Ethnicity and political violence in Africa: The challenge to the Burundi state

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Abstract

This paper contributes to debates on the crisis of the African state, particularly the challenge posed by the rent-seeking elite, ethnicity and political violence. In most accounts, Burundi's persistent civil war fits contemporary discourse of the failed neo-patrimonial state in which opportunistic elites mobilize ethnicity for economic gain. Drawing on recent theorising on the politicization of identities and their intersection with state formation, the paper examines historically the development of ethnic consciousness and its links to the Burundi state. Ethnicity, it contends, has been the central organizing principle of the modern Burundi state with its successive policies of differentiation and exclusion. Throughout its post-colonial history, the Burundi state has not been a fully functioning sovereign state along the lines of its western counterparts. Yet, its citizens, irrespective of their ethnic affiliation, have not contested its territorial integrity. Instead the conflict reflects contested claims for enrichment, representation and security as expected from a model state. The on-going violence is attributed to an increasingly factionalised political elite, based on the multiple cleavages in Burundi society, who mobilize ethnicity in their struggle for control of the state. Recent peace negotiations, aimed at correcting ethnic imbalance through power sharing and reform of the institutions of governance are unlikely to resolve the political crisis as they fail to move beyond a methodological pre-occupation with ethnic identities and address the complex social reality of Burundi society and to include the people of Burundi as part of a broader non-ethnicized political community, a prerequisite for a stable pluralistic democracy.
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Introduction

The small central African state of Burundi represents one of the few nation–states in Africa that, from the outset, possessed some of the basic elements for national unity in the post-colonial period. Unlike the majority of modern African states, it was a political and geographical entity in the pre-colonial period, and its people share a common socio-cultural and linguistic heritage. Since independence, however, Burundi has been highly unstable, with six governments between 1962 and 1966, the abolition of the monarchy (1966), four successful *coup d'états* (1965, 1976, 1987 and 1996), and the assassination of its first democratically elected president, Melchoir Ndadaye, in October 1993. Moreover, like its neighbour Rwanda, Burundi has witnessed violence of genocidal proportions; an estimated 200,000 people were killed in 1972 and a further 20,000 in August 1988. Between 1993 and 2000 civil warfare killed a further 200,000 people and forced over 350,000 into exile (Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, 2000; International Crisis Group [ICG], 1998). Insurgency attacks by rebel movements and reprisals by the military displaced more than one million people and created a climate of fear and impunity. Despite the signing of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in August 2000, the establishment of a power-sharing transitional government in 2001 and the instalment of another democratically elected government after elections in June and July 2005, Burundi continues to exist in an in-between state, popularly termed 'no peace no war'.

This paper challenges two dominant discourses concerning warfare in Burundi. Firstly, that popularized by the media and policy makers, and which portrays the violence simply as the natural outcome of age-old enmity or 'tribalism' between the Hutu and Tutsi population.[1] While there is no doubt that the violence is manifested in predominantly ethnic terms, this paper argues against the simplification and de-contextualization of the ethnic narrative, and, instead, tries to unpack the trajectory by which 'ethnic' difference' has seemingly become a major de-stabilizing force in post-colonial Burundi. Drawing on recent debates on the conceptualization of political identities and their relationship to the modern African state, the paper argues that ethnic identity, though positioned as one of a range of identities that Burundians deploy in political contestations, has been, since the colonial period, an essential component of statecraft, and ethnic violence the main route for settling political difference.

Secondly, this paper questions the discourse that labels Burundi a 'failed state', understood as one that has lost its capacity to deliver welfare services to its citizens; to provide security because of the loss of its monopoly on violence, as well as being undemocratic (Pax Christi Netherlands, 2005). Proponents of the 'failed states' thesis argue that state capacity and effectiveness have been undermined by internecine violence, sometimes deliberate, and the exigencies of a neo-patrimonial and a rapacious political elite (Bayart, 1993; Bayart et al., 1999; Reno, 2002). Neo-patrimonialism, or the distribution of state funds through patronage, is applied almost universally to explain conflict in Africa (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Ndikumana, 1998; Nkurunziza & Ngaruko, 2002; Reno, 2000, 2002). Policymakers at the Bretton Woods institutions and some western governments have placed the blame for ineffective neo-liberal

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[1] Hutu, Tutsi and Twa are popular abbreviations of the Kirundi names. The correct terms are Bahutu (pl) Muhutu (sl), Batutsi (pl) Mututsi (sl), Batwa (pl) Mutwa (sl) and the nation, Burundi (pl) and Murundi (sl). This paper uses the popular terms but in extracts from scholars from the region and documentations from the Peace negotiations the correct terminology is left unchanged.