

Burundi Constitutional Referendum

03 May 2018

Background

On 01 May 2018, campaigning began for a national referendum on 17 May 2018, to decide whether presidential term limits should be increased from five to seven years. Approval of the controversial referendum would allow a president to serve more than two consecutive terms after the 2020 Presidential Election; this could extend President Nkurunziza's rule until 2034.

Since cessation of the Burundi Civil War in 2005, the country has been ruled by the National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party. The party was formed from a prominent Hutu rebel group and is led by President Nkurunziza, who is currently serving his third term as president. The peace accord that brought an end to Burundi's civil war ensured that the army would be split 50-50 between the minority Tutsi and majority Hutu population.

2015 election violence

In 2015, an escalation of violence followed President Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third Presidential term in office. This decision was in direct contravention of the Burundi constitution which does not allow for more than two consecutive presidential terms. The CNDD-FDD government defended this decision as President Nkurunziza was elected by Parliament and not a public vote during his first term in office. Despite these issues, President Nkurunziza won 70% of votes amongst claims by both opposition parties and international organisations of voter intimidation.

In response to this, protests emerged across Burundi and an unsuccessful Tutsi-led military coup attempted to overthrow the government. The coup failed due to a lack of support from the Hutu contingent of the Army who controlled key infrastructure, and subsequently in July 2017, the government began purging Tutsi soldiers and officers from the Army with forced redundancies. This action was probably motivated by two main factors; reprisal and to prevent another coup after the forthcoming presidential term limit referendum.

Regional issues

Violence between opposition rebel groups and government forces in both the Burundi countryside and major cities after the 2015 election led to a regional refugee crisis. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) predicts that 285,000 Burundi refugees fled to neighbouring Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). International aid from the EU was suspended in 2016 as the conflict failed to be resolved by the Burundi government. Effects of reduced aid have since been compounded by a reduction in US funding for the UNHCR in 2018, which has increased financial pressure on regional governments hosting refugees.

Evidence is mounting that regional governments are no longer willing to shoulder the burden of Burundi refugees. Tanzania's President, John Magufuli, has publicly announced measures which will see his government's support for the estimated 240,000 Burundi refugees in Tanzania withdrawn. Meanwhile, neighbouring Rwanda has expelled 1,600

Burundi refugees for failing to properly register their living status. However, the Burundi government alleges that the reason for the expulsion was the refugee's refusal to join the Rwandan Army.

Opposition arrests

Government forces have reportedly carried out a series of violent arrests against opposition supporters and individuals who oppose the referendum. Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report last month detailing 19 cases of police brutality since December 2017. This included the beating to death of one individual who did not register to vote and the arrests of eight people accused of planning to use firearms to disrupt the elections. Consequently, Burundi's lower house passed a bill at the end of April to allow security forces to conduct raids without warrants. This will likely lead to more raids by government security forces who no longer need to secure legal approval.

Predictive assessment:

- It is highly likely that the referendum vote will trigger changes to the constitution and allow Presidents to serve more than two consecutive terms after the 2020 elections. This will be achieved through a crackdown on opposition parties and intimidation of voters which will lead to international condemnation.
- There is highly likely to be an increase in the number of police raids on opposition locations between now and the referendum. The government are likely to accuse any perpetrators caught in these raids as being terrorists looking to disrupt the referendum.
- There is a realistic possibility that aid funding will be further cut to regional states sheltering Burundi refugees. This is almost certain to increase strain on host-governments who are already taking action to expel refugees. While instability remains in Burundi, refugees are unlikely to return home and more could flee if violence erupts around the referendum which may compound regional pressures.
- The lack of UN and AU intervention in Burundi thus far suggests that neither is likely to forcibly deploy a peacekeeping force in the future. In the unlikely event that it did deploy the quantity of forces discussed above, it is questionable how much impact they would have on restoring stability.

Assaye Risk Research and Analysis

Assaye Risk's research and analysis team can provide periodic assessments of events in Burundi for clients. This includes bespoke risk assessments, security incident monitoring and competitive benchmarking. For further information contact the research and analysis team on +44 (0) 20 7042 5110 or email info@assayerisk.com.