



A Look Ahead: The Upcoming Burundi Elections

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Speakers:

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The Great Lakes Policy Forum met on April 1 to hear a panel of practitioners and statesmen speak on the upcoming Burundi elections. In attendance were academics, peacebuilding practitioners and foreign policy professionals.

Challenges- While Burundi successfully carried out national elections in 2005, the nation does not have a strong democratic tradition. As a result, there is a lack of knowledge about democratic practice and conduct and a greater threat from opportunistic politicians, including leaders instated in the Arusha accords facing the possibility of losing their positions. The sheer number of parties and presidential candidates competing (at least 44 and 11 respectfully) exacerbates this situation considerably, especially considering the redundancies in political platforms. In addition to domestic procedural issues, there is still a 14 million dollar shortfall in international funding for the elections.

There are also concerns about the potential for violent conflict. Some former rebel groups are not fully integrated. While DDR (demobilization, disarmament and reintegration) is currently in process, it will not be completed by the election. While there is always the potential for violence to spark around youth, land conflict involving refugee repatriation issues, and some instances of political intimidation or

assassination, the ready availability of small arms, particularly around Bujumbura, allows these conflicts to become more serious. Another important issue is the prevalence of vigilantism and mob justice which raises tensions and reflects issues of impunity or at least inefficiency in the justice system.

Accomplishments- At this time registration has been successfully completed, with over 3.5 million voters registered as well as a final list of parties and candidates for some of the elections prepared. In many cases problems during registration can be a warning sign that elections will be troubled as various groups can use intimidation or corrupt tactics to prevent their opponents from registering. The general lack of these issues during the Burundi registration is a positive sign.

Burundi is also taking important steps to increase the participation of women in politics and government. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of these efforts is the fact that more than half of the registered voters are women. Additionally, more than 30% of the candidates for the legislature and several presidential candidates are also women. This official increase in representation is complemented by an increase in meaningful engagement in politics through civil society groups.

When looking at the longer term possibilities for Burundi as a successful democracy it is important to note that the current government has maintained its focus on education and the creation of an independent and credible electoral commission. A combination of outside training and internal support is preparing the electoral commission to be a good arbiter of future elections. While there are severe resources limitations, the government has retained its focus on education with free primary education and a widespread effort to build more schools and hire more teachers. Some of the work behind this is done through a community public works program that uses volunteers on the weekends for schools, roads and other infrastructural projects.

International Engagement- US engagement in Burundi is in a secondary and supportive capacity. USAID and other groups are engaged heavily in training, monitoring and funding elections. USAID has recently completed a democracy and government assessment and US policy overall stresses the importance of regional cooperation and integration. USAID is also looking at the possibility of expanding its mission in Burundi in terms of staff and funding if the elections go smoothly.

IFES is focusing heavily on training and logistics for the upcoming election. In terms of training, the focus is on the electoral commission and staff as well as general civic education, especially political engagement programs for women and conflict mitigation programs for youth.

There are many other groups working in Burundi right now as well, a few of which were discussed by the panel. Ushahidi is working as a monitoring group in preparation for any conflicts or crises that develops. The Dutch are taking the lead on the police training and the African Union is playing a particularly strong role in these elections in terms of observation and support. There is hope that the African Union will continue to strengthen its role and credibility in elections as it becomes more willing to punish nations that fail to hold free and fair elections.

The panel closed with the consensus that, while the elections have great significance to other countries in the region, and are the focus of many international efforts, they are first and foremost an opportunity for the Burundian people to determine their fate.