

Report from Kenya
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Burundi and Elections

October 27, 2009

A year ago everyone was excited about the election in the United States. After eight years people were very tired of George Bush. Some wanted Barack Obama to win while others liked John McCain and particularly his running mate, Sarah Palin. Here in my home town of Lumakanda, everyone was rooting for Obama since his father came from Kenya. People got up at 4:00 AM in the morning to go to "superbowl" parties for the debates between Obama and McCain, cheering every good move by Obama and booing for McCain. Following the exhortations of some of my friends in America, I tried to register some of the people in Lumakanda to vote, but alas the voting laws did not allow citizens of Kenya to vote in this election.

The next election in Burundi, scheduled for August 2010, does not bring this same excitement. As Gladys and I found during our week in Burundi, the election is bringing FEAR. Fear of political violence, fear of uncertainty, fear of chaos, fear of ethnic re-division, and at worst fear of the return to civil war. For example, on our drive up-country we were stopped by the police. Gladys and I were asked for our passports because, we were told, the elections were coming and the police had to be vigilant about who was moving around the country. This is only the second time in all my years in Africa that I have been asked for my passport while in-country. (The other time was also in Burundi during the civil war.) Because Burundi gives only a three day visa when you cross into the country by road, our passports were in Bujumbura so that we could get another visa. We were taken to the local police commander in Gitega who gave Adrien a lecture in Kirundi and we were on our way.

We met with the assistant administrator of Ruhororo Commune. When I asked him about the upcoming election, he first stated that there would be no problem, but then spoke for the next ten minutes on how the elections were hindering his work of rebuilding his community and getting the internally displaced people (IDP) to return to their homes. When we visited the Ruhororo IDP camp, the largest in Burundi with 8500 people, we learned that one political party that expected strong support from the Tutsi in the IDP camp did not want them to return home, because if they remained in the camp they would be a strong voting block for that party while if they returned home it would be difficult to communicate with them and enforce solidarity with that party.

Following the very successfully 2005 elections in Burundi people were buoyant and excited – this has now been lost. That election was won by the rebel group that, along with the Government Tutsi-led army, did much of the fighting, killing, and destruction in Burundi during the civil war. During the last 4 years this new government has been weak. The ruling party broke into two factions and all the other rebel groups (there were 15 rebel groups in the peace negotiations) plus the party that had formerly ruled Burundi vied for positions of influence and power. Government was paralyzed with bickering.

Peace, of course, brought progress, particularly because the international community poured funds into stabilizing Burundi. The greatest signs of this are the many new schools built throughout the Burundi countryside.

Just recently the last rebel group has agreed to disarm and join the political process. The major stumbling block was they had the word "hutu" in part of their party name and ethnic based parties had been abolished. Since they were known by their name, they did not want to change it, but it is clear that it was and will be a Hutu based ethnic party. All together I understand there are 43 registered political parties.

Although it is still ten months until the election, this fear, this uncertainty is everywhere we went and. Burundi is small and poor. If you win an election (at whatever level) you have a position of power and influence and a steady income. If you lose, you go back to hugger-mugger farming.

Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried". Those people who promote democratic elections as the best method of forming governments assume that the voting will be peaceful, fair, and that losers will accept their loss. But when this does not happen – when elections bring uncertainty and violence, when voting is rigged, when winner-take-all leads to alienated losers (which could be said at the moment for the losing Republican Party in the last US election) – are elections beneficial? Do they express the will of the people or the will of the most violent and corrupt? If this is not a satisfactory way to change and legitimize a government, what is a better one?

AGLI's current Election Violence Prevention Program, supported by a grant from the US Institute of Peace, is moving forward rapidly. Nine communities considered volatile from the last election have been chosen. Each will have four Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC) workshops concluding with the formation of Democracy and Peace associations which will then observe and monitor the whole election process.

Facilitators from these nine communities have each completed two 3-day workshops and will soon conduct a second one-week training. Then they will each continue with two more 3-day HROC workshops and 2-day follow-up workshops which will include community organizing against election violence, and the formation of the associations. Will these communities then handle the election and potential violence better than other communities? I'll let you know about a year from now after the election and our evaluation of the program!

The other major concern is how Burundi is doing since the end of the civil war in 2005. I have my own rural poverty index which I use to assess conditions as I travel around the countryside. It is based on how women and children dress (men are too difficult to assess since they frequently don't dress well even when they can).

Level 1 Destitute - Women wear old, dirty, and/or ragged clothing. Children are dressed in rags.

