

## ETHNICITY, SECURITY, AND CONFLICT IN BURUNDI

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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A man refuses to leave the road after police order residents to get off the streets and into their houses, during opposition demonstrations in the Mutakura neighborhood of the capital Bujumbura, Burundi Tuesday, June 2, 2015. Burundi's electoral commission is considering alternative dates for national elections amid growing calls for the polls to be postponed due to political unrest, an official said Tuesday as anti-government protests returned to parts of the capital. (AP Photo/Berthier Mugiraneza)

## AFRICA'S THIRD WAVE OF PROTESTS

By Alexander Noyes

On June 2, 2015, the opposition in Burundi called for a fresh round of [demonstrations](#) against President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term in office. Burundi has seen widespread protests over the past month, with more than 20 killed and 90,000 fleeing the country. Burundi is not the only African country to see large-scale protests lately; recent demonstrations have also taken place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Togo, Burkina Faso, and [Angola](#), among others. Are such demonstrations merely isolated events, or are they part of [broader](#) upward trend of popular protests in Africa? [more...](#)



Burundi riot police fire blanks as they chase stone-throwing demonstrators during clashes in the Musaga district of Bujumbura, Burundi, Tuesday April 28, 2015. Anti-government street demonstrations continued for a third day after six people died in protests against the move by President Pierre Nkurunziza to seek a third term. (Source: AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Security in Burundi Prior to Arusha

Security in Burundi has been a source of conflict since the post-colonial restoration of independence in 1962. Although members of the Tutsi ethnic group are a minority in Burundi (approximately 15 percent of the population), they have historically dominated the army. There are numerous examples of [Tutsi repression](#) of the Hutu majority. In 1972, following a violent rebellion against the Tutsi government by members of the Hutu majority, the government responded by killing between [100,000 and 200,000 Hutu civilians](#) over the course of a few months. In the early 1990s, Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was elected in the country's first multiparty elections. Security sector reform was one of his [key campaign promises](#). Feeling threatened, members of the military assassinated Ndadaye in October 1993, triggering civil war.



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## Ethnicity and Power-sharing within Security Forces

The Arusha accords established the framework for a post-civil war government. Ethnic inclusion and power-sharing were bedrocks of the agreement. To these ends, the agreement formalized an ethnically based government and required that no ethnic group comprise more than 50 percent of the military.

Since the war ended, security sector reform has been an ongoing process in Burundi. Major donors [include](#) the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada. Specific attention has been paid to the governance of the military – specifically, improving the [transparency and accountability](#) functions of military institutions and security actors. Burundi has enjoyed [significant success](#) in overcoming its ethnic divisions to create a new, inclusive, and professional military organization. According to [research published in 2015](#), Burundi is now one of the world's top troop contributors to peacekeeping missions.

## Current Conflict

The conduct of the police has been called into question due to their partiality for Nkurunziza and frequent firing on protesters. The military, with the major exception of an [attempted coup](#) on May 13, 2015, has been [praised for its impartiality](#), especially in comparison to the police.

The coup leader, Godefroid Niyombare, was a former rebel alongside Nkurunziza and was once considered very close to the president. He was the country's first Hutu chief of staff of the army. Niyombare also served as Director of National Intelligence until he leaked a memo warning against a third-term bid in February 2015. He was fired as a consequence.

The conflict in Burundi has, thus far, broken along political lines, not ethnic ones. The key issue has been the legality of Nkurunziza's third presidential term. Despite [explicit language in the Arusha accords](#), which states that “no



one may serve more than two presidential terms,” President Nkurunziza insists that he is eligible to run for a third term as president. Opposition to Nkurunziza’s third term has come from co-ethnics from [within his party](#) and from outside his party. Agathon Rwasa, a former Hutu militia leader and Nkurunziza’s main opponent in the election, has also been [vocal](#) about his concerns about Nkurunziza’s bid and the elections themselves. Rwasa has requested the East African Community [deploy a standby force](#) during elections, if polls are to proceed.

## Conclusion

Since mid-April, the opposition has been staging [daily protests](#) over Nkurunziza’s decision. Despite these protests, an attempted coup, members of the electoral commission fleeing the country, aid cuts, and international pressure, Nkurunziza still appears to have dug in his heels. On June 1, the government of Burundi said that it was [considering the East African Community’s call](#) for a six-week election postponement, but there are no indications that Nkurunziza intends to abandon his bid for a third term. Local and parliamentary elections, previously scheduled for June 5, have been [postponed](#) indefinitely but presidential elections are still tentatively scheduled for June 26.

