In 1962, Burundi declared its independence, and soon spiraled into conflict (Lemarchand 2009). The country is split ethnically between a traditional elite minority, the Tutsi, and an underprivileged majority, the Hutu. Differing primarily in socioeconomic status, the divide between Tutsis and Hutus has manifested ethnically and violently (Toyi 2016).

After independence, Burundi experienced mass violence, civil war, and genocide, though the most recent post-war agreement seemingly afforded peace. In 1972, Hutus began killing Tutsis in the south, prompting severe reprisals from the Tutsi-dominated government. Genocidal campaigns on both sides resulted in over 200,000 deaths (Lemarchand 2009). Following years of coups, political assassinations, and minor skirmishes, civil war broke out in 1993. Tutsi extremists assassinated the first Hutu elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, and retaliations led to war (Lemarchand 2009). During the 12 years of fighting, thousands died, and armed Hutu fighters led another genocide against the Tutsi (Bouka 2017). Following this devastating war, Nelson Mandela brokered a power sharing agreement in Arusha, Tanzania, helping establish democratic institutions (Wittig 2016). In 2005, voters elected Pierre Nkurunziza, a leader within the former Hutu rebel group (turned-political-party) CNDD-FDD, in free and fair elections (Wittig 2016). However, recent events undermine the agreement's initial success.

Reemergence of Violent Conflict

A 2015 political crisis caused the reemergence of conflict in Burundi, risking civil war, and raising new civilian protection challenges. On April 25th, 2015, President Nkurunziza announced his decision to run for a third term in office, breaking the constitutional two-term presidential limit (Bouka 2017). This left the country split between his supporters and opponents. Just two months before the 2015 presidential election, prominent CNDD-FDD members Godefroid Niyombare and Cyrille Ndayirukiye staged an unsuccessful coup (ICG 2017). Although Nkurunziza was re-elected, he began violently targeting any form of political opposition (Bouka 2017).

While 2015 was the tipping point, the Nkurunziza regime had been consolidating its hold on the country since the 2005 election. Concerned with legitimacy, Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD outwardly committed to the rule of law and democracy. Inwardly, however, the regime restricted opposition rights, and physically abused political opponents (Rufyikiri 2017). Nkurunziza's new official party title, "Supreme Eternal Guide," indicates this progression (Moore 2018). The government in Bujumbura insists that human rights are a top priority, but independent investigations suggest otherwise, describing Burundi as a prolific "slaughterhouse of humans" (Al Hussein and Ra'ad 2018; Kaneza and Keaten 2018).

Since the 2015 crisis, human rights violations have become increasingly common. In September, 2017, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry released its report on the state of human rights in Burundi. The report details state-sponsored torture, disappearances, executions, and sexual assault (OHCHR 2017). From 2015 to 2017, thousands of civilians experienced government abuse, with over 1,200 dead (FIDH 2017). Furthermore, over 430,000 had fled Burundi by 2018 (UNHCR 2018). Important to note, conflict in Burundi has remained largely political, rather than ethnic. Vandeginste (2015) attributes this to the ethnic quotas in the military, government mandated by the power sharing agreement. A secondary report issued by the Commission of Inquiry in 2018 noted similar trends of violence and abuse (OHCHR 2018).

2020 Presidential Elections

More recently, a nationwide referendum and announcements from President Nkurunziza have highlighted the potential for increasing violence in 2020. In May, 2018, Burundians voted to alter the constitution, allowing Nkurunziza to extend his term to 2034, and to begin a process to review (and potentially abolish) ethnic quotas in the government (ICG 2018). The vote itself was filled with irregularities, with violence against those either boycotting the referendum or suspected of voting against its provisions (HRW 2018). Surprisingly, Nkurunziza announced his intentions to abdicate the presidential office come 2020, creating a void of uncertainty with the upcoming elections (Economist 2018). This announcement appears a welcome development, but risks either outrage if he reverses his decision (a likely outcome given the referendum, and path to 2015 "2.0"), or a disruption to the current patrimonial system in the country. Analysts emphasize the role of patrimonialism in states like Burundi, and warn of the violent consequences when links between patrons and clients are threatened (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Van de Walle 2001).

