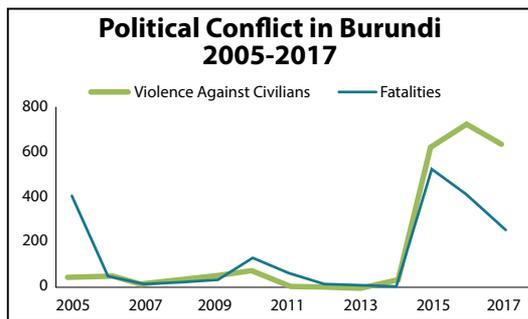


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By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's former president, after the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government summit in Abuja, Nigeria. (Source: AP Photo/Olamikan Gbemiga, File December 17, 2016.)

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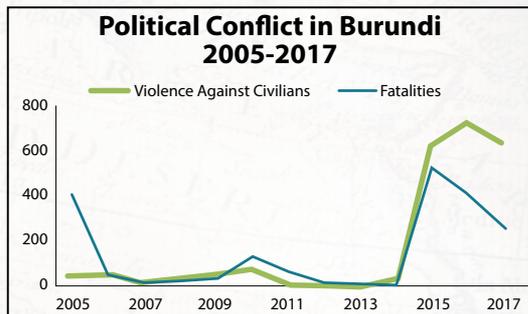
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Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

## Clinging to Power

Nkurunziza, a charismatic former Hutu rebel leader who fought in Burundi's civil war, came to power in 2005 after the country's 12-year conflict ended. The [Arusha Accords](#), a series of agreements between the major rival groups negotiated by former South African President Nelson Mandela and former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere over the course of several years, was the framework ultimately agreed upon to end the conflict. The accords include provisions to ensure over-representation of the minority Tutsi ethnic group, to ensure ethnic integration of the armed forces, and to prevent the centralization of power.

Per the agreement, parliament elected the country's first post-conflict president in 2005 to a five-year term. After winning re-election handily in 2010, Nkurunziza announced his intention to run in the 2015 election, arguably in contravention to the Constitution's two-term limit on the executive, and certainly contrary to the spirit of the Arusha Accords. To bolster Nkurunziza's position, the government [introduced](#) an amendment to remove presidential term limits, but it was narrowly defeated in parliament in March 2014. When that maneuver failed, Nkurunziza still went forward with his campaign for a [third term](#), arguing he was not directly elected in 2005 and thus should be allowed to run again in 2015 for a second directly elected term.

[Protests](#) over Nkurunziza's candidacy broke out after he was formally nominated, and in May 2015 an unsuccessful coup was [attempted](#) by General Godefroid Niyombare, former army chief and ally to Nkurunziza. An [estimated](#) 70 people were killed in the lead-up to the election. Despite frequent violent protests, an opposition boycott, and [international condemnation](#), the government went forward with the vote, and Nkurunziza won re-election in July 2015. Nkurunziza's power grab, however, sparked a political crisis that has been simmering ever since.

In October 2015, the government established the 15-member National Commission for the Inter-Burundi Dialogue, ostensibly to address the political turmoil. The opposition claimed the commission was a [sham](#) and [refused](#) to participate. On November 24, 2017, the government approved recommendations made by the commission, [including](#) a review of the ethnic quota established by the Arusha Accords, reducing the supermajority required to pass bills to a simple plurality and extending the presidency to a seven year term, once renewable. These provisions, among others, will be put to a popular referendum in May 2018.

## Increasing instability

Politically motivated attacks have increased substantially since 2015. Over the past three years, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has recorded almost 2,000 incidents of violence committed against citizens and

at least 1,200 fatalities. The Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained Persons (APRODH) alleges that the government has been systematically targeting its political opponents. Almost all the violence is believed to have been committed by the military, the police, and the [Imbonerakure](#) (“those that see far” in Kirundi ), the ruling party’s youth league. The *Imbonerakure* have been accused of torture, illegal detainment, and targeted killing of opposition members. In April 2017, a video of the *Imbonerakure* [chanting](#) about raping women to get them pregnant so that they “give birth to *Imbonerakure*” went viral. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned the chant, saying that it “was not an isolated incident, but rather the tip of the iceberg. . . .” A January 2018 [report](#) by the UN accused the government of human rights abuses, including repression, torture, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killing. Burundi has [repeatedly](#) refused to grant access to the UN to conduct an inquiry into allegations of abuse.

The violence has also led to a regional refugee crisis, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees [stating](#) that more than 400,000 have fled to neighboring Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania. The government has downplayed the refugee situation. In December 2017, the government [said](#) that the crisis had ended, and it expected 60,000 refugees to return in 2018. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees [disputed](#) this claim: “The political situation in Burundi remains unresolved,” noting its concern over continuing human rights abuses by the regime.

