

Burundi Peace Committees: A Model for Reducing Electoral Violence

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Introduction

Burundi has long suffered from violence, especially ethnic-related killings between Hutu and Tutsi. This situation has happened both under dictatorial and democratic dispensations. Transforming destructive relationships between different ethnic groups and preventing ethnic violence is thus fundamental to peace and development at both communal and national levels. This work plays a critical role in preventing electoral violence as it was recently observed in Burundi.

Since 1994, Local Peace Committees (PCs) were created by the Mission for Peace and Reconciliation Under the Cross (MIPAREC) to address this societal need. These committees deal with ethnic violence to prevent the recurrence of the past violence and help the society to move on. Burundi is not the only country where PCs have been used for this same purpose. In Kenya, it was found that during the post-electoral violence of 2007 where over 1000 people were killed, districts that had PCs experienced less violence in comparison to other districts.¹ This further emphasised the importance of building local peacebuilding capacities before violence erupts. In the case of South Africa, PCs were formed in 1992–1994 to facilitate the transition from apartheid to a democratic regime. Regarding Burundi, there are over 400 PC initiatives. PCs are considered as a model of grassroot organization initiated by and made up of volunteers from diverse social and ethnic groups of Burundi, namely Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, displaced persons, demobilized soldiers, freed political prisoners, residents and traditional chiefs. These people are

¹ Wachira, Arendshorst and Charles, 2010.

either victims or survivors of violence, or interested community members passionate about building peaceful environments in their communities. They are guided by shared community values, and committed to peaceful coexistence in their localities through dialogue, reconciliation, healing of memories, unity, peaceful management of conflicts, mediation, solidarity, mutual assistance, early warning responses, promotion of gender, and reconstruction.

Ethnic violence before the coming of democracy in Burundi

The population of Burundi is divided between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Since attaining independence from Belgium in 1962, many episodes of ethnic violence took place between Hutu and Tutsi. For example, the insurrection of 1972 resulted in the death of between 2000 and 3000 Tutsis. The consequence was the massacre of between 1,000,000 to 200,000 Hutus. In 1988 as many as 500 Tutsi and 20,000 Hutu died in ethnic violence. In 1993, the first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was elected. After 100 days in office he was murdered by Tutsi army. Subsequently, the war broke out. Between 1993 and 2005 more than 300,000 Tutsi, Hutu and Twa perished. According to Gahungu Peace Committee member in Kibimba, "People were killed not because of what they did but because of who they were." The violence resulted in widespread mistrust and a sense of insecurity; Hutu feeling unsafe in the face of Tutsi and vice-versa. Arusha peace agreement was signed on August 28, 2000, to end the violence. Parties to the conflict agreed to share power in a democratic process between Hutu and Tutsi but also to two presidential term limits. Elected on the basis of this agreement in 2005 and the constitution crafted thereafter, the government of President Pierre Nkurunziza fostered levels of stability never experienced in the landlocked country for many years. However, this stability was short lived due to a controversial third term for President Nkurunziza in 2015 which became a bone of contention.

Understanding the Election-Related Violence of 2015 -2016

In 1993, the first liberal democratic elections were held and led to the election of President Melchior Ndadaye. It was hoped that the advent of democracy would put an end to the long history of violence which characterised the country since independence. But like in many countries in the Great Lakes region of Africa, principles of democracy have been largely overlooked. This has given way to election-related violence. The price paid by civilians is very high. The killing of the first Hutu President plunged the country into a vicious civil war. Hutu extremists massacred thousands of Tutsi civilians. The Tutsi-dominated army responded by killing hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians. Years of instability followed until 1996, when President Pierre Buyoya, a Tusti, took power for the second time through a coup d'Etat. In August 2000, a peace-deal, agreed to by all but two of Burundi's political groups including the *Front National de Liberation* (FNL), laid out a timetable for the restoration of peace and democracy. After several more years, a cease-fire was signed in 2003 between Buyoya's government and the largest Hutu rebel group – *Conseil National pour la Démocratie et le Développement-Front pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDD-FDD), the current ruling party. In 2005, another Hutu rebel group, the Front for National Liberation (FNL), finally agreed to lay down arms. Elections held in 2005 brought into power the populist government of the CNDD-FDD under the leadership of Pierre Nkurunziza.

