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Burundi Elections: Going Well or Badly?

I just returned to Kenya from a week in Burundi trying to assess the status of the upcoming elections there and the progress of our program to Prevent Election Violence.

I met with diplomats from the Belgian, French, South African, and the European Union, attended a meeting with IFES – the consortium of NGO's concerned with the elections – and a meeting of NGO's with a delegation from Germany. On the grassroots side I met with 20+ election observers from the Quaker Peace Network and attended the first of five days of training for HROC's "citizen reporters". Naturally I talked with all kinds of people in between.

There are going to be five different elections between May 21 and September 7 for the various levels of government. The registration of voters had just been completed the week before I arrived. Did it go well or not?

Everyone is in agreement about one thing, namely that the election is not about ethnicity; that is, the division between Hutu and Tutsi which has defined Burundian politics since independence in the early 1960's. All parties are multi-ethnic and the divisions are now between regions of the country, political personalities, and like issues. This is seen by all as a substantial improvement. But there is no political difference between the 40+ parties as none seem to have any kind of political platform that they are running on. CAPI found that in Burundi only one of the major six or seven political parties even had an up-to-date webpage. In other words, the election is not at all about issues. If that is the case, then what is the election about? Power, wealth, and influence for the winners!

The conventional wisdom is that the current president, Pierre Nkurunziza, is quite popular and is likely to win the presidential race, but that his ruling party, CNDD-FDD, which was once the major rebel group that participated in the destruction of much of the country during the twelve year civil war between 1993 and 2005, is not very popular and likely to lose. So the president might need to rule the country in some kind of coalition that will evolve during the election.

But otherwise there is a major split between the international community and grassroots activists as to how the situation is developing. The international consensus was expressed by one of the diplomats from South Africa – the election, which cannot be expected to be perfect, is progressing satisfactorily. The following problems were considered "normal" and not something that should invalidate the electoral process:

- two politicians have been assassinated,
- youth groups from two of the major political parties in one province fought each other in a battle,
- there are substantial indications that various political parties are organizing and training youth groups who are the ones who do the actual election violence in places such as Burundi,

- one of the opposition party's offices, near where I was staying, was raided at eleven o'clock at night by men with guns and rocks and the police did not show up until the following morning,
- there were reports of fraud in the enrollment of voters – including people registering more than once, underage children being enrolled as voters, buying of voter identification papers, under-registering of female voters, the spreading of rumors (the best one I heard was that if people registered to vote the country would be hit by an earthquake like Haiti and all the houses would be destroyed), election enrollment offices are hard to find, the ruling political party is taking the enrollment books home at night and adding unauthorized names to the polling list, and other like misdeeds.

The Quaker Peace Network-Burundi (QPN-Burundi) is comprised of 9 Quaker and Quaker affiliated organizations in Burundi. This includes the AGLI assisted programs of HROC-Burundi and the Friends Women's Association, but also AVP, Mi-PAREC, THARS, and the Mennonite Central Committee (honorary Quakers in Burundi). In the past QPN has realized that too many people concentrate on the voting process itself by poll watching on the day of the election, but neglect all the activities during the enrollment of voters, the election campaigning period and the post election period of potential violence. So QPN-Burundi has decided to observe throughout the whole election process. QPN-Burundi had 35 observers during the two weeks of the enrollment of voters.

I met with over 20 of these observers. They were not nearly as confident that the election was going smoothly. They observed many of the incidences of fraud indicated above. In a number of cases they reported the misdeeds to the Burundi Electoral Commission and the Commission did respond by investigating and correcting the fraudulent practices. But how many of these were not caught by election observers or others? Since in order to win, every political party will need to seek whatever unfair advantages it can get because otherwise its opponents will win; will these numerous frauds cancel each other out? Or can there be a "free and fair" election when there is substantial grassroots fraud? I think that the answer is "no" because the ruling party, through its control of the organs of government, has much more power to instigate fraud than any of the other political parties. I was told that one of the "tricks" of the out-of-power political parties is to accuse the ruling party of fraud at every instance to build up the case that the ruling party is "stealing" the election. But is this a "trick" or true? The conventional wisdom is that the ruling party, if it lost, would not be willing to go back into the bush to start another civil war because they have become too used to the good life brought by governing the country. But this same statement can be used to indicate that the ruling party will do everything possible to win re-election.

Most people seem to expect some violence during the election, but at this time do not feel the country will return to chaos and civil war. The grassroots people, remembering previous elections, are still very much afraid of a violent outcome.

Perhaps an election in such an out-of-the-way country as Burundi seems of minor importance. But I think that this is an excellent example of the dynamics of elections in poor countries where the winners become wealthy and the losers return to hugger-mugger farming.

As time goes on, I'll let you know the outcome. My next report will be on the progress of our Burundi Election Violence Prevention Program.