As the current situation continues to unfold, the power-sharing agreement within the military appears to be holding. The current conflict has yet to take on a strong ethnic component. This fact might be reflective of the transformative effects of power-sharing. But it also serves to underscore the pernicious nature of political conflict, especially countries transitioning away from autocracy. Many countries in transition have retained [overly powerful executive branches](#) and weak counterbalancing government institutions. (As a testament to the weakness of other institutions in relation to the executive, members of the [high court](#) and the [electoral commission](#) have fled the country rather than openly dispute Nkurunziza’s third term.)

To be clear, the current situation in Burundi is a conflict over political power. It is not an ethnic-based conflict – not yet, at any rate. Ethnic power-sharing within the military has, on its own, not eliminated conflict dynamics in Burundi but rather has channeled them into a different arena.

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## "Third Wave" of Protests

Compared to the [flurry](#) of academic and press attention paid to the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, recent African protest movements remain considerably under-reported and under-researched. Analysts have often [asked](#) why an "African Spring" never took hold on the heels of the Arab Spring. Recent research, however, suggests that the current demonstrations in Burundi are indeed part of a broad "third wave" of protests in Africa that began toward the end of the previous decade. In a [book](#) released in March 2015 titled *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*, political scientists Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly situate current protests in a long history of popular protest in Africa. Including North Africa as well as sub-Saharan Africa, they argue that Africa's first wave of protests began in the decolonization period, the second wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s over democratization, and a third wave taking shape over the past decade motivated by both local problems and broad governance issues.

Contrary to conventional wisdom on the frequency and breadth of African protests, Branch and Mampilly [assert](#): "Starting in the late 2000s, what we identify as the third wave of African protest has posed dramatic challenges to the established order in over forty countries across the continent." They include all popular protests with "significant political society participation" in their count. They argue that, from 2005 to 2014, "popular protest has been sweeping the continent, erupting in dozens of countries from Egypt to South Africa, Ethiopia to Senegal, Sudan to Angola." They identify two major patterns of protests in Africa during this period: one, "localized protests," which are smaller in scale and focused on a particular issue or constituency, such as service-delivery protests, and two, broader-based "general uprisings," which are focused on changing the political *status quo* and can grow into revolutions, as seen in [Burkina Faso](#) in October 2014. Branch and Mampilly maintain that general uprisings often gain traction around elections, when diverse interests have an opportunity to coalesce and target the current regime.

## Support in Findings Beyond Africa

The study by Branch and Mampilly gains support from separate research conducted by political scientist Dawn M. Brancati. In her forthcoming [book](#) titled *Democracy Protests: Origins, Features, and Significance*, which looks at democracy protests on a global scale during the period of 1989 to 2011, Brancati echoes the finding by Branch and Mampilly of a pronounced rise in protests in Africa over roughly the last decade. Brancati defines democracy protests as "mass public demonstrations in which participants demand countries install or uphold democratic elections." She [finds](#): "in Africa, there was a spat [sic] of protests in the early 1990s and an even more pronounced rise in protest activity at the end of the first decade of this millennium." Her most interesting finding for Africa specialists may be that from 1989 to 2011, Africa as a region accounted for the single most protests worldwide, accounting for more than 40 percent. She [notes](#): "Democracy protests occurred most commonly in Africa and Asia where 40 percent and 37 percent of democracy protests that arose in this period took place respectively. Only 13 percent occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean and 11 percent occurred in Europe."



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## Conclusion

Further research remains to be done on recent protests in Africa, particularly on the various causes, consequences, and outcomes of this “third wave” of protests. While large in scope, the study by Branch and Mampilly carries out only four in-depth case studies (Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan), leaving dozens of other cases as promising avenues for future research. That said, the studies discussed above provide evidence that Africa’s recent protests can no longer be sidelined or dismissed as isolated events. While the extent of a “diffusion” effect is yet unclear, [reports](#) that activists with experience from previous protest movements in Burkina Faso and Senegal were deported from the DRC after participating in term-limit protests suggest that such links should be analyzed carefully.

What role should international actors play? Recent [research](#) by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan may offer useful guidance. Using global data from 1900 to 2006, they [assert](#) that “campaigns of nonviolent resistance against authoritarian regimes were twice as likely to succeed as violent movements” and that “the larger and more diverse the campaign, the more likely it was to succeed.” They also maintain that “nonviolent resistance also increased the chances that the overthrow of a dictatorship would lead to peace and democratic rule.” Given the potentially salutary impact of non-violent protests on peace and democracy, international actors might focus on developing creative ways to [help](#) African protestors organize cohesively, build broad-based coalitions, and remain non-violent.

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