## International Response

In response to the crisis, several international donors have withheld assistance to Burundi. In 2015, the U.S. [suspended](#) peacekeeper training programs to Burundi but [continued](#) support of two rotational battalions deployed to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). In 2016, the European Union, which funds about half the Burundian government’s budget, suspended direct financial support to Nkurunziza’s administration. To make up the shortfall and to pay for the 2020 elections, the government began [garnishing](#) civil servant wages by approximately 10 percent in February 2018.

The international community has also tried to broker peace talks between the government and opposition groups, but the government has [rebuffed](#) attempts at external intervention. In 2016, the East African Community [appointed](#) former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa to help mediate the crisis after peace talks led by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in 2015 stalled. Unfortunately, Mkapa’s [attempts](#) have been unproductive. The government has refused to participate, [insisting](#) that there is no problem. Now, the government is claiming that the constitutional referendum will help move the country forward. Given the intransigence with which the Nkurunziza government has approached this situation, however, the crisis does not appear to be ending anytime soon. Rather, the constitutional referendum is likely to inflame an already combustible situation.

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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's former president, after the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government summit in Abuja, Nigeria. (Source: AP Photo/Olamikan Gbemiga, File December 17, 2016.)

## The Ibrahim Prize

In 2006, the British-Sudanese telecommunications businessman Mo Ibrahim launched, through his foundation, the Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, known as the Ibrahim prize. Recipients of the prize receive a sum of \$5 million over 10 years and thereafter an additional \$200,000 annually for the remainder of their lives. [According](#) to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the prize "recognizes and celebrates African executive leaders who, under challenging circumstances, have developed their countries and strengthened democracy and human rights for the shared benefit of their people, paving the way for sustainable and equitable prosperity."

The prize also aims to offer an incentive to African leaders to leave office peacefully and not cling to power beyond their mandates. To be [eligible](#) for the prize, former African heads of state must have left office within the past three years, been democratically elected, served their constitutionally mandated term, and demonstrated exceptional leadership. The prize is only awarded when the Mo Ibrahim Foundation prize committee decides that all criteria have been sufficiently met; it is not awarded every year. Previous [recipients](#) of the Ibrahim prize are Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique) in 2007, Festus Mogae (Botswana) in 2008, Pedro Pires (Cabo Verde) in 2011, and Hifikepunye Pohamba (Namibia) in 2014. Nelson Mandela was awarded as an honorary laureate in 2007.

## Lack of Past Winners

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's decision not to award the prize in years past has generated [discussion](#) about the quality of African leadership. According to the Foundation, this is by [design](#): "The significance of the Prize lies not only with its winners but also with the conversation around leadership that it generates." When the prize committee decided against awarding the prize in 2017, committee chairman Salim Ahmed Salim [responded](#) directly to critics of the prize: "We recognize and applaud the important contributions that many African leaders have made to change their countries for the better. . . . But the prize is intended to highlight and celebrate truly exceptional leadership, which is uncommon by its very definition."

## Liberia's Controversial Sirleaf

Sirleaf, only the fifth winner of the prize, is the first woman to take home the accolade. With an MBA from Harvard and previous prominent positions in international companies and organizations, she was celebrated internationally after her election in 2005. Donors and capital flowed into Liberia, and Sirleaf won a variety of other international awards and prizes, most notably the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 2011, which she shared with fellow Liberian Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. She was reelected in 2011 and stepped aside to make way for Weah after her term limit was up in 2018.

But her tenure as president of Liberia was not without controversy. Sirleaf was arguably more popular internationally than she ever was domestically. She faced repeated allegations of nepotism after she [appointed](#) three of her sons and a sister to high-level government positions. She was also accused of turning a blind eye to [corruption](#) during her presidency; in her first term alone, more than 20 ministers were accused of corruption by the General Auditing Commission but were not prosecuted. During last year's election, she fell out with her own party (Unity), refused to campaign for her successor, and was accused of interfering in electoral processes. The Unity party [expelled](#) her in January 2018.

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation appeared to acknowledge such controversies in its announcement of the 2018 award, but viewed her successes in the areas of post-war reconciliation and building democratic institutions as deserving of the prize. As Salim [said](#) this week, "Throughout her two terms in office, she worked tirelessly on behalf of the people of Liberia. Such a journey cannot be without some shortcomings and, today, Liberia continues to face many challenges. Nevertheless, during her twelve years in office, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf laid the foundations on which Liberia can now build."

## Conclusion

While Liberia faces a number of acute challenges, including a [slumping](#) economy, rampant corruption, and a worrying resurgence of some of the major political players from the country's brutal civil wars, the country has also made progress over the past 10 years. Indeed, as [noted](#) by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation: "Since 2006, Liberia was the only country out of 54 to improve in every category and sub-category of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance. This led Liberia to move up ten places in the Index's overall ranking during this period." Despite Liberia's progress, for which Sirleaf surely deserves some credit, accusations of corruption and her missteps in office are likely to cast a shadow over her legacy and this year's Ibrahim award. Nevertheless, the Ibrahim award continues to provide an incentive for good governance and generates useful discussion on the state of leadership in Africa.

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