While the absence of examples where democracy go to war with each other has become one of the key selling points of democracy in modern days, democracies are going to war with themselves. Burundi is a typical example. Since President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his bid for a third term in 2015 Burundi went to war with itself.

President Nkurunziza was first democratically elected by the parliament (indirect vote) in 2005. In 2010, he was re-elected for the second term by universal direct suffrage. After his two terms in office, the nation looked forward to the first ever peaceful hand over from an elected president to another. This golden opportunity and historical moment was missed. Instead of preparing for a peaceful transfer of power, the first signs of violence began to take place a few years before the end of the second and final term which was due to end in 2015. As is common in the Great Lakes region when political violence is to come, in August 2014, a dozen bodies were found floating in the River Rweru shared between Rwanda and Burundi. Both governments rejected the responsibility for the killings. The hope for a peaceful regime change began to fade away and the fear of being hunted by the past began once again.

On May 5, 2015, six of the seven Judges of the Constitutional Court of Burundi decided that the incumbent President, Nkurunziza, could run for a third term through direct universal suffrage. The decision of the High Court was not unanimous. Judges who objected were threatened. For example, fearing for his life Mr Sylvère Nimpagaritse, the Vice-President of the Constitutional Court who opposed the decision of the Constitutional Court sought refuge in Rwanda. For those who supported the decision, the first term was ‘a special one’ because the President was elected by the Parliament. The bone of contention was the interpretation of the Article 302 of the constitution. It stipulates: “As an exception, the first President of the Country in the post-transition phase is elected by a majority of two thirds of the National Assembly and Senate members sitting together.”²

The decision by the Constitutional Court strengthened the government position to stay in power beyond the two term limits. Using Article 302 of the constitution as evidence, the

² Author’s translation.

government argued that during the first election in 2005, the President was elected indirectly by the Parliament and not by direct universal suffrage required by the Constitution in Article 96.

This Article provides that “The President of the Republic is elected by universal direct suffrage for a mandate of a five-year mandate renewable once.”³

The opposition contended that the third term for the current President was a violation of Article 96 of the Constitution and the 2000 Arusha Peace Agreement. Unlike the Constitution, the Arusha Agreement clearly limits the Presidential terms to two and does not offer any special term. This conflict in the interpretation of the Constitution became a loophole which later led to political violence. I agree with Acemoglu and Robinson that “weak or ineffective institutions perpetuate a system doomed to fail.” This is true not only for Burundi but also the Democratic Republic of Congo and many other countries in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

As anticipated, a new deadly violent conflict broke out in May 2015 after President Nkurunziza was elected for a controversial third term. Unlike the previous conflicts, the levels of violence have been far less than might have been expected. Between May 2015 and May 2016, the United Nations (UN) reported that 1133 people were killed from both Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. Among those killed there were 999 members of the opposition, civil society and civilians opposed to the third term as well as other innocent people and 134 Police and civilians supporting the government. In addition to the killings, in the same period 250,000 people were displaced. Above indicators show that the ethnic factor does not seem to be strong. This is a major shift because historically all major conflicts, including the post-1993 elections in Burundi had a strong ethnic dimension. A number of factors explain this small number of victims and

³ Author’s translation.

limited ethnicity factor. Among them, the role played by PCs long before the violence broke out and during the ongoing conflict.

Peace Committees in Burundi

Peace Committees (PCs) in Burundi are local initiatives born out of the first peace efforts launched in 1994 in Kibimba Commune by Rev. David Niyonzima, then Legal Representative of Quakers church. The initiative received a boost with the involvement of Susan Seitz from the United States of America. Susan was a nurse by profession who came to Kibimba during the height of violence following the killings of President Ndadaye. During the course of her work at Kibimba hospital, she facilitated the process of bringing all parties to the conflict in Kibimba Commune around the table. Her peace initiative received the support of Mathias Ndimurwanko, then Head of the Camp of displaced persons made up of Tutsi. The idea was also welcomed by other community leaders including those from Quakers Church, such as Rev. David Niyonzima, Aloys Ningabira, Domitien Sabongerwa and Rev Elie Nahimana. Interestingly, the peace initiative also received the support of local military Commander, Oscar Nimpagaritse, nicknamed later “Mahoro” (meaning peace) due to his peacebuilding efforts.