Civilian Targeting and the Institutionalization of Violence

Violence in Burundi largely stems from the regime's desire to maintain control, but also involves group endowments and civilian denunciations. Given a culture of impunity, violence against civilians might appear indiscriminate. However, this is only partly true. Key analysts counter suggestions that civilian harm is random and barbaric, arguing instead for a strategic logic of violence (Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Valentino 2005). They find that violence against civilians serves a specific purpose. This is true in Burundi, where civilian targeting is aimed at regime consolidation. However, civilian targeting in Burundi fails to meet Valentino, et al.'s threshold for "mass killing," and is hardly a "final solution." One possible explanation is that the government is pre-emptively "draining the sea," undermining possible rebel support bases, but further explanation is necessary. Here it is useful to consider Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) institutional perspective.

Civilian targeting in Burundi is part of an institutionalized tendency towards violence from political elites. Helmke and Levitsky explain that informal institutions serve to reinforce or undermine formal institutions inside of states, which engage the rule of law. In Burundi, historical cycles of violence help explain the current regime's behavior. After decades of violence, an informal institution has emerged, where security actors prevail, and violence is understood as a political tool to allocate power and resources (Curtis 2013; Vandeginste 2015). With this lurking in the background, it makes sense that Nkurunziza would turn to violence against civilians to consolidate his regime.

Jeremy Weinstein's theory of violence helps account for such cases of indiscriminate harm against civilians. His theory focuses on resource endowments during group formation. Those with greater resources, given other chaotic circumstances, tend to exercise indiscriminate violence more often. These groups, which he terms opportunistic, are concerned with short-term gains, rather than longer-term ideological development (Weinstein 2007). This is characteristic of the Imbonerakure, an armed group in Burundi, as will be demonstrated.

A complementary theoretical tool considers how civilians themselves partake in violence. Drawing from Kalyvas (2006), civilians in Burundi engage in a joint process with armed actors to exchange information for security purposes. Here, the security forces target specific civilians based on this type of information (Trial International 2017; Amnesty International 2015).

Armed Actors

The majority of violence in Burundi stems from the government and armed groups associated with the government. Two of the main actors are the National Intelligence Service (SNR) and the Imbonerakure. The former was previously known as the Documentation Nationale. This agency lacks oversight, reports directly to the president, and is a source of abuse against civilians (HRW 2016b, HRW 2006). The latter is a paramilitary-like group formed out of restless youth and improperly demobilized soldiers (IRIN 2015). Officially the youth wing of the CNDD-FDD, the Imbonerakure zealously support Nkurunziza, act with impunity, and are noted for frequent cases of killing, torture, sexual assault, and plundering among civilian communities (OHCHR 2018).

The opportunist nature of the Imbonerakure stems from a large resource endowment. The government provides weapons, uniforms, and even judicial immunity for members (HRW 2017). Such is their standing, that a representative of the government explained that the Imbonerakure have "not only… the right, but also the obligation" to uphold surveillance and security in the communities where they operate (HRW 2017). Weinstein's opportunistic theory certainly applies here.

Additionally, the group is tasked with reporting suspected political opponents to the security forces, which increases the potential for civilian denunciations. Returning to Kalyvas's work (2006), here civilians become agents of violence in a joint exchange of information for protection.

Civilian Protection Strategies

This section considers three sectors for protection strategy implementation, and then assesses the viability of these strategies. These are: 1) the government, 2) the international community, and 3) civilians themselves.

