

Attempted military coup in Burundi

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Clashes were reported Thursday in Bujumbura, capital of Burundi, between rival factions of the military, a day after Major General Godefroid Niyombare, the former intelligence chief, announced the ouster of President Pierre Nkurunziza. In a broadcast on two local radio stations Wednesday Niyombare declared the coup d'état, stating, "The activists of Burundi have decided to take charge of the nation."

The head of the Burundian army, Major General Prime Niyongabo, announced on state radio that the coup had failed and called on the rebel forces to surrender. Niyongabo claimed that pro-Nkurunziza forces remained in control of the presidential palace and government offices.

Burundi's police commissioner Venon Ndabaneze, a spokesman for the anti-Nkurunziza forces, denied the claims that the coup had failed and said that forces loyal to Niyombare remained in control of Bujumbura International Airport.

The attempt to oust Nkurunziza came in the wake of more than two weeks of large protests in the capital after the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party announced that the president would seek a third term.

Since the end of March more than two dozen people have been killed in the government's crackdown on protests, while at least 600 protesters have been arrested. The UN reports that as a result of the violence more than 70,000 people have already fled to the neighboring countries of Rwanda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

While he was visiting Somalia last week, US Secretary of State John Kerry denounced Nkurunziza's efforts to seek a third term as a move that "flies directly in the face" of the country's constitution. On Thursday the State Department released a statement saying that it

still recognized Nkurunziza as the legitimate leader of the country. The United States is currently providing \$80 million a year in weapons, training and support to the Burundi military.

While the constitution adopted in 2005 limits the president to two five-year terms, Nkurunziza's supporters argue that he should be allowed to stand for a third term since he was elected by the parliament in 2005 rather than by a popular vote.

The coup attempt was launched while Nkurunziza was in neighboring Tanzania at a meeting of the East African Community to discuss the political situation in his country. Niyombare was dismissed by Nkurunziza as head of the Burundi Intelligence Service (SNR) in February after a report he authored opposing the president's bid for a third term was leaked to the press.

A minority of the Burundi constitutional court handed down a decision in favor of Nkurunziza on May 5, one day after the court's top judge, Sylvere Nimpagaritse, fled the country after reportedly receiving death threats. Three other judges had also left the country, so the decision was handed down by only three of the seven judges on the court. Nimpagaritse told reporters that the court had been under "enormous pressure" from leading government officials to approve the president's bid for a third term.

Nkurunziza has ruled the deeply impoverished east African country since the end of a more than decade-long civil war in 2005, and there are concerns that the conflict over his third term could open up a renewed conflict between the country's two main ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsi.

The civil war began in 1993 after the country's first democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndayade, was assassinated by Tutsi elements within the military. Members of Ndayade's Burundi Democratic Front (FRODEBU) party responded by massacring as many as 25,000 Tutsi. Over the course of the 13-year

civil war it is estimated that more than 300,000 people were killed.

Both the incumbent president, Nkurunziza, and the leader of the military coup, Niyombare, are Hutus, but the mounting clashes have sparked fears that extremist Hutu elements aligned with the president could take revenge through ethnic massacres. Most of those fleeing the country are Tutsis.

The ongoing ethnic conflicts between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis in Burundi, like those that produced a genocidal slaughter in neighboring Rwanda, are rooted not in ancient tribal conflicts but rather in the imposition of the colonial system on the African continent by the European imperialists at the end of the 19th century.

Despite decolonization throughout the continent in the 1960s, the national borders and divisions established by the imperialist powers more than a century ago, to assist their efforts at cheaply extracting raw materials, remain a dominant factor in political life.

The area which is known as Burundi today first came under colonial rule with the establishment of German East Africa in 1885. The German Empire dispatched several hundred troops to suppress opposition but mainly exploited tribal differences to assert their control over an area of the continent that included present day Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanganyika (mainland Tanzania).

With the defeat of Germany in World War I, its colonial possessions were carved up amongst the victorious imperialist powers via the Treaty of Versailles signed in 1919. Belgium officially gained possession over the newly formed territory of Ruanda-Urundi, while Portugal gained control of the Kionga Triangle and the remaining territory became the British colony of Tanganyika.

Belgium, which controlled Ruanda-Urundi from 1916 until 1962, favored the Tutsi minority over the majority Hutus in education and positions in the colonial government, exploiting the traditional authority of the king, chiefs and sub-chiefs as means of imposing its control.

Two years after Belgium gave up direct colonial control over neighboring Belgian Congo, it granted independence to the territory of Ruanda-Urundi in 1962, which became the two separate countries of Rwanda and Burundi.

The more than 50 years of official independence for Burundi have brought nothing but continuous conflict and poverty for the mass of the population. The small land-locked nation ranks among the poorest in the world, with a per capita gross domestic product of just \$911 in 2014 as estimated by the IMF. According to the World Bank, 67 percent of the country's population lived in poverty in 2006.

While the majority of the population continues to rely on subsistence farming, and coffee accounted for more than 90 percent of the country's exports, Burundi's importance as a source of raw materials is growing, especially in the extraction of rare earth metals used in smartphones, wind turbines and solar panels. Rainbow Rare Earth Limited, in partnership with the German steel corporation ThyssenKrupp won a contract from the Burundian government in March to begin the extraction of bastnaesite and monazite among other minerals from an area in the country's Gakara region.



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