

Arusha ethnic quotas were poor antidote for the wrong diagnosis. Here's why

President Peter Nkurunziza's obsession to stand for a third term in May 2015 despite strong popular mobilization against his project and the previous failure to amend the constitution sealed the fate of the Arusha Peace Agreement that was signed in August 2000 Under the patronage of Nelson Mandela. But the peace agreement was always about shoving the dirt under the rag. It was meant to suffer stillbirth and it was a miracle that it lived for 10 years if we count from the time of the promulgation of the constitution that emanated from it and whose blatant violation by Nkurunziza's insistence to run for another term lifted the rag on Burundi's uneasy peace.

The first to feel the burn were the former president and vice-president, the very people who had handed over power to Nkurunziza. They were imprisoned on concocted charges, tortured, and accused of "endangering state security." But they were not alone. For a period of ten years leading to the crisis in 2015 hundreds of executions were carried out against Nkurunziza's real and perceived opponents. During the ten years property, mainly land, belonging mostly but not exclusively to the Tutsi were confiscated in complete violation of the recommendations of the Arusha agreement, particularly with regard to property and land issues. In the lead up to the 2010 general elections supporters of Agathon Rwasas Hutu-dominated FNL political party became open targets of violence. This was intensified through systematic elimination code named operation "Safisha" (wash, from Swahili). Operation Safisha began immediately after the 2010 elections that Nkurunziza won and whose results were rejected by almost the entire opposition due to massive fraud. Nkurunziza also purged malcontents from his own party; they

were either killed, jailed or exiled. So, in some ways it was almost equal opportunity political violence.

The list of violations of the Arusha Accord is long. If the purpose of Arusha ethnic quotas was to guarantee the security and protection of the rights of the minority groups – in the context of majority rule – while opening political space for the Hutu elites who were disgruntled by 30 years of ethno-regionalist minority rule that discriminated against them, then Arusha failed miserably.

For one thing, it was premised on the idea that Tutsi officials in their capacities would protect the interests of their kin and that the Hutus would no longer face the wrath of security forces which were formerly dominated by the Tutsis. The logic of ethnic representation was allowed to triumph despite evidence of its flawed application in as far as they represent interests beyond those that concern their own as ethnic entrepreneurs.

Neither did the minority Tutsi nor the majority Hutu could find reprieve in the Arusha agreement. On the contrary, in addition to having their properties confiscated, hate speech was directed to all Tutsis as well as threats of physical violence. Hutus were not spared. Those who didn't want to associate themselves with the increasingly violent state were portrayed as "traitors of the Hutu cause." These accusations were normalized to the extent that by the time of the crisis in 2015 Tutsis were "naturally" enemies of the state and Hutus who weren't enthusiastic about the direction the country was taking were suspects in the eyes of the state.

Accordingly, only the ethnic entrepreneurship phenomenon explains why despite this self-inflicted damage cited above, CNDD-FDD always found a willing partner with whom to form a government. In other words, it would begrudgingly search and find those to enter in alliance with in a show of pretense that it was abiding to the quota requirements of the Arusha

Agreement. For whom was this show intended, one wondered.

[A colleague on this platform once referred to the phenomenon as the tendency to perform to the galleries.](#) Similarly, Nkurunziza understood that he could respect the form of the Arusha agreement without ever having to consider its substance.

On the surface, Nkurunziza was implementing the Arusha Agreement that had brought an end to a decade of civil war which claimed more than 300,000 civilians and caused the exile and internal displacement of nearly 500,000. In practice, he was always preparing for another cycle that began in earnest when he got to power and was only intensified by the crackdown on real and perceived opponents in 2015 that claimed thousands of lives and once again exiled more than 300,000 Burundians. The repression encountered minimal resistance because the checks from the Arusha Agreement couldn't stand up to the violence and the military coup that attempted to stop the slaughter was quashed in a matter of hours.

In short, it would be easier and tempting to analyze the events of 2015 as the starting point of the current crisis rather than as a logical continuation of the series of events cited above and which challenge the very idea that these agreements were ever a success story. At most, they were like a respite offered to a population bruised by a decade of civil war and decades of intermittent massacres and genocides between the main categories of the population as defined as ethnic groupings.

Like most imported solutions for Africa, the dominant view is that it is not the proposed solution that was a problem, rather the people responsible for implementing it. To the extent that these people were the belligerents, it is difficult to see who, other than those who clashed, could pretend to administer the cure. Moreover knowing what ideologies drove the belligerents, the solution could only be

modeled on their definition of the Burundian problem and it is perhaps at this level that the error must be sought.

Article 4 of the Protocol I of the agreement defines the nature of the conflict in these terms:

With regard to the nature of the Burundi conflict, the Parties recognize that:

(a) The conflict is fundamentally political, with extremely important ethnic dimensions;

(b) It stems from a struggle by the political class to accede to and/or remain in power.

If the protagonists had been sincere, they would have recognized that the struggles of the political elite to access and/or remain in power by exploiting ethnicity was and remains the fundamental problem.

It cannot be denied that years of suffering have imprinted certain reflexes in our collective memories. But history is marked by undeniable facts which demonstrate that the Burundian population is not as a whole frozen in predetermined patterns based on ethnic considerations.

For instance, during the struggle for independence, Prince Louis Rwagasore, knew how to gather support across all social, regional, "ethnic", religious partitions that the colonial administration had erected. Prince Rwagasore was endowed with the qualities of a statesman and took advantage of his princely aura and his proximity to the King, who was revered by Burundians and the only source of legitimate power. Even years after his death, the massacres and genocides targeting one group or another were never the results of spontaneous actions by the Burundi population. Each of the most tragic episodes in our history was preceded by ethnic propaganda, hate speech, constant and assiduous campaigns of incitement on the danger imposed by the "other," who was defined as an enemy

to be defeated and against whom it was necessary to take action by carrying out preventive attacks.

Neither of the two genocides committed in Burundi in 1972 against the Hutus and in 1993 against the Tutsis was committed without the preparation, organization, propaganda, participation of administrative officials and sometimes threats made against those who were reluctant to attack their neighbors. But even then, countless witnesses and survivors would testify to how courageous and upright neighbors or unknown Samaritans stood up against the prevailing madness and saved people from other ethnic groups from the slaughter.

In other words, the ethnic dimensions of the conflict as described in Arusha are only consequences of identifiable and preventable acts of certain leaders who mobilize on identity issues because they cannot mobilize on policy – as if groups defined as ethnic are monolithic entities dominated by a single thought and common interests. This ought to be offensive to the electorate.

To dignify the electorate by redefining the problem is to revitalize the Burundian—and hopefully African—identity as taking precedence over clannish, regional, religious, “ethnic”, and other affiliations. It’s the quest for citizenship that would retrace us to the ideals of conscientious pan-African elites in the mold of Louis Rwagasore, Julius Nyerere and Lumumba whose close collaboration attracted the wrath of the colonial powers.

After the signing of the Arusha Accords, a great statesman of this region had these observations of the protagonists (Burundian elites): “I have seen those who claim to defend the Tutsis and I have seen those who claim to defend the Hutus. But I haven’t seen anyone defending Burundi.”