

Peacebuilding Commission – Burundi Configuration

Report of the Chair's visit to Bujumbura, 30 June-03 July 2010

In the context of the electoral process under way in Burundi, which the Peacebuilding Commission Burundi Configuration has been supporting from the early stages, and after consultation with the Government of Burundi, as well as with members of the Burundi Configuration and BINUB, I undertook a visit to Bujumbura from Wednesday, 30 June to Saturday, 3 July 2010 with the following objectives:

- i) To introduce myself to the Government of Burundi in my capacity as the new Chair of the PBC Burundi Configuration;
- ii) To have an update on the situation on the ground and better understand the progress made in the on-going electoral process as well as any important challenges that require the attention of the international community;
- iii) To pursue the PBC's engagement with the Government, the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI), political actors, and national and international stakeholders in support of efforts aimed at ensuring the current electoral process is democratic, safe and inclusive;
- iv) To discuss with national authorities and BINUB the next steps after the elections and the opportunities for PBC support to long-term development efforts.

The following report contains a summary of my personal impressions and assessments from my first trip to Burundi. The trip was short, but very intense. Given the limited time available I am aware of the fact that this report represents only a snapshot of the political situation in the country. The views expressed herein are strictly personal and reflect my assessment only.

At the outset, I would like to thank the Government of Burundi for having guided and facilitated this visit, as well as the national and international stakeholders for their availability, openness and engagement. I also wish to thank the UN Integrated Office in Burundi, BINUB for their advice, logistical and substantive

support to the visit, as well as the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) for their continued support.

The report is structured along the four objectives set for the trip.

Objective 1: Personal introduction

This objective was entirely achieved thanks to the numerous contacts facilitated by the Burundian authorities and by BINUB.

I met with the President of the Republic of Burundi and the First Vice-President, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Public Security [in a joint meeting with the three Ministers], the Director of Cabinet in the Ministry of External Relations and International Cooperation, the political parties represented in the Parliament, the FNL, the CENI, electoral observers, the representatives of religious denominations, civil society, women's organisations, the media, Abashingantahe, the private sector, representatives of the international community, including the UN System and regional actors. I also had the opportunity to attend the ceremonies of the National Day on 1 July where, I was able to interact informally with a number of Government Officials and representatives of the international community.

Objective 2: Get first-hand information on the ground

This objective was also achieved. The meetings with the personalities, institutions and representatives mentioned above allowed me to get first-hand insight of the current political situation in Burundi.

In my view, the political situation after the communal and presidential elections and before the parliamentary elections can be summed up as follows:

All interlocutors assured me of their commitment to peace. Typical statements were: "Burundians aspire to peace", "all ethnic groups want peace"; "nobody is against elections"; "nobody is questioning Arusha".

With regard to the communal and presidential elections, I was informed by both CENI and the national and the international electoral observers that both elections were considered to be fair, despite certain irregularities. The electoral observers agreed that these irregularities did not distort the result of the communal

elections. The presidential elections took place in a well organised and orderly fashion. In fact interlocutors recognised improvements made during the presidential elections that built on lessons learned from the communal poll. The representatives of the international community, the region and the population were unanimous that the process should go on.

Despite the conclusions of the electoral observers, a group of thirteen political parties has challenged the results of the communal elections, alleging important irregularities, and is now boycotting the remaining elections. Five candidates from those thirteen parties withdrew from the presidential election, leaving the current President Nkurunziza as the sole candidate.

Many interlocutors, both national and international, informed me that political tensions have increased after the results of the communal elections became public. I was also told that intimidation and violence were growing.

In my meetings with political parties not represented in government, I sensed a lot of deception and frustration with the outcome of the communal elections. The general feeling was that these elections were rigged and needed to be repeated. The said political parties further accused CENI of being one-sided and unresponsive to their complaints. Accusations of intimidation and politically motivated arrests were voiced mainly by representatives of FNL and, to a lesser extent, by FRODEBU.

Burundi has a vibrant civil society and both women and youth have demonstrated an attitude against violence. In particular, women are leading a campaign aimed at ending violence, “saying no to violence and saying yes to peace”, using a symbol, the “scarf of peace” or “the Foulard Amahoro”. The civil society deplors the current trends that could evolve into a “culture of fear”.

Worries about increasing violence were also voiced by the representatives of the Catholic Church. They feared that heated rhetoric from both sides (i.e. the party in power and the opposition parties) could provoke youth groups, which are hard to control, into more frequent acts of violence. Also, the difficult economic and social situation may be conducive to such acts.

The Government regretted the recent grenade explosions and other acts of violence which resulted in eight deaths and more than one hundred wounded among the Burundian population. The government representatives reaffirmed that the overall

security situation in the country is under control and they were of the view that available legal means to challenge election results should be used. I was impressed by the reassuring tone of the three Ministers in charge of elections and security, as well as by their efforts to coordinate among themselves. At the same time I voiced concern about allegations of politically motivated arrests as well as of inhuman treatment or torture during detention. The Ministries concerned promised to look into cases of misconduct of law enforcement agents submitted to them.

Despite rising emotions, all political actors told me to be willing to engage in dialogue with a view to participate in the upcoming electoral process. At the same time, everybody is waiting for the other side to make the first move. Opposition parties, civil society and representatives of the Catholic Church expect the newly elected President of Burundi to initiate and lead this dialogue as a public gesture towards reconciliation before the beginning of the parliamentary electoral race.

