



Freedom in the World - Burundi (2011)

Capital: Bujumbura
Population: 8,303,000
Political Rights Score: 5 *
Civil Liberties Score: 5 *
Status: Partly Free

Ratings Change

Burundi's political rights rating declined from 4 to 5 due to arrests and intimidation by the government and ruling party during local, parliamentary, and presidential election campaigns.

Overview

Local, presidential, and parliamentary elections were held in May, June, and July 2010, respectively. Irregularities in local elections and efforts by President Pierre Nkurunziza's National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) to close political space led opposition candidates to boycott the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections. Sporadic political violence occurred throughout the electoral period, with the CNDD and opposition parties accusing one another of complicity in the attacks.

The minority Tutsi ethnic group governed Burundi for most of the period since independence from Belgium in 1962. The military, judiciary, education system, business sector, and news media have also traditionally been dominated by the Tutsi. Violence between them and the majority Hutu has broken out repeatedly since independence. A 1992 constitution introduced multiparty politics, but the 1993 assassination of the newly elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye of the Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) party, resulted in sustained and widespread ethnic violence.

Ndadaye's successor was killed in 1994, along with Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana, when their plane was shot down as it approached Kigali airport in Rwanda. This event triggered the Rwandan genocide and intensified the fighting in Burundi.

A 1994 power-sharing arrangement between FRODEBU and the mainly Tutsi-led Unity for National Progress (UPRONA) party installed Hutu politician Sylvestre Ntibantunganya as Burundi's new president, but he was ousted in a 1996 military coup led by former president Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi whom Ndadaye had defeated in the 1993 election. Peace and political stability remained elusive, as insurgents sporadically staged attacks and government forces pursued a campaign of intimidation.

In 2000, 19 groups from across the political spectrum agreed in principle on a future political solution to the conflict, and in 2001 a transitional government was installed, with Buyoya temporarily remaining chief of state and FRODEBU's Domitien Ndayizeye serving as vice president. Key elements of two Hutu rebel groups, the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) and the National Liberation Forces (FNL), failed to participate in the transition, resulting in both continued negotiations and additional violence.

By the end of 2002, most factions had agreed to stop the fighting and participate in transitional arrangements leading to national elections. In April 2003, Buyoya stepped down and was replaced as president by Ndayizeye, and the FDD subsequently reached an agreement with the government in October. An August 2004 agreement outlined the shape of new democratic institutions—designed to balance the interests of the Hutu and Tutsi populations—and the holding of elections.

In 2005, Burundi held the first local and national elections since 1993. The largely Hutu National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD), the political wing of the FDD, emerged as the country's largest party, and Parliament chose Pierre Nkurunziza as president. Domestic and international observers generally regarded the voting as legitimate and reflective of the people's will.

A key faction of the sole remaining rebel group, the FNL, agreed to lay down its arms and participate in the political process in 2006. A tentative ceasefire agreement was reached with the last significant FNL faction in 2007, but violence involving the group flared again in 2008. Nonetheless, FNL leader Agathon Rwaso soon returned to participate in negotiations on the demobilization of his guerrillas and the transformation of the FNL into a political party. These discussions were complicated by complaints regarding repressive actions taken by the CNDD and counterclaims that the FNL was continuing to recruit military cadres.

The talks finally led the FNL to lay down its arms in 2009, leading to its recognition as a legal political party. In April of that year, an independent election commission was sworn in to prepare for elections due in 2010, and a new electoral code was adopted. However, political uncertainty and tension remained, as opposition parties accused the government of trying to manipulate the electoral process.

Local elections took place in May 2010, followed by presidential elections in June and parliamentary polls in July. Following widespread fraud in the local elections—which the CNDD won with almost two-thirds of the vote—and increasing efforts by the CNDD to close political space, opposition candidates boycotted both presidential and parliamentary elections. Prior to the presidential poll, the government placed serious restrictions on freedom of movement for opposition leaders, arrested dozens of opposition activists, and banned all opposition party meetings. According to opposition parties and human rights organizations, the ostensibly independent election commission failed to adequately investigate allegations of pre-electoral violence and make public some individual polling place results. In the legislative poll, the CNDD captured 81 percent of the vote, followed by UPRONA with almost 12 percent and FRODEBU with nearly 6 percent, while Nkurunziza was reelected president with some 92 percent of the vote. Observers viewed the elections as a missed opportunity for strengthening Burundi's democratic political culture, as political polarization increased, and several leading opposition leaders fled the country fearing for their safety. Sporadic violence continued throughout much of 2010, with both the CNDD and opposition parties blaming one another for the attacks.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Burundi is not an electoral democracy. The country lacks representative institutions at the national level, in both the legislative and executive branches of government. Despite citizens' ability to change their government democratically in 2005, serious electoral irregularities and repression during the May 2010 local elections led most opposition parties to boycott subsequent presidential and parliamentary polls. The 2010 presidential election was the first by direct vote for a five-year term, but without meaningful competition, the results lacked legitimacy. The president appoints two vice presidents, one Tutsi and one Hutu, and they must be approved separately by a two-thirds majority in both the lower and upper houses.

