



## Promoting Peace in the Great Lakes Region: What are the Other Options?

John Windie Ansah

### Executive Summary

The current political tension between Burundi and Rwanda has not only proven to be a threat to economic activities and human lives. It equally has the greater danger of escalating into a sub-regional crisis in the East African Community (EAC) (herein referred to as the Great Lakes region). The promising economic prospects in the EAC sub-region, over the past few years, are gradually being sacrificed on the altar of political suspicion, mistrust, insecurity and authoritarianism.

The current conflict resolution approaches deployed have proven to be highly unworkable. It is because the approaches lack the moral and ethical finesse they would require convincing the two feuding political actors to compromise their respective stance. Hence, a conflict resolution approach that establishes the habitual observance of truth about all the suspicions is critical. An approach which assures a high sense of neutrality with the deployment of a mediator emerging outside the geographical confines of the Great Lake region should be given attention. Finally, the application of a conflict resolution approach which would direct a moral persuasion to the feuding actors must also be emphasised.

## Key Points

- The African Union should introduce a mediator with a moral platitude concerning democratic credentials who hails from outside the EAC sub-region.
- The African Union in collaboration with the EAC must embark on a fact-finding mission to ascertain the truth about the situations such as the possible use of mass movements and refugees for destabilisation purposes – a suspicion that is mutually held by either of the parties.
- The role of the mediator should focus on altering the subjective orientations and the authoritative tendencies of the political actors at the centre of the political feud.
- The EAC, in collaboration with the African Union, must ensure that government's support for warring factions are addressed at the supranational regional political level with sub-regional forces if allegations are verified.

## Introduction

The problem of conflict among neighbouring countries does not just have implication for political stability but also regional economic integration. Much as conflict may have its functions, the widely held viewpoint about conflict is that they need to be treated as a pathological situation. In truth, aftermaths of conflict, albeit somewhat functional, is non-adaptive. In Africa, the sub-regional blocs have experienced their pounds of inter-country conflict. However, currently ensuing in the Great Lakes region of Africa is the politically-motivated conflict between Burundi and Rwanda. From many disciplinary lenses, this conflict does not just call for analysis from historical, structural and subjective frameworks. In fact, the conflict also calls for innovative approaches that would engender peace, security and economic development in the two feuding countries and, by extension, the EAC sub-region. Situating the source of the political crisis within historical, functionalist and subjective contexts will not only deepen an understanding of conflict but also help appreciate the solutions to be offered.

In this policy brief, I seek to highlight the subjective undertones interspersed with some structural arrangements which have underpinned the conflict, unearth the real and potential implications of the conflict, examine the current strategies employed to curb the conflict and their lapses thereof, and then introduce some new options towards addressing the conflict between the Burundi and Rwanda.

### Where is the conflict coming from? Historical, Functionalist and Subjective perspectives

The historical experiences of Burundi and Rwanda could be regarded as commonly chequered; both countries have experienced

bloody civil wars with the intention of reversing an existing ethnically-based stratified social structure which was reinforced by colonialism. After gaining independence, some forms of political bonds were apparent until some traces of a self-centred realigned political support became visible in the relationship between high ranking political actors in these two countries. As a matter of fact, a political marriage of convenience between Rwanda and Burundi emerged and reached its peak when Rwanda, in substantial terms, offered massive financial support for Nkurunziza given the fact that his opponent, Pierre Buyoya, refused to support the Rwanda Patriotic Front (current party in power) during the guerrilla war<sup>1</sup>. However, this arrangement could only be seen as a matter of forming political alliances without universal human principles; it was an arrangement which was rather motivated by self-centred desires which were to make the known alliance to be short-lived, ostensibly. Thus, even though the historical experiences and ethnic formation commonalities of Burundi and Rwanda have played important roles in cementing the political relationships, intense acrimony between the high-ranking political leaders of these countries seems to have replaced the former cordiality.