Level 2 Very poor - Women are decently dressed but without shoes, although perhaps with flip flops. All a woman needs to look presentable is a blouse and a rap-around (called a "kanga" in Swahili). Children are still dressed in rags.

Level 3 Poor - Women are slightly better dressed and have flip flops or shoes. Children are not dressed in rags, but still have no shoes.

Level 4 Doing Fine - Women are dressed in fashionable dresses, hair is cared for by straightening or braiding, nice sandals or shoes. Children are better dressed and some wear flip flops or shoes.

During the civil war, most rural areas in Burundi were at about level 2. Now, four years after the end of the civil war, I assess that some parts of Burundi, particularly those near Bujumbura and the major cities, have reached level 3. Nonetheless, the more remote communities such as Mutaho, and Ruhororo communes, where we do a lot of HROC work, are still mostly in level 2.

The Ruhororo IDP camp, where 8500 Tutsi have lived for the last fifteen years is still between level 1 and 2. I was actually surprised at how poorly off many of the IDP's were. Formerly they didn't seem much different from the local, mostly Hutu, population but with the end of the civil war the condition of the local population living on their plots of land have improved while the IDP's condition has not. With the uncertainty of the upcoming election and the potential for violence – I heard reports that some politicians were already inciting ethnic-based political language – I doubt that any IDP's will return home until after the election; and only then if it is peaceful.

I note the major difference between the situation in Burundi and that of Kenya and eastern Congo where the governments declared that peace has come, that IDP camps must close, and people must return to their homes. In Burundi it seems that there is no government fiat to close the IDP camps. In 2003 an AGLI workcamp built a house for a Tutsi in Kibimba, the Quaker mission center but I was told that person still has not returned to the very nice house we built him! I also heard that some IDP's had returned. Others would do so if they had housing in their former plots. But not for the next year!

I also have a prosperity index. How much of the wealth in a country is trickling down to the grassroots level? Rwanda had more than a 10% growth in GDP last year and 9% for the first six months of this year, Uganda had more than 10% growth last year and Kenya, due to the post election violence last year, had much more modest single digit growth. I do not have figures for Burundi but since it started at such a low level a possible 10% increase does not mean much in dollar terms.

My prosperity index is shining mabati. Mabati is a Swahili word used in the region for the simple reason that it is so much better than the English equivalent "corrugated iron

sheets". So we will use the term mabati. When mabati is put on the roof of a house, it shines brightly. After a year or two it dulls; after ten it begins to rust; after twenty it is very rusty; after thirty, mostly rusty; and after forty it is completely rusty and soon needing replacement.

The problem is that a mabati roof is expensive and requires people to have cash for them to be installed. For a typical, small, two-room house mabati alone costs about \$250 which is more half of the cost of an entire adobe or mud and wattle house. For a larger four-room house, Mabati costs about \$500. Clearly these are substantial outlays that can only happen if the rural population has surplus cash income.

During the civil war Burundi had no shining mabati except for the few houses AGLI workcampers and other organizations built. In AGLI's case, the homeowner had to have someone sleep in the unfinished house as soon as the mabati was put on so that no one would steal it at night.

After the end of the civil war, there was a lot of building in rural Burundi, but it was roofed with burnt tile which is made locally and costs about a fourth of the mabati roof. This time in Burundi we saw a considerable number of new mabati roofs in the countryside around Bujumbura and the major towns of Gitega, Ngozi, and Kayanza. There were still no shining mabati roofs in the very rural areas of Mutaho and Ruhororo except for one place where they were building teacher houses for a new secondary school. Nonetheless, in this area there is a lot of new housing being built with the tile roofing.

Income is in short surplus and is trickling down to the rural population and those close to wealthier urban areas, but has not yet reached more remote areas. Frankly I would assess this as substantial progress for one of the poorest countries in the world.

I also have a population index – how many women of child bearing age are carrying babies on their backs. When I lived in Kenya, in the 1960's, Kenya had the highest birth rate in the world and almost every woman of child bearing age had a baby on her back or was obviously pregnant. A few years ago, Burundi, along with Uganda and Afghanistan, had the highest birth rates in the world. This was clearly obvious using my baby-on-the-back index. As we traveled through Uganda my impression was that Uganda continues to have a very high baby-on-the-back index. My observation of Burundi was that on the whole Burundian women have substantially decreased their baby-on-the-back index. Teenage women in particular seemed frequently not to have a baby yet. This, for me, was a very encouraging sign since Burundi, which is already highly populated, will not achieve much progress unless there is a substantial lowering of the birth rate.

Peace,
Dave

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