

A different liberation is needed in Burundi

I have been contemplating about liberation in Burundi. So far, I have come to the realization that it is easy to define what you are fighting for: freedom. However, it is much more difficult to define what freedom is or to describe the multilayered processes leading to freedom. Freedom is much more difficult to conceptualize in ways that take into account the constraints and realities of the moment. More directly, it is difficult to conceive freedom within a neocolonial context. Kwame Nkrumah said: "A state in the grip of neocolonialism is not a master of its own destiny".

Neocolonialism in Burundi manifests itself as much in its internal contradictions – and attendant conflicts – as in its relations with the outside world. These internal conflicts denote first and foremost the elite's inability to define a vision – or purpose – that prioritizes the needs of the various socio-economic components of the country.

The elites' political differences were subordinated to their ethnic differences. They reduced Burundian society to groups that are prepared to fight each other and then cultivated this instinct within the people. Any other group formation that was not premised on the urge to fight was relegated to subordinate status in the Burundian body politic. This is the height of political discourse in the country. Since Rwagasore's death, there has never been a movement in Burundi to reorient the structure of group formation for a purpose that is greater than this instinct to fight. In fact, anyone who has sought to rearrange this mental furniture of the Burundian elite has done so at greater personal risk. Indeed, not many in Burundi think that such a figure is about to appear on the political scene in the near future.

Worryingly, what was sold to Burundians as a solution for this structural dysfunction only fortified the political ground. The unexamined acceptance of the multiparty system, as an essential component of democracy, by African elites in general, and more specifically by Burundian elites, left little or no room to a thorough analysis of its implications. The analysis would have emphasized the significance of addressing the pressing challenges of the moment as the core business of the state and the substance of any form of democratic rule, whether multiparty democracy or otherwise.

Following the collapse of the Soviet empire, many countries in Africa “had no choice” but to (re)introduce the multiparty democracy system, yielding to Western pressures which sought to impose a certain model of governance.

Alas, without substantive debate on the “challenges of the moment” a populist agenda that had at its core the exploitation of Burundi’s ethnic composition and bloody past emerged: using the people as ransom for elite bargains and threatening to unleash them on “opponents”. Such incitement constituted political dialogue for much of post-colonial Burundi.

In practice, the elite with the most people under its capture would declare that they are overseeing a system of democratic rule. They would use this “legitimacy” to dole out opportunities to those who agreed that indeed it is such and to punish those who disagreed.

This logic ruled the roost, regardless of the ethnic group that believed itself to be in power. However, whether it was those enjoying the carrots or those suffering the stick, few dared to mention the structural dysfunction. Indeed, the satisfaction and the hunger, respectively, conditioned our people not to see that the predicament they found themselves in was merely a consequence of a much deeper challenge.

This deficiency, led to a culture of confrontational politics based on ethnic identities or political affiliations where each party intended to capture or keep power by force and share the resulting meager dividends to a small minority of its supporters.

The Arusha accords, despite promoting good governance and consensual politics on paper – including attempts to address the ethnic component of the conflict by introducing quotas in specific public institutions – failed to rise to the occasion, to nudge the structural dysfunction. On the contrary, it perpetrated the elite logic of the unexamined acceptance of multiparty democracy. The violence that resulted was a predictable outcome. So is the runaway corruption.

While the current Burundian government is plundering resources, allowing nepotism, patronage and tribalism to flourish, the opposition is reduced to counting the dead, the disappeared and all the victims of the horrific government's crimes that stem from a deep crisis of values and the aforementioned inability to conceive a national purpose.

In short, to paraphrase Father Adrien Ntabona, acculturation in the sense of adopting foreign concepts without any consideration to socio-economic and historical contexts, both a direct consequence of colonialism and a necessary conveyor belt for neo-colonialism, accompanied by a loss of indigenous moral references, gives rise to a "criminogenic society." In such an environment, the society becomes desensitized to the worst crimes, with the main preoccupation of the oppressed getting reduced to mere survival. The oppressor's is self-aggrandizement by the ability to induce pain and suffering without any mitigating factor. Such a society promotes crime and suppresses virtue.

Given the challenges we, Burundians face, liberation is a second quest for independence. A credible opposition must go beyond denunciation and present an alternative whose

imagination goes beyond what has been tabled since 1962, the day of "independence." Such imagination must transcend the desire to hold the people of Burundi in captivity in the name of multiparty democracy. It must concern itself with the most pressing challenges of the moment as understood by the Burundian people.

A general economic policy that allows us to judge and gauge priorities must be the new ideological orientation whether for those in power or those in opposition. Only this way shall a credible political entity emerge in Burundi, with serving the people being the primary political pursuit.

Liberation in the Burundian context is the adaptation of the term "democracy" to contextual and local realities. It must stop limiting itself to civil liberties dear to the elites and address in priority the needs of the average citizen. Such an approach will reorient the national purpose beyond the capture of people to introduce substance in Burundian politics.