While the lower house of Parliament—the 100-seat National Assembly—is directly elected for a five-year term, locally elected officials choose members of the Senate, also for five-year terms. Each of Burundi's 17 provinces chooses two senators—one Tutsi and one Hutu. Carefully crafted constitutional arrangements require the National Assembly to be 60 percent Hutu and 40 percent Tutsi, with three additional deputies from the Twa ethnic minority, who are also allocated three senators. In both houses, a minimum of 30 percent of the legislators must be women.

There are more than two dozen active political parties in the country, ranging from those that champion radical Tutsi positions to those that hold extremist Hutu views. Most are small in terms of membership. Many Tutsi have now joined formerly Hutu-dominated parties. The government appointed in September 2010 consists of members from the three political parties represented in

the Parliament: the CNDD, UPRONA, and FRODEBU. Many political parties include groups of youths that are used for intimidation and violence against opponents. According to Human Rights Watch, both the ruling and other parties have occasionally employed coercive methods against rival parties and internal dissent.

Corruption remains a significant problem. A July 2010 Transparency International-Kenya report named Burundi as the most corrupt country in East Africa, identifying the Revenue Authority and the police force as the two most corrupt institutions. The deputy head of Burundi's main anticorruption organization, the Anticorruption and Economic Malpractice Observatory (OLUCOME), was assassinated in 2009, and the case went to trial at the Bujumbura Court of Appeal in Burundi in July 2010. A dozen suspects, including police, civilians, and demobilized combatants, were subsequently arrested and put on trial, which was ongoing at year's end.

Freedom of speech is legally guaranteed. While journalists continue to engage in self-censorship and are occasionally censored by authorities, they have been increasingly willing to express opinions critical of the government. Radio remains the main source of information for most Burundians. The government runs a television station and a radio station, as well as the only newspaper that publishes regularly. Several private broadcast media outlets also operate, though most have a limited broadcast range. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio France Internationale, and the Voice of America are available on FM radio in the capital. There is an opposition press, though it functions sporadically. Print runs of most newspapers remain small, and readership is limited by low literacy levels. Access to the internet remains largely confined to urban areas.

Despite the recent emergence of a more pluralistic press, journalists have been arbitrarily arrested, harassed, or threatened on numerous occasions. In 2010, several domestic press groups stated that the content of the privately owned Rema FM, a pro-CNDD radio station, repeatedly abused professional norms by disseminating hate messages and identifying opponents by name and address. A journalist for Radio Publique Africaine was hospitalized in June after being beaten with bricks by police for writing an article covering police abuse. In July, an editor for the online newspaper *Net Press* was charged with treason after publishing an article warning that Burundian security forces lacked the capacity to effectively counter external terror threats against the country; he remained in police custody at year's end. In response, the Federation of African Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, and the Eastern Africa Journalists Association criticized what they deemed a government-sponsored "campaign of intimidation against media."

Freedom of religion is generally observed. For many years the ongoing civil strife and the Tutsi social and institutional dominance impeded academic freedom by limiting educational opportunities for the Hutu, but this situation has improved in recent years.

The constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association, although members of human rights groups that criticize the government have been threatened with or subjected to surveillance. There is modest but important civil society activity with a focus on human rights. Constitutional protections for organized labor are in place, and the right to strike is guaranteed by the labor code. The Confederation of Burundi Trade Unions has been independent since its establishment in 1995. Most union members are civil servants and have bargained collectively with the government. Following a two-month strike by public and private secondary school teachers in early 2010, classes slowly resumed in Bujumbura and the provinces in May.

Burundi's judiciary is hindered by corruption, a lack of resources and training, and executive interference in legal matters. Crimes, especially those related to political violence, often go unreported or uninvestigated. The current judicial system struggles to function effectively or independently, and cannot handle the large number of pending cases, many of which are politically sensitive. According to domestic and international human rights group, in the wake of the 2010 elections, Burundi's National Intelligence Service resumed its practice of physically and psychologically torturing members of the opposition who had been arrested on a variety of dubious charges, including "threatening state security" and "participation in armed groups." Prisons remain overcrowded, unhygienic, and at times life-threatening. A justice and reconciliation commission, designed to provide accountability for past abuses, has been agreed upon in principle, but had not

been established by year's end.

The 2009 penal codecriminalizes same-sex relationships. Women have limited opportunities for advancement in the economic and political spheres, especially in rural areas. According to a September 2010 report by the Center for Global Development, Burundi has made progress in only one of its 15 Millennium Development Goals: the promotion of gender equality. Albinos face a particular threat from discrimination and violence; eight murderers of Albinos were convicted and sentenced to prison in 2009; several additional albino murders were reported in 2010.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*