The Government

The first set of protection strategies and recommendations involves the Burundian government, and prescribes an end to impunity and better training for armed actors. Rather than encouraging violence from the SNR and Imbonerakure, the government must instill a commitment to protect civilians. Although foremost concerned with maintaining domestic power, Nkurunziza also seeks legitimacy with the international community (United Nations 2018). Throughout his presidential tenure, Nkurunziza has attempted to consolidate political power, all the while maintaining the guise of a successful post-war democracy. Even with evidence of human rights violations by the government, Nkurunziza still seeks legitimacy. This perspective is supported by the government's constant responses to NGO and United Nations reports claiming abuse (Kaneza and Keaten 2018; United Nations 2018).

Training armed actors in civilian protection would bring legitimacy to the regime, and have the added benefit of mitigating civilian harm. The Imbonerakure are paramilitary-like, but too close to the government to offer plausible deniability. Forced Imbonerakure disappearances suggest that officials in Bujumbura understand this (IRIN 2017).

To pursue international legitimacy, therefore, it is in the best interests of the government to adopt a policy of civilian protection, and to train its allied armed actors in what such a policy means.

This strategy largely depends on the regime's perception of costs and benefits. Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD's end goal is to maintain domestic power. Since the 2015 coup, the cost of targeting civilians has not undermined its perceived benefits, namely preventing regime change. However, considering the government's efforts to cover up abuse, this cost-benefit relationship may be changing. To ensure legitimacy, it may be in the best interests of the state to adopt a policy of civilian protection. Even if employed for the wrong reasons, i.e. consolidation of an autocratic regime, this could prevent further violence against civilians. By comparison, the Center for Civilians in Conflict notes the situation in Nigeria where fighting Boko Haram is often conducted at the expense of civilians, "rather than with their safety as the goal" (Dietrich 2015, 12). However, new policies aimed at protecting civilians have helped mitigate harm to them (Nagarajan 2017). If applied to Burundi, training the Imbonerakure to avoid civilian harm could ease violence and help end the culture of impunity.

But counter-arguments are compelling. These strategies, while potentially viable, are unlikely to succeed in Burundi for two key reasons: 1) the government no longer holds a monopoly on violence, and 2) it may not want, or be able, to end impunity. In the Weberian sense, to be successful in this ominous way, the state should maintain a monopoly on violence. Although impunity emerged by design from the government, it is now an uncontrollable consequence of the fractured military and the weakness of rule of law (ICG 2017). Furthermore, inaction from international and regional actors may not drive the costs of harming civilians up to a point, to a threshold, where the government would want to end impunity (UNSC 2017). Perhaps Nkurunziza's apparent concern with Burundi's image abroad will offer opportunities to pursue more favorable strategies, especially when connected with mandates of the international community.

The International Community

The next set of protection strategies and recommendations to be considered engage the international community, and revolve around monitoring, advocacy, and peacekeeping. Bringing attention to the crisis in Burundi is an important role that international actors must take to benefit civilian protection. Government-sponsored reports on human rights in Burundi continually suggest little wrongdoing, and even improvement since 2015 (CNIDH 2018). Without externally validated reports documenting cases of abuse in the country, it is unlikely civilian protection will succeed. Such reports are necessary. Keck and Sikkink (1998), in seminal work two decades ago, used the examples of Mexico and Argentina to demonstrate the power of international human rights pressures. They noted a boomerang effect, where domestic governments and their partners only took action after the reporting efforts of external NGOs and INGOs. Although challenging, increased international attention on Burundi will improve the likelihood that Nkurunziza will implement the strategies suggested in the former section.

Another role of the international community involves peacekeeping forces. President Nkurunziza continues to deny access to peacekeepers and regional police forces, citing little need for intervention and the violations of sovereignty that this would entail (McCormick 2016). However, international actors should continue to press for a presence in the country.

It is also important to note that in the event of civil war, a peacekeeping force would be necessary for protection. It is useful here to turn to the lesson of Rwanda. Constantly cited for its failure to prevent genocide, events there eventually did demonstrate that international forces can establish effective civilian safe zones. Kuperman (2000) explained that Hutus generally avoided attacking Tutsis in those few areas where there was a large international presence. He argued that a more robust force could have saved thousands. This argument is consistent with Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon's (2013) more recent findings that stronger peacekeeping forces benefit civilian protection. However, at present strong peacekeeping forces in Burundi would be unlikely given troop commitments elsewhere in Africa. Considering this, non-violent negotiation, which was marginally effective in Rwanda, could also apply to Burundi (see Stein 2014).

