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Burundi Is Trying to Come In From the Cold

Filip Reyntjens | Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021

On July 1, Rwandan Prime Minister Edouard Ngirente visited Burundi to mark the country's Independence Day—the first high-level visit between the two neighbors in years. Apparently seeking to turn the page on years of sometimes violent tensions, Ngirente said, “This is the right time for Burundi and Rwanda to build on our existing strong foundation of historical and cultural linkages in order to achieve prosperity and development.” Burundian President Evariste Ndayishimiye issued a similarly forward-looking statement in response (<https://allafrica.com/stories/202107020178.html>): “Let us leave the past behind, and open a new chapter.”



Burundian President Evariste Ndayishimiye is inaugurated in Gitega, Burundi, June 18, 2020 (AP photo by Berthier Mugiraneza).

Only a year ago, few observers of the region would have thought such a visit possible. Burundi's relations with neighbors like Rwanda (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/16624/burundi-rwanda-spat-stokes-fear-of-revived-ethnic-tensions>), not to mention the international donor community, had been tense since 2015, when then-President Pierre Nkurunziza ran for a third, unconstitutional term in office (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15700/burundi-tensions-rise-after-court-backs-president-s-third-term-bid>) in that year's elections. Street protests broke out in the largest city, Bujumbura, which was the capital at the time, and an attempted coup by the army was narrowly defeated. Dozens of people were killed in the unrest, with hundreds more wounded or arrested. More than 300,000 people fled the country, mainly to neighboring Tanzania and Rwanda. When the African Union, the United Nations and the European Union attempted to mediate, Nkurunziza's regime responded with contempt. Ultimately, election results showed Nkurunziza taking almost 70 percent of the vote amid an opposition boycott, handing him his third five-year term, while the ruling party secured overwhelming majorities in both houses of parliament. In the wake of the political crisis, the U.S. and EU imposed sanctions on Burundian officials (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-burundi-politics-eu/eu-to-impose-sanctions-on-four-burundi-officials-close-to-president-idUKKCN0RS1T020150928>).

Faced with what it perceived as international hostility, the regime adopted an isolationist stance. It vehemently opposed a decision by the AU in December 2015 to deploy peacekeepers (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/17585/african-union-intervention-could-do-more-harm-than-good-in-burundi>) to Burundi, forcing the AU to back down (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35462079>). After diplomatic talks failed to make progress, the EU in March 2016 suspended direct financial support to Burundian authorities. The government “took note” of the sanctions (<https://www.burundi-forum.org/3988/communique-du-gouvernement-sur-la-declaration-du-14-mars-2016-par-l-union/>), which it said “risked encouraging terrorists who could interpret it as a reward for their criminal enterprise.”

Despite the fact that the sanctions negatively affected Burundi's already vulnerable economy, the Nkurunziza regime didn't budge from its defiant stance. In April 2016, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court announced the opening of a preliminary investigation into whether crimes against humanity were committed during the previous year's crisis. Burundi's government responded in October 2016 by announcing its withdrawal from the ICC. In March 2019, the U.N. closed its human rights office in Burundi (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-rights/burundi-forces-united-nations-to-shut-human-rights-office-u-n-idUSKCN1QM10M>) at the insistence of the government, which claimed that the country had made enough progress on human rights that the office was no longer necessary.

By this time, Burundi had burned nearly all its bridges with its foreign partners, a loss that was only partially compensated by continued diplomatic support from China and Russia. At the regional level, Tanzania remained a loyal ally, but relations with Rwanda were hostile. Both sides accused the other of supporting rebel forces in each other's countries, which they indeed did. Cross-border trade between the two came to a virtual standstill, while the closure of the Uganda-Rwanda border since 2019 also negatively impacted Burundi, as part of its imports transited through Rwanda.

Just one year into his term in office, Ndayishimiye seems to have convinced a reluctant political class to open up Burundi to both the world and the region.

