

# Burundi Elections: Why Rwasa is the lesser of two evils

This morning Burundians gathered to vote for their next president, members of parliament, and other local-level leaders who will represent them for the next seven years. The elections are held after five years of bloody and uninterrupted repression that forced thousands to flee the country and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. President Peter Nkurunziza is not running. However, he has ensured that his political party enjoy the upper hand of campaigning in an environment of intimidation and lack of transparency around the electoral process. Plus, the repression that was unleashed on the main opposition political party to intimidate its supporters and forcing them to either vote for the incumbent or stay away on the election day.

The question of term limits which constituted the most contentious issue in the lead-up to the electoral crisis in 2015 is now out of the way, and CNDD-FDD has designated Evariste Ndayishimiye as the torch-bearer or torchbearer against grassroots campaigning maestro Agathon Rwasa who is running on the CNL (National Congress for Freedom) ticket. The incumbent party claims to run on the promise of “change and continuity” while the main opposition has promised a “New Burundi”. In other words, the protagonists agree on the need for a change.

However, the nature and substance of that change define the boundary. A closer reading of CNDD-FDD’s view of change is that it ought to be incremental and built on Nkurunziza’s “achievements.” On the contrary, CNL seeks a fundamental change, which is subtly premised on the observation that Nkurunziza’s reign didn’t achieve anything worthy of retaining and building upon. In other words, CNL considers CNDD-FDD’s claim as mythical. However, none is to say that a myth cannot

be a rallying point for forging an imagination and ideology or manifesto around which mobilization can be premised. The fact that it is not grounded in reality does not make it useless, which is the power of mythology.

Consequently, the strategy of the ruling party has involved conjuring up allied parties whose electoral potential or real existence on the ground is challenging to assess beyond the few individuals who represent them on paper. They fit the definition of the so-called "briefcase" political parties. They claim loyalty to Ndayishimiye.

On the other hand, a protest and grassroots movement has emerged around Burundi's veteran political opponent, Rwaso. The movement kept growing since 2015 as the socioeconomic situation deteriorated further and the repression piled up victims.

Behind Ndayishimiye, therefore, is a system that is armed with a repressive apparatus whose deadly efficiency has proven itself over the past 5 years and which continues to kill, maim, rape, exile and imprison; one that has benefited from international indifference for the suffering of Burundians and is ready to ensure that its candidate wins at any cost.

There is something to be said about the relentlessness of an individual who, despite his troubled past and questionable political choices in the past 20 years, has unflinchingly stared down this monstrous establishment. Moreover, his charisma and courage have endeared him to a large section Burundians and earned him credibility as someone who genuinely yearns for a meaningful change in Burundi. Indeed, his political capital has continued to grow despite a challenging environment which explains why his party can impose and present itself as a force to reckon with as the only popularly avowed alternative to the current status quo.

What's at stake in this election is also about the values that

the two top candidates represent. Rwaswa surprised many when he campaigned on the idea of a united Burundi "Uburundi bw bose" where even those who the ruling party has castigated as enemies of the country, the refugees scattered in the neighbourhood and beyond, would feel secure to return home to rebuild their country. While it remains to be seen whether this discourse reflects an ideological shift on his part or whether, ultimately, in the current circumstances, the need to secure the widest internal, regional and international support is the driver that pushes him towards such unifying stance. In other words, were he to win the election, it would be interesting to see how this rhetoric of unity matches the reality of policy actions. Rwaswa is often dismissed for his criminal past. However, if one is justified to cast doubts on Rwaswa's sincerity due to his past criminal record, then the criminal record of CNDD-FDD is the past, present, and likely the future.

Ndayishimiye, unlike Rwaswa, has been unable to muster the transcendent rhetoric that suggests that the criminality of CNDD-FDD will be left in the past. Otherwise, he wouldn't try to justify it by christening CNDD-FDD's crimes "learning by doing." Surely, Burundians are tired of being subjects or guinea pigs of CNDD-FDD's criminal experiments.

To be fair, Ndayishimiye represents the rise of a moderate force within the ruling party whose moderation is driven by the awareness of the prevailing dire economic situation and international isolation that the country finds itself in as a result of Nkurunziza's intransigence. It is therefore significant that Ndayishimiye emerged as a consensus choice of this moderate wing against Nkurunziza's preference for Pascal Nyabenda, the speaker of the national assembly who would have represented continuity from the perspective of radical intransigence.

Ndayishimiye emerged over Nkurunziza's choice because as a "historical" of the FDD rebellion he remained part of the

small clique of ex-FDD generals that, along with Nkurunziza, call the shots. In addition to these credentials, he is one of the few whose name does not appear on international lists implicating senior officials of CNDD-FDD of having committed crimes since it came to power in 2005.

However, it would be naïve to claim that Nkurunziza's wing of the party has been defeated. It has merely lost territory and retreated with the hope to fight another day. As a result, they will be watching Ndayishimiye closely hoping that he falters and hands them a comeback. Similarly, Ndayishimiye will seek to appease them so as to find his footing. In other words, if he is to win the election, his leadership is expected to be straight-jacketed within the contours of the broad interests of the ruling party, including satisfying the demands of this radical wing.

Ndayishimiye has already demonstrated this political dexterity of pandering to some forces within his party. Initially, CNDD-FDD nominated for the parliamentary election politicians who kept a distance from hate speech and repression over the past five years of Nkurunziza's rule – the moderates. However, when faced with the opposition's energized mobilization and the prospect of losing, the party has once again turned to hardliners. Since there is no record of him denouncing this move, then it is safe to say that Ndayishimiye consented to it for his own political survival.

Since those changes, the national electoral commission refused to publish voter lists. Neither did it finalize the distribution of voter cards; it also remained silent in the face of protests by the main opposition party against the removal of their agents from lists of those to monitor polling stations, which will make their task of verification and counting of votes difficult, if not impossible. Amidst this silence, the police and Imbonerakure militiamen affiliated with the ruling party have resumed their chase for CNL supporters (the army was being deployed across the country and

especially around polling centres in Bujumbura).

If the ruling party had been serious about change, then this shift towards moderation was a significant signal towards that aim. However, the decision to empower the radical wing as well as the repression against the opposition were indicators of the likelihood that the status quo will remain and prevail over Ndayishimiye since he would frequently need to appease them for his political survival.

These two factors are also the key indicator that CNDD-FDD will cling to power regardless of what Burundians do with their vote and the greatest signal that the crisis will worsen unless Rwaswa concedes even if/when he believes that he has won the majority of the votes. In other words, all indications suggest that real-change alternative in Burundi will not be possible as a result of the ballot box. However, should Rwaswa win and choose to defend the decision of the Burundian people by all means at his disposal against a heavily armed oppressive machinery, then the key to change lies with those moderate elements within the ruling party as well as in the army in as far as they would be willing to change allegiance to the opposition and resist orders to crash protesters who will come out in heavy numbers should the charismatic leader, Rwaswa, order them to do so.