The renewed Commission of Inquiry is a positive step in recognizing Burundi's crisis, but the likelihood of intervention should there be civil war is low. Even monitoring efforts have become increasingly difficult. In August, 2016, Burundi rejected access to a UN monitoring taskforce (UNSC 2017). Additionally, independent domestic and international human rights groups have more recently faced expulsion. Ligue Iteka, one of last remaining independent human rights group in Burundi, was banned in 2017, and in December, 2018, the government forced the United Nations Human Rights Office to withdraw (France Diplomatie 2017; Kaneza and Keaten 2018). The situation is 2019 remains tenuous.

International and regional organizations, especially the UN and the African Union, must proactively design multilaterally relevant intervention plans in the event of civil war in Burundi, even if external agents would have limited access. Effective monitoring would have to be stressed as well; this is critical for civilian protection.

Civilians Themselves

The final considerations for civilian protection strategies and recommendations lie with the civilians themselves. Civilian self-protection strategies in Burundi would involve utilizing local organizations to effectively aid those fleeing violence, while practicing neutrality. It is easy to neglect civilians as agents in their own protection, but doing so undermines the potential for effective protection (Barrs 2010). Civilian strategies in Burundi must remain non-violent. Given the repressive nature of the government, and the volatile political and ethnic landscape, protection strategies necessarily revolve around decreasing violent action. Human Rights Watch (2016a) notes that cases where civilians or armed opposition respond violently to the Imbonerakure have only led to worse civilian treatment. In place of violent action, this article recommends two specific strategies: 1) neutrality, and 2) flight, both tactics of autonomy.

Neutrality as a tactic for civilian protection provides an option for Burundians to avoid harm. Neutrality is premised on non-violent, apolitical actors, with mechanisms for self-rule that are complemented by convincing armed actors that targeting the community in question is counterproductive (Kaplan 2017). Tactics of neutrality stem from the concept of autonomous communities, which require high levels of social capital. This theory in practice is demonstrated through Kaplan's analysis of the Peasant Workers Association of the Carare River (ATCC) in Colombia. The ATCC was able to avoid violence by negotiating conditions of neutrality with armed actors from a position of autonomy. They demonstrated investigatory capacity and the ability to clear the "fog of war," while remaining committed to non-violence (Kaplan 2017). Something similar to this neutrality/autonomy strategy might also be possible in Burundi.

Since the early 2000s, many rural communities in East Africa have established local organizations to enhance farm production, which also is key for expanding social capital. Again referencing Colombia, Kaplan (2017) found that social capital is a driver in strategy selection, yet is unlikely to emerge during periods of intense violence. In Burundi,

farming organizations have created social capital within rural communities, but food shortages are wide-spread – with nearly a third of the population (over 3.6 million people) requiring humanitarian aid as of last year (AFP 2018). To cope with this pressure, during the last decade certain of these organizations have focused on better management of crop production, along with strategies for farm dispute resolution (Vervisch and Titeca 2010; Minani, Rurema, and Lebailly 2013). These local organizations offer the social capital necessary to pursue neutrality tactics, as long as the civilians remain committed to such a policy.

Additionally, there are reasonable prospects that well-organized rural communities may be able to convince the Imbonerakure to refrain from violence. Disappearances of witnesses to human rights violations are increasing, even among the Imbonerakure (IRIN 2017). While a culture of impunity remains present in Burundi, the government strongly desires a "clean" image. Therefore, highly visible cases of civilian targeting put perpetrators at risk. This presents an opportunity for such communities to dialogue with armed actors and convince them to show restraint.