After five years of a costly isolationist policy—albeit a successful one, from the government's perspective—a window of opportunity opened with the May 2020 general election. To the surprise of many, Nkurunziza announced that he would not run for a fourth term (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/28508/in-burundi-nkurunziza-won-t-run-again-but-is-he-really-giving-up-power>). After some internal competition, the ruling CNDD-FDD party proposed Ndayishimiye, a former deputy army chief and interior minister, as the party's candidate. He secured almost 69 percent of the vote, while the runner-up, Agathon Rwaso, obtained 24 percent, a result that opposition parties disputed (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/28787/burundi-braces-for-unrest-after-a-vote-marred-by-violence-and-fraud-charges>). When Nkurunziza died unexpectedly just weeks after the elections (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/28836/nkurunziza-s-unexpected-death-could-set-off-another-crisis-in-burundi>), the government accelerated plans for Ndayishimiye's inauguration, and he was sworn in in mid-June, two months ahead of schedule.

Soon after taking office, Ndayishimye signaled a dramatic change in leadership style (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28797/both-sides-claim-victory-in-burundi-election-threatening-return-to-violence>), reaching out to Burundi's international partners. Many Western powers, who were suffering from sanctions fatigue and were keen on restoring normal relations, welcomed the reestablishment of diplomatic communications under the new president. In November 2020, the International Organization of the Francophonie, a group of French-speaking nations, lifted a four-year sanctions regime that it imposed against Burundi in the wake of the 2015 crisis. The following month, Burundi resumed regular dialogue with the EU, giving rise to hopes for "a gradual and complete normalization of relations," as a January statement from ambassadors of EU member states in Burundi put it. Also in December, the U.N. Security Council ended its mandatory reporting

(<https://www.africanews.com/2020/12/08/security-council-ends-mandatory-scrutiny-of-burundi-citing-may-elections/>) on the situation in Burundi, citing “peaceful elections recently conducted in the country.” Thus, just six months after his election, Ndayishimiye brought an end to five years of stubborn isolation under his predecessor.

At the regional level, Ndayishimiye has embarked on something of a charm offensive

(<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/ndayishimiye-charm-offensive-to-put-burundi-back-on-the-map-3419732>), paying state visits to seven African countries since his inauguration, including Kenya and Uganda, both fellow member states of the East African Community. Ndayishimiye also hosted the leaders of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Burundi last month.

The government has also sought to ease tensions with Rwanda after the very tumultuous past few years. In August 2020, just months after Ndayishimiye's inauguration, the two countries' military intelligence leaderships met, followed in October by a meeting of both sides' foreign ministers in the border town of Nemba. In April 2021, Rwanda made an important symbolic concession by asking Burundian journalists exiled there since 2015 to stop operating from its territory. However, Burundi's request for the extradition of alleged putschists residing in Rwanda remained a bone of contention. Further, an attack by Rwandan rebels from Burundian territory in May caused renewed security concerns in Kigali. Even so, the recent visit to Bujumbura by the Rwandan prime minister shows that, despite an ongoing lack of mutual trust, a sense of pragmatism is taking hold on both sides.

Prior to last year's election, some analysts—myself included (<https://www.fairobserver.com/region/africa/filip-reyntjens-burundi-elections-news-african-politics-world-news-international-48948/>)—expressed some doubts about whether Nkurunziza's successor would be able to chart a new path away from isolationism and loosen the grip on power of the ruling party's hardliners. But now, Ndayishimiye's victory is looking like a game changer. Just one year into his term in office, he seems to have convinced a reluctant political class to open up the country to both the world and the region. Most importantly, this development stands to deliver much-needed relief to the Burundian population. And the diplomatic thaw with Rwanda may even have spillover benefits in the region, helping to ease hostile relations between Rwanda and Uganda, and thus allow the East African Community to resume its integrative role again. Given all of these potential benefits, Burundi's international and regional partners would be wise to assist Ndayishimiye's reforms.

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