



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Burundi 1993–2005

Executive Summary

Burundi gained independence from Belgium in July 1962.¹ The ethnic structure of Burundi is sharply divided, with a “class ranked ethnic system” creating a foundation for inequality and dissent that devolves rapidly into violent conflict.² The Tutsi ethnic minority held most political office positions in the decades following independence. A constant power struggle between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups through coups d’état, arrests, and executions marked these years.³ President Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi, held office for 13 years, spanning 1987–93 and 1996–2003.⁴ Buyoya took office through coups d’état both times.

In the national election in mid-1993, Melchior Ndadaye became the first Hutu president.⁵ The Tutsi-dominated army, however, was loyal to Buyoya, who lost this election. Three months after the election, on October 21, 1993, a group of Tutsi-led soldiers from the national army assassinated Ndadaye, sparking an ethnic civil war between the Tutsi-led army and Hutu guerrilla groups.⁶ The Hutus themselves were fractured into factions which prevented a united front and made negotiations difficult.

Ironically, on May 16, 1991, two years before Ndadaye was elected, Buyoya himself passed the National Unity Code, which was issued as a new constitution to end ethnic-based oppression and guarantee equal rights to Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas.⁷ Implementation of the National Unity Code was essentially annulled when Buyoya lost the first free election to Ndadaye and organized Ndadaye’s removal just months later.⁸

Burundi’s supreme court accused Buyoya of the Ndadaye assassination, and Buyoya was exiled until 1996 (when he regained power through another military coup).⁹ The Ndadaye assassination sparked the civil war that began in 1993 and lasted for 12 years. Enraged Hutus sought retribution through the large-scale killing of Tutsis throughout the country. The ethnic violence persisted throughout the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century.¹⁰

From 1994 to 1996, a series of multiethnic governments attempted unsuccessfully to stabilize the country. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 people were killed in the first year of the civil war. Beginning in 1996, Buyoya ruled the country again under the Tutsi-led National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party until 2003. This party, founded in 1994, was the most prevalent Tutsi armed group during the civil war.¹¹ The war was further complicated by politics and conflict in neighboring Rwanda and Congo. In 2000, the Arusha Accords were established to enforce a peaceful power-sharing system but were only partially successful as numerous splinter groups and factions continued to fight.¹² Hutu leader Pierre Nkurunziza, who held a prominent role in the party leadership, eventually succeeded Buyoya as president in 2005. Under his leadership, further peace talks and a new constitution eventually ended the violence.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. The SOIC definition of a nation is a country in which more than 85 percent of the total population expresses a common identity. Burundi is composed of two primary ethnic groups: the Hutu (slightly more than 85 percent) and Tutsi (14 percent). Another ethnic group, the Twa, accounts for 1 percent of the population.¹³ This conflict was primarily a civil war between Burundi's two primary ethnic groups, but the Hutus did reach the 85 percent threshold. The Hutus were frequently divided into opposing factions, however, which prevented a unified political front. The country underwent several leadership changes throughout its few decades of independence. Although steps were taken to equalize both groups' social and political standings, neither the National Unity Code nor the principles of the Arusha Accords were upheld during the period of the civil war.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. The brief Ndadaye government in 1993 was perceived as legitimate. Ndadaye was the first president of Hutu ethnicity and was elected through Burundi's first free and fair democratic election, which were made possible by the implementation of the National Unity just two years earlier. Violence and protests erupted when Buyoya ran for a third term against Ndadaye, which constitutional constraints prohibited. This dissent led to Ndadaye's election by a clear majority. The Hutu population widely accepted this government as legitimate, but the Tutsi-led militia (and longtime government majority) did not accept it. Since 85 percent of the population was Hutu, logically, the Hutu-led government would have been considered legitimate by most of the population. The civil war began after Ndadaye's assassination three months after the election.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. The Hutu-led government was unable to maintain security control over 85 percent of the country's population. The national army was Tutsi-dominated, and the army and Tutsi paramilitary groups roamed the countryside and frequently attacked Hutu villages, massacring Hutu civilians.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. Both ethnic groups used neighboring countries as bases and sanctuaries. Bordering countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania were easily accessible, and both Hutus and Tutsis lived on both sides of the colonial borders. For example, the Tanzanian government was accused of providing Hutu extremists access to sanctuary in refugee camps at the border.¹⁴

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Although in this case there is a Hutu majority in Burundi, the Tutsi minority formed most of the army and officer corps and was responsible for the civil war. In 1993, when the conflict began, the national army was largely Tutsi-dominated and loyal to the former Tutsi president.

BURUNDI 1993–2005	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Hutu government defeat. The Tutsi rebels succeeded in toppling the newly elected Hutu majority government in 1993 and taking control of the government, though by the end of the conflict in 2005 the Tutsi minority government did ultimately yield some power. In 2005, when the war ended, Nkurunziza came to office under the CNDD-FDD. There has not been another Hutu president since Ndadaye, and the Hutu population is still marginalized by the government. Since the early years of the civil war, the CNDD-FDD has been accused of multiple counts of corruption, violence, and human rights abuses.¹⁵ Approximately 300,000 Burundi people were killed during the 12 years of the ethnic civil war.¹⁶

Endnotes

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