The reason to work for peace in Kibimba was due to the need to reconcile Hutu and Tutsi communities and to create an environment where these different ethnic groups can live together in peace and harmony. This was at the time when Hutu lived in bush as internally displaced persons (IDPs) some under the protection of Hutu militia and Tutsi lived in displaced camps guarded by Tutsi army. According to MIPAREC the following situation prevailed:

During the time when Tutsi lived in displaced camps in Gitega, no Hutu was considered innocent. Local or foreign from the community, every Hutu was meant to be killed. Many killings took place even in broad daylight and in the presence of public with the army as accomplice. During the same period, Tutsi who went to the field to get some food suffered the same fate.⁴

For a start, access to either Tutsi or Hutu used to be facilitated by peace activists from the same ethnic group. A meeting of the above leaders and representatives of Hutu and Tutsi communities took place out of which they decided to create a community forum for peace on 6 December 1994. The process was filled with mistrust and it took too many rounds of informal negotiations to reach a point of bringing the leaders together. The forum born out of this process was named “Kibimba Peace Committee”. Thus, “the centre of Kibimba became a place of refuge instead of a place of chaos.”⁵

Elsewhere while mourning his murdered son, the father of President Ndadaye stood for peace and opposed any form of revenge and violence. Upon hearing that his son was killed, Ndadaye Senior told communities in Nyabihanga, the birthplace of President Ndadaye, that: “Revenge has never been a way which leads to peace but forgiveness has always been. That way [violence] was not the best support he needed to counsel him or honour his son and his family. The population should refrain from shedding more blood because [the blood] of his son was enough.”⁶ Subsequent to his advice, the population in Nyabihanga locality always sought peaceful ways of dealing with conflicts between Hutu and Tutsi. Instead of mobilizing for violence, villagers chose to mobilise for peace. These peacemakers managed to advocate against

⁴ MIPAREC, 2015, 14.

⁵ Nakuwundi, 2007, 124.

⁶ Ndadaye Senior, ADD

divisive ideologies which led to conflict in other parts of the country. Sindimwo, Member of the PC in Nyabihanga, said that “the population of that zone remained united though there were serious provocations coming from the army and Tutsi visiting the village from elsewhere.”⁷ Ultimately peacemakers created the Nyabihanga Peace Committee.

There are 400 PCs spread across the country established between 1994-2015 in 11 provinces out of 16 in the country and supported by MIPAREC. By 2015, a sample of 12 PCs has more than 8000 members from different ethnic groups. Participants themselves form a Steering Committee of 12 to 18 members elected democratically for a period varying between 3 to 5 years. Gender is taken into consideration in forming the leadership team. They are also registered by the government as local peacebuilding and development initiatives. They hold regular meetings where they discuss about the situation prevailing in local communities; continue reconciliation efforts and other peacebuilding and development efforts. Members are provided with basic training lasting up to five days on conflict analysis, conflict transformation and non-violence. The curriculum is called “*Ntazibana Zidakubitana Amahembe*” meaning knocking horns. Both the training and the diversity within PCs contribute to transformation within the group. Such transformation goes beyond the group and brings change in the communities. After training and before starting reconciliation sessions, issues of violence and conflict affecting communities are identified. Subsequently, reconciliation sessions are launched. Reconciliation meetings result in many cases of storytelling over killings and destruction of property, forgiveness with the aim of reaching reconciliation and preventing the repetition of violence.

⁷ Sindimwo, ADD

PCs have resolved many conflicts. From 2005 to 2015, the following PCs have resolved 711 conflicts mainly between Hutu and Tutsi: Kayogoro, Makamba, Nyaza-Lac, Itaba, Butanganzwa, Butezi, Ruyigi, Gitega, Nyabihanga, Mutaho, Rutegama and Shombo. Conflicts resolved were killings, land disputes, family disputes and witchcraft issues.

