



## 2015 AS A REPEAT OF 1965 IN BURUNDI: THE STUBBORNNESS OF POLITICAL HISTORY

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In the run-up to independence in 1962, Burundi held national elections in September 1961 contested between two rival groups of traditional princes (Ganwa): the Bezi, represented by the *Union pour le Progrès National* (UPRONA) party, and the Batare, represented by the *Parti Démocrate Chrétien* (PDC) party. The then popular and pro-independence king's son, Prince Louis Rwagasore, whose UPRONA [Union for National Progress] had just won the elections in preparation for independence, became the de facto independence's leader thanks to a triumphant victory gaining 58 of the 64 seats. The Belgian colonial administration, in a move to oppose UPRONA, had supported PDC [Christian Democrat Party]. Peter Uvin, who had extensively studied post-independence political developments that country, noted that the multi-ethnic dimension of UPRONA was conspicuous in the outcomes of these

elections: of its members elected, “25 were Tutsi, 22 Hutu, 7 Ganwa and 4 of mixed parentage.”

Barely a month after the electoral victory of UPRONA, Prince Rwagasore—of Ganwa descent, therefore neither Tutsi nor Hutu—was assassinated on 13 October 1961 by a Greek mercenary who, according to a historical reading by Burundian clergy Zacharie Bukuru, had been recruited by UPRONA's political adversaries (members from the PDC) in collusion with some Belgian colonial officials. By and large, the historic assassination of Prince Rwagasore remains colossal in the unfolding events of post-independence Burundi: it indeed represents the day on which doors were closed for Burundi's post-colonial democratic dispensation. Soon after his death, sheer divisions among the pre-independence Burundian political elite grew even deeper, more so fuelled by the fear borne by the then prevailing manhunt against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Political power, which had for so long remained in the hands of the royal family, was soon coveted by both Hutu and Tutsi intellectuals of the time. Burundi's traditional monarch, *Mwami* (king) Mwambutsa—historically popular among both Hutu and Tutsi—resumed a governing role and called for legislative elections in May 1965, after the Hutu Premier he had appointed, Pierre Ngendandumwe, was assassinated three days into his office. The then king had tried to satisfy everyone by changing prime ministers (a Prince, a Hutu and a Tutsi premier) but all in vain. According to René Lemarchand, a no less influential academic of contemporary African Great Lakes politics, Prime Minister Ngendandumwe's assassin—a Rwandan refugee—was employed by the United States Embassy in Bujumbura just because the administration there suspected the Prime Minister of being a communist; suspicion was awakened because of some links he had opened with China.

This barbaric act of assassination of a Burundian Hutu Premier by a Rwandan Tutsi refugee further

nourished extremism of the Hutu against the Tutsi in Burundi. The subsequent legislative elections, which were organised three months later, took place in a tense atmosphere of ethnic connotation. Its outcomes were expectedly construed to be a victory of one ethnicity over the other. A big majority of elected members of the legislative assembly (MPs) consisted of the Hutu. Although with a huge Hutu majority in the legislature, the Tutsi politico-military elite was determined to deny power to the Hutu. King Mwambutsa appointed Léopold Biha as Prime Minister much as the Hutu had won a majority in the legislative elections. Consequently, a small group of frustrated Hutu army officers and gendarmes staged on 19 October 1965 an attack on the royal palace and shot Prime Minister Biha (albeit not fatally) in the king's compound, only to be stopped by Tutsi army officers led by Captain Michel Micombero.

This assassination plot—coupled with the prevailing conviction by Hutu mobs in the northern province of Muramvya who mistakenly believed the Tutsi had turned against the Mwami and hence attacked Tutsi civilians—precipitated the country in a bloody civil war. It became evident that the case of Rwanda then—whereby, in 1959, the Hutu, after having exiled the king and massacred the Tutsi, went on to declare independence of a Rwandan republic—had, on the one hand, appealed to the Hutu elite in Burundi and had become frightening to the Burundian Tutsi elite, on the other hand. Accordingly, ever since the events of 19 October 1965, the evil of 'ethnic' antipathy became even more entrenched among the grassroots (Hutu and Tutsi) who got trapped and manipulated by the will of a divided political elite—those hungry for power as inspired by the Rwandan scenario of 1959 on the one hand, and those keen to conserve power not to allow the Rwandan scenario of 1959 to happen in Burundi, on the other.

Against the above recapitulation, I am strongly tempted to suggest that 2015 in Burundi is but a perfect repeat of 1965, *ceteris paribus*. If history indeed stubbornly repeats itself over time, today's Burundi offers a perfect venue for such historical repetition. For those now too familiar with the unfolding of events in today's Burundi would hardly disagree with the fact that *l'histoire politique est vraiment têtue* [political history is indeed stubborn!] Fifty years had passed but the political ghost of 1965 has come to vehemently haunt 2015's Burundi. This is not to suggest that the stubbornness of political history is strictly confined to the case of Burundi; it is evident wherever political history had unfolded, i.e. wherever humans are found living in a sort of political community—even on Jupiter, I bet! If 1965 consists of the first time in recorded history of contemporary Burundi that people lost their lives simply because of who they were 'ethnically' considered to be, 2015 is yet another moment in the post-colonial history of Burundi that people are losing their lives simply because of who they are 'politically' considered to be. What else will Burundians die for in 2065? What we do know from its history is that the Burundian fracas of 1965 was only brought to a stoppage by the coup d'état of then Captain Michel Micombero in 1966, who declared the First Republic. Is yet another coup d'état what the Burundi military corps has in store for us in 2016? There is no higher duty of political agency both inside and outside Burundi than to break this cycle of historical repetition! Of course, for a political deficiency, a political remedy is in order.

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