Government officials and representatives of the international community underscored that in the communal elections the CNDD-FDD obtained 62% of the votes, and they regretted that the opposition parties might miss the opportunity of using the power of the remaining 38% to bring forward their agenda and contributions to the national institutions.

The representatives of the international community and from the region reaffirmed that the legitimacy of power comes from the polls, not from violence. They support flexibility and dialogue that could ease the current tension and encourage an inclusive process.

Objective 3: Pursuing PBC engagement towards safe, democratic and inclusive elections

This objective was partially achieved.

I met with the leaders of various political parties (CNDD -FDD, FRODEBU, UPRONA, CNDD-Nyangoma, and FNL) one by one in order to ensure a direct, personal conversation. I tried to convince the leaders of political parties which are threatening to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections to reconsider their position and to participate in the elections in order to avoid being marginalized from the national institutions and the political process. I received mixed reactions and messages. UPRONA questions the fairness of the communal elections but its

leaders informed me that they would participate in the legislative elections. They appealed for the other parties to join the process in order to have a strong voice within the institutions. FRODEBU questions the communal elections as well and its leaders are calling for a dialogue, but they seem to be waiting for somebody else – such as the President of the Republic or the ruling party CNDD-FDD - to make the first move and initiate that dialogue. The leaders of CNDD and FNL take a more radical stand and question the electoral process as a whole. They indicated that in their view peace and security are at risk. FNL in particular regrets the security environment for its members who in its view are victims of politically motivated arrests and intimidation. They said that they would not be able to participate in the elections under such circumstances.

With regards to maintaining an inclusive political process, President Nkurunziza and other Government officials reassured me that the Constitution protects ethnic and political minorities. With regards to his possible role as a referee and a convenor of a possible dialogue, the President told me that he sees himself as a player like any other in the political arena. His election is not yet validated by the Constitutional Court, he is not sworn in as the new President, and his political party is still in competition for the remaining polls. My impression was that he didn't see a need to lead a dialogue with political parties at this juncture. He reassured me that once sworn in he intends to initiate a dialogue with the population on constitutional issues

Objective 4: Discuss next steps after the elections for PBC support to long-term development efforts.

This objective was partially achieved. The short time and the concentration on the current political situation allowed only for a general discussion on the next steps.

In the meeting with the President of Burundi, I reiterated the PBC's willingness to continue working with the authorities with a view to fostering the democratic and institutional stabilization process. I invited the President to reflect together with the PBC on the next topics to be addressed and steps to take. As possible examples for peacebuilding issues of common interest, I mentioned rule of law, transitional justice, fight against impunity, development of the judiciary institutions, good governance and economic development through promoting foreign investments and generating interest of commercial and economic actors.

The consensus view of the international community represented in Bujumbura is that the PBC should continue its engagement in Burundi. However, the way in which PBC should work with the Burundian government and the possible areas of cooperation should depend on the outcome of the parliamentary elections.

Concluding remarks and suggestions

The current political situation, as I see it, presents itself as a mixed picture.

On the bright side, I sense a clear general commitment from all sides towards peace, the Arusha Agreements and change of government by constitutional means. All parties assured me of their unambiguous rejection of violence. This overall attitude reflects considerable democratic maturity given the fact that the society is just emerging from a not too distant violent past.

On the other hand, while there is pervasive desire for dialogue expressed, it appears that everybody is waiting for the other side to make the first move. The general feeling I sensed was one of “I want to talk but there's no -one to talk to”. This sentiment is particularly widespread with those political parties who did not fare well during the communal elections. They particularly regretted a lack of readiness by CENI or the government to discuss the way the elections went, to talk about lessons to be learned and to assure them that the parliamentary elections would be equitable, free and fair.

The government, in turn, seems to have difficulties in understanding what the opposition parties exactly mean by “dialogue” and what the content of such a dialogue at this stage should be. There is a certain apprehension that “dialogue” is a coded term for putting “Arusha” into question.

As regards the upcoming elections and the political situation thereafter , I see basically two scenarios:

In the first, “optimistic” scenario, a representative number of political parties will participate in the elections for parliament. This, in turn, will result in parliamentary chambers which adequately reflect the whole political spectrum of society. If the outcome of the electoral process is positive, Burundi will come out of this process as a triple winner: (1) winner in democracy for the country and its citizens; (2) winner in the region as a model of democracy and pacific transition; (3) winner on the international arena. It is likely that such an outcome will

generate a more positive disposition by Burundians and more international interest in cooperating with Burundi and investing in long term development/business.

The other scenario is that both sides don't reach out towards each other. The likely outcome is a hardening of positions. In the next five years, the ruling party might put an emphasis on security while consolidating its power. The opposition in turn might grow in its conviction of being excluded and might be tempted to react accordingly. It will be important that the Government doesn't over-impose its power if peace is to be sustained and potential crisis averted. Long term development programs, economic activities and employment opportunities could reduce current tensions and nurture a political space that is less determined by individual interests and needs.

After only a brief visit, it is difficult to assess which scenario is more likely to happen. The current dynamics in Bujumbura have a component of resentment and bitterness among several political personalities. While it is hard to determine how much of it is rhetoric and how much justified, it seems important to me to make sure that these interpersonal conflicts don't undermine the future of the country and don't take it back to a situation of violence.

My concluding suggestion is that the Peacebuilding Commission should continue to assist Burundi independently of the outcome of the parliamentary elections. However, the focus of co-operation should be determined according to the political situation prevailing thereafter. I recommend that the next visit of the Configuration to Bujumbura takes place early enough in the process to keep the momentum of our engagement with Burundians.