Table I: Number of conflicts resolved between 2005 and 2015 by eleven PCs⁸

Number of peace committees	Total of conflicts dealt by the peace committees	Conflicts resolved	Conflicts partly resolved	Pending conflict or being dealt with	Unresolved conflicts
11	711	337	109	195	70

Discussions and Trainings

PCs in Burundi were initiated in 1994 to deal with the ethnic violence between Hutu and Tutsi, and to prevent the recurrence of such violence which disfigured the face of communities and the country. Toward this end, PCs employ many approaches of conflict transformation and violence prevention. Generally, the process starts with training by using the “*Ntazibana zidakubitana Amahembe*” curriculum. This training on non-violence, conflict transformation and reconciliation plays an important role as the first step toward reconciliation. Among other reasons, training brings participants from different ethnic groups and backgrounds. The

⁸ MIPAREC, 2015.

experience from Makamba shows that one of their trainings included not only Hutu and Tutsi, but also administrators, local chiefs and soldiers. Because of diversity and safety which the forum offers, different perspectives, which could not be shared in other settings, are heard, as the respondent from Shombo said. The fact that participants share their perspectives, they are able to learn from one another. Such an opportunity could hardly be found in other settings because of the high level of mistrust between Hutu and Tutsi during the time of conflict.

Training became a breeding ground for PCs, another starting point for the journey to reconciliation for many. The beginning of these trainings presented some challenges. The experience of the 12 participants from Ruhororo shows that the process of conflict transformation is complex, and the road is not smooth. During the war, on their way to the training from their village, Hutu and Tutsi participants from Ruhororo did not trust each other. Consequently, they could not share seats on the same bus. Change came about on the third and last day of the training. As trust grew, they decided to form a PC in their village. When the 2015 electoral violence broke out in Burundi, Ruhororo youth did not join armed groups. PC in Ruhororo mobilized young people and shielded them away by involving them in peace-related activities which were already ongoing. Thus, peacebuilding activities played a useful role in preventing electoral violence in that community. This experience demonstrates that even the most destructive relations can be turned into constructive relationships. The first step is to build trust.

With the establishment of PCs comes an opportunity for reconciliation sessions. Between 2005 and 2015, 11 PCs addressed 156 violent conflicts. Some conflicts involved heinous acts of violence. Two of these cases failed as presented in Table I (above). Failure was partly due to unhealed psychological wounds and lack of trust. Healing is central to peacebuilding and

breaking the cycle of violence. A lot of work goes into preparation of reconciliation sessions, including individual counseling and home visitation by members of PCs in order to create friendships and to build trust before starting the process. A transformed nation is aware that “if you do not share your healing with the wounded, the wounded will share their wounds with you.” As a matter of fact, people move from being instruments of violence to being instruments of violence prevention.

Reconciliation contributes to change not only at personal level but also at community and national levels. Examples abound. The introduction of PCs in Burundian schools affected by ethnic conflicts also added value to violence prevention. At Marumane Primary School in Rutegama, for example, Hutu and Tutsi children are able to play together. Upon seeing the change, parents also became peacemakers in the community. Elsewhere in Gitega, victims (Tutsi) visited offenders (Hutu) in Gitega prison. This had far reaching implications for prevention of revenge. Although initially offenders refused the meeting, through advocacy, they finally accepted to welcome their accusers. When victims arrived with food, offenders refused to eat it because they suspected it was poisoned. Because victims forgave them, some of them were released. After their release, they gave up on revenge.

The change also affected soldiers. During armed conflicts, soldiers and their military bases played a critical role in escalating ethnic violence. Through training on peacemaking, some soldiers were transformed. For example, in Kabungere, transformed soldiers became forces for peace. Through advocacy, some military bases were relocated or transformed. For example, when a Tutsi soldier raped a Hutu girl, a PC in Nyarurambi successfully advocated for the removal of the military base from the community. The administrator’s intervention led to the relocation of the military base.

