



Citizens from Burundi critical but supportive of regional dialogue, new report says

African leaders should decide how to revive the dialogue on Burundi, IRRI said today, as it launches a new report on dialogue and peace agreements in Burundi. The report's findings show that despite considerable scepticism, many Burundian citizens support a continuation of talks and strongly value previous peace agreements.

"While criticising the parties and the mediators, the citizens we interviewed see talks as the main way to reduce tensions in Burundi," Thijs Van Laer, programme manager at IRRI said today. *"Regional leaders should decide whether they are willing to make the dialogue work, or whether they hand over the responsibility to the African Union."*

After a political crisis erupted in Burundi in April 2015, the East African Community set up talks between the government and its ruling party on the one hand, and the political opposition on the other hand. It appointed a mediator, President Museveni of Uganda, and later a facilitator, former President Benjamin Mkapa of Tanzania. More than three years after the start of the crisis, however, the dialogue has yet to see tangible results and has seen a serious setback when constitutional amendments were recently approved in a contested referendum.

Between December 2017 and March 2018, IRRI and its partners interviewed 106 Burundian citizens, both in country and in exile, about their perception of previous peace agreements and the ongoing talks. Respondents especially criticised the government for not constructively engaging in the talks, and the facilitator, Benjamin Mkapa, for his alleged bias and for not sufficiently steering the process. Mkapa has faced serious challenges, including on deciding who should be able to participate. President Museveni's involvement has been limited. Several suggested that others – not from the region – should take over.

The people we spoke to credit previous agreements, especially the Arusha Agreement, for ending the civil war and for reducing ethnic tensions, but disagree on their relevance today: those critical of the ruling government lambasted the latter for not implementing these agreements, and blamed international guarantors for their lack of follow-up. Several, in favour of the sitting government, favoured a revision of ethnic quotas and constitutional amendments.

These amendments were presented as a result of an internal dialogue process that was criticised by most interlocutors in Burundi for only including government supporters, instructed or coerced into suggesting constitutional changes or attacking the Arusha Agreement. Many interpreted the internal dialogue as a move to distract international actors and keep President Nkurunziza in power, but he surprised many by announcing his mandate would end in 2020.

Respondents often compared the current dialogue context with the situation in the 1990s, when regional states put pressure on the Burundian government and armed groups to participate in the talks, mediated by influential leaders. Currently, regional pressure is lacking, opposition parties are struggling to prove their

relevance and armed groups constitute no real threat to those in power. As a consequence, there is little pressure on the Burundian government to make concessions.

In general, there was only limited consensus amongst our respondents on what should be the subject of the talks. Some rejected the process, others suggested that the talks should be about the implementation of the Arusha Agreement, while yet a third group suggested widening the scope to include a stronger emphasis on current problems, such as the return of refugees and the preparation of the 2020 elections. Contrary to those still in Burundi, refugees in Uganda established strong links between their personal situation and the need to make progress in the talks, including on public freedoms, accountability and security. Most rejected power-sharing as an outcome of any dialogue and expressed their disillusion in their political class and in regional leaders.

“Regional actors must listen to such voices and learn lessons from their successes and failures in the past,” Van Laer said. “Only if there is willingness by regional states, including Uganda and Tanzania, to press the Burundian government to engage in meaningful talks can Burundian citizens renew their trust in the political elites of Burundi and its neighbouring countries.”

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This report is part of a wider research project on the sustainability of peace agreements and the effectiveness of international mediation.