Given the nature of the events that have taken place so far, it can be confidently mentioned that certain subjective elements have assumed a central stage of the relationship between the two heads of states - Burundi and Rwanda. The following reasons support this claim. First, the events surrounding the conflict have been largely characterized by mutual suspicions between two authoritarian leaders exhibiting abuse of incumbency each of which is suspicious of the other for masterminding an overthrow. Indeed, the acrimony got to its pinnacle when Rwanda accused Burundi of contributing to the M23 rebellion, a pro-Rwandan armed group which was active in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)<sup>2</sup>. A counter accusation from Burundi equally lays blame on Rwanda for supporting opposition members and Burundian

refugees engaged in mass protests. In practice, these were mass protests which were in reaction to the enactment of legislation targeting members of civil society. Such legislation enacted in 2010, and expanded with other laws in 2013, was also meant to shrink the democratic space, equally restricted public gatherings.<sup>3</sup> The intensity of the mass protest in 2018 has lingered on throughout the mid portions and subsequently rendered the acrimony even murkier since Nkuruziza declared his intention to seek a third term.

Making mention of the Burundian refugees in the analysis of the undercurrents of the conflict introduces some new interweaves. The narratives of the Burundian president about the presence of the Burundian refugees as supplanted by political detractors brings to the fore some glimpses of contradictions in the light of the fact the Rwandan president had also claimed that the refugees were repatriated because they refused to undergo a biometric registration exercise in Rwanda. Where then lays the truth? On this score, the political crisis between Rwanda and Burundi could also be regarded as a matter of mistrust and counter-accusations founded on unverified assertions.

From the foregoing discussions, it can be argued that the political conflict between Rwanda and Burundi could be seen as a function of a political salad of suspicion, mistrust, authoritarianism and insecurity creating a superstructure of unfounded counter accusations of similar wrongs by leaders of the two states. However, which institutions, groups and individuals are bearing the brunt of the impetuous political conflict?

## What have been the real and potential effects?

The political economy, human rights, and social welfare implications of the feud between Burundi and Rwanda are real in these countries, albeit unequal. Since the occurrence of the neighbouring country's feud, trade activities have been adversely affected because transporters with a fleet of trucks have remained stranded in Bujumbura; a situation which has lingered since 2015 as both countries have been forced to limit movement across their common border.

Given the fact that Bujumbura is a crucial location for the trade corridors of the Great Lake region, any violence which erupts hamper the massive trade gains much as it would impede business attractiveness. This is because of the loss of confidence in such a political boiling point. In addition, Burundian traders are compelled to change vehicles before they can transit to Kampala.<sup>4</sup> In other economic fronts, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and tourism receipts to Burundi, in particular, have been affected. Foreigners are beginning to stay away from the country as airline companies such as FlyDubai have suspended operations to Bujumbura International Airport (BJM) from January 2018<sup>5</sup> largely seen in a significant fall in inbound traffic.

Beyond the economic implications, there are clear traces of the deprivation of human rights. Lives are lost in spates of mistaken identity at a point when ordinary citizens who have no idea of border demarcations have typically wandered off into a no man's land<sup>6</sup> with other fatal consequences. By virtue of the high degrees of insecurity associated with the political feud, international donors and aid agencies have been observed not only evacuating their experts, but they are also suspending aid programmes<sup>7</sup> which are visibly jeopardizing the welfare needs of some citizens. As these implications stare the political economy and legal spaces of the two feuding countries, and the sub-region at large, some efforts to address the feud seem to have

been carried out. What are they? How effective have they been?