Change came by other means as well. Members of PCs spread the message through successful storytelling, sports events, inter-ethnic marriages, and by turning destructive expressions into jokes. For example, “You hid me that you hate me and I also hid you that I know it.” While this expression during the war was used to prepare for revenge and killings, it was turned into a joke for peace. Another example, referring to someone as Hutu or Tutsi does not hurt people like it did before. Unlike in Rwanda where people are not allowed to talk about ethnicity, in Burundi people openly talk about it. Such expressions were used to cause ethnic violence during war time but over the time became harmless. Besides, many people were reconciled through income-generating activities. For example, reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi women happened through the production of mats in Kibimba, the birthplace of PCs. Reconciliation was also promoted via community development, as seen in the building of houses for victims. It is true that the significance of reconciliation “is not only an end of violence or conflict, but also the construction of a new relationship among parties.”⁹ In many communities across the country favorable conditions for the reintegration of various social groups were created because of reconciliation.

The work of PCs does not only focus on Hutu-Tutsi ethnic conflict. It also deals with other issues, such as land disputes. For example, in Makamba and Nyanza-Lac, PCs mediated over multiple layers of land disputes between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Niyonzima is right in saying that “in restoring relationships the whole village must be involved.”¹⁰ The strength of these approaches rests in the involvement of people from different backgrounds including ex-combatants. Women in particular play a critical role. They provide leadership on truth, justice and love. Love is especially important, because “not loving is hating and hating is killing.”

⁹ Lederach, 1997, 51.

¹⁰ Niyonzima, 2007, 123.

From Kibimba in 1994, PCs spread to 11 out of the 16 provinces of the country. Change brought about by PCs reached the national level. Through this national network, they set up an early warning system. The system was particularly very useful when election-related violence broke out in 2015. For example, in 2015, Ntakirutimana prevented ethnic killings in his Gitega community by using rumour control mechanism. He dispelled rumours that there was a Hutu businessman who hide machetes in his store in order to kill Tutsi. After investigation by Gitega PC, the information was found to be false. Thus, many lives were spared. The work of PCs to collect security information helps people to stay safe by avoiding dangerous areas and acting before violence erupts.

Members of PCs vow “*plus jamais ça*” (never again) should ethnic violence consume the Burundian society. The conclusion by Hoffman is true for Burundi: “The capacity that the country has acquired can help measure the successful conflict prevention of the country.”¹¹ Since election-related violence broke out in 2015, the levels of violence are far less than they would have been expected, and the ethnic factor is weak despite calls from political leaders for people to see the conflict as an ethnic one. Now, conflict is relatively obvious and separation between Hutu or Tutsi and the problem is clear than before. As Rwaswa, a former Hutu rebel leader, argues, the problem today is not ethnicity but rather a political one.¹² This change did not come overnight or by itself. PCs played an important role in transforming destructive ethnic relationships long before the violence broke out. This drew the attention of members of Parliament. In 2015, PCs in Burundi shared their experiences with members of the Burundian Parliament.¹³ As Regina, PC member from Ruyigi once said: “During our meeting, members of

¹¹ Hoffman, 2014.

¹² Afrique, Jeune, 2016.

¹³ Four recorded personal comments.

Parliament wondered, how did you do it? This was because they were amazed by the transformation brought about by Peace Committees' work across the land." According to Juvenal, a PC member from Ruyigi also, how it happens is that "when I get peace in my heart after reconciliation, I share with people from my ethnic group. The victim also does the same." Sinza, another PC member from Ruyigi, provided the following example, "at school, children from reconciled people play together and seat together." Playing together and seating together is better for electoral violence prevention.

Conclusion

There are currently 400 PCs modeled by MIPAREC in Burundi. They aim to transform conflict and prevent the recurrence of ethnic violence. With this role, they have directly and indirectly contributed to preventing ethnic-related killings in the wake of the current conflict caused by the controversial third term of President Nkurunziza in 2015. Experience shows that PCs have successfully resolved many ethnic-related cases they dealt with between 1994 and 2015, and transformed many destructive relationships between Hutu and Tutsi. Mobilised around the message of "*plus jamais ça*," they have also promoted peace in numerous communities through various strategies, including reconciliation sessions and income generating activities, community development projects, and advocacy. While not being the only key factor, this effort has contributed to the prevention of electoral violence. Hence, compared to 1993 post-election violence, the levels of killings were less in 2015 electoral-related violence and surprisingly lower than in all past major ethnic conflicts in the post-independence history of Burundi.

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