In some cases, flight is a better option. Flight is a dispersive protection strategy that is most effective in the face of ideologically genocidal groups. Flight was a common tactic during El Salvador's civil war, where civilians escaped violence by temporarily fleeing their homes (Todd 2010). Kaplan (2017, 58) explains that groups with "strong preferences to target or kill" civilians, yet who also "derive little benefit from civilian support," are considered ideologically genocidal, and that flight strategies therefore will be needed by civilians. Although not necessarily genocidal, the Imbonerakure are characteristically similar to these groups. Such opportunistic actors may not consider potential government reprisals enough to deter violent action. The perceived benefits of targeting civilians may still be deemed to be great; if so, civilians must flee. Given the existing local organizations in rural Burundi, it is reasonable to expect these flight tactics to mitigate civilian harm.

Conclusion: Emphasizing Social Cohesion

In Burundi, while civilian self-protection strategies are more likely to succeed than strategies involving international actors and the government, each is inter-related and each has potential. These can be mutually reinforcing. Training armed actors in civilian protection increases the likelihood of success for civilian self-protection, just as successful civilian self-protection may encourage policies against harm among armed actors. For the international community, monitoring and engagement with local community leaders can help develop self-protection strategies, and can encourage the development of better top-down policies within the government. Although the likelihood of success is not the same for all these strategies, their potentially reinforcing inter-relationship suggests that all must be pursued – especially in light of the upcoming 2020 elections.

For those interested in engaging further with Burundi and promoting civilian protection, there are several key considerations and potential avenues available. First, despite – or perhaps because of – the dip in media coverage, Burundi still requires the attention of scholars and practitioners. Applied anthropologists can play key roles. The most recent iteration of the Global Peace Index (GPI) lists Burundi as a country becoming more peaceful year-over-year (IEP 2019). However, as this article demonstrates, this largely obscures Burundi's troubling reality, emphasizing our need to distinguish between negative and positive peace. As Johan Galtung (2011) reminds, the former relates to the absence of physical violence while the latter relates to active initiatives that promote peaceful conditions. Reported reductions in physical violence have led some journalists and other analysts to turn away from Burundi, using peace indices like the GPI as a rationale. But a focus on positive peace is needed, and with recent reports of continued abuse, it is apparent that Burundi still deserves and requires a great deal of attention.

Second, for the first time since 2015, opposition leaders recently claimed that an armed insurgency may be the only realistic way to combat the regime (Vandeginste 2018). This is troubling news, and suggests a potentially emergent issue for engagement. Although this article has primarily focused on harm perpetrated by the government, insurgent groups (even those deemed "righteous" by the people) often resort to violence against civilians. This trend was earlier noted by Kalyvas elsewhere, and was shown to correlate with denunciations and territorial pressures (2006). With this in mind, engaging Burundian opposition groups today on civilian protection, using a medium like the newly formed National Congress for Freedom (CNL), may serve to limit harm in the near future. Members of the opposition in exile also can help create more accurate accounts of the current on-the-ground situation.

Third, refugees and members of the diaspora can be essential resources. Large numbers of Burundian refugees have fled to places such as Tanzania; they can offer a direct way to begin implementing the necessary groundwork for successful civilian self-protection. Displacement is hugely disruptive, and despite high levels of both overt and structural violence in Burundi, many refugees are seeking a return home (UNHCR 2019). This partially stems from the poor conditions in refugee camps. It also stems from a desire to assist their compatriots back home. As they return, they will again face the risks currently present (with the potential for greater violence in 2020), but also will be able to create opportunities. As such, external and internal specialists cooperating with these populations on civilian protection strategies will prove very important. Since access to Burundi is so limited, interacting with refugees in places like Tanzania is a sensible way for practitioners such as applied anthropologists to help. Building on the work of Kaplan (2017), practitioners should emphasize initiatives that dually improve living conditions and promote social cohesion. This will help current civilians and returnees to focus, together, on protection. There are numerous benefits that come from enhanced social cohesion in a challenging landscape like Burundi.

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