### What has been done so far, what are the deficiencies?

The process towards addressing this political crisis has been failingly characterized by the appointment of the Ugandan president as the lead mediator for peace talks between Burundi's government and opposition groups on 4 December 2018.<sup>8</sup> Even though the international actors such as the United States, African Union, and various European countries have backed the mediation attempts by urging both opposition groups and the government to negotiate, since the election in July 2018<sup>9</sup>, Museveni has been unsuccessful in bringing the parties together. This is because his influence on the high-ranking political actors has been weak. This is so within the reality check context that Museveni equally exhibits such traces of forceful long stay in power just like the political actors whose feud he has sought to mediate. On the grounds that the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, has been in power for more than thirty years renders his mediating powers practically flawed in the eyes of the disputing parties because his democratic track record is questioned in the remit of persuasion. The second issue is about the posture of accusation in the mediating role which reduces the effectiveness of the mediation. The accusative stance comes to the fore as Yoweri Museveni keeps insisting that Rwanda had recruited and supported Burundian refugees who had then tried to destabilize Burundi.

The next questionable approach which smacks of inconsistency and non-conciliation is the stance by Burundian President, Pierre Nkurunziza, as he calls for a special regional summit on what he describes as an 'open conflict' with neighbouring Rwanda. Meanwhile, a letter had already been leaking on social networks<sup>10</sup>, as confirmed by Agence

France Presse from sources within the presidency, purporting Nkurunziza to have accused Rwanda of being the origin of the three-year crisis in Burundi. On such grounds, calling for a summit founded on accusation becomes somewhat untimely and not entirely effective. This is because the summit would then appear as a formal attempt to distract from the truth of self-accountability and, more so, without recourse to 'reason'<sup>11</sup>. The absence of reason in the reconciliation narratives may suppress the possibility of altering subjective orientations of feuding parties. Hence, both approaches, which appear in forms of mediation and reconciliation, could be seen as characteristically lacking the moral and ethical finesse to address the political conflict.

Having known the nature of the political crisis, its non-adaptive political, economic and human outcomes coupled with the possibility of cross-border violence, some exhibits of attention are required. What then is the way forward?

### Policy Recommendations

Curbing the rising tensions between Burundi and Rwanda requires efforts which will cure the political disease of suspicion, mistrust, insecurity and authoritarianism. The theory of communicative action which appeals to reason and common understanding is a critical tool for addressing this visibly escalating conflict. The process of seeking 'common understanding'<sup>12</sup> may be devoid of accusations and counter-accusations and rather be founded on truth and 'reason'. How are the truths supposed to be established? Fact-finding is fundamental in ascertaining the truth. The fact-finding is supposed to be set on the premise that some events about the repatriation of the refugees have attracted contradictory narratives. Arriving at the truth in the face of the contradictory narrative will constitute the best way to mitigate suspicion.

Further, the need for a process to reach a common understanding and arrive at the truth requires a process of mediation. It should be a mediation exhibit which is devoid of accusation and as fundamental to a conflict resolution approach that assures neutrality. However, selecting the mediator from within the sub-region will not be appropriate because, as it stands now, Burundi feels followed and confronted by Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and DRC with constitutional questions<sup>13</sup>. This has rendered these countries to lose their neutrality in the eyes of Burundi. Thus, the mediator must come from outside the sub-region and must be somebody with an enviable democratic track record. This option assures neutrality and offers enough bases for emulation and persuasion.

Finally, the phenomenon of the government's purported support for warring factions must be handled and addressed at the supranational regional political level with sub-regional forces.

## Conclusion

The conflict between Burundi and Rwanda, largely, could be observed as a function of the subjective orientations which have become central to the political relations between the heads of states of the two countries. Such acrimonious relationships have repudiated the long-standing historical and social bonds between two countries with the same patterns of structural ethnic formation and diversity. As the conflict surges, with its non-adaptive political, economic, human rights and social welfare aftermaths, it is apparent that the current conflict resolution methodologies employed are not aiding the process towards maintaining peace in the sub-region. Given the potential and real effects of the conflict, the search for peace and security in the Great Lakes region of Africa is not merely a political imperative but a foundation for economic prosperity and a guarantee to human rights of the citizens in the

EAC sub-region of Africa. Critical attention is therefore required. It is an attention that would contain a mediatory approach which made up of all the moral and ethical finesse that can alter the character of the subjective orientations of the political actors that are located at the fulcrum of the feud.

## About the Author

John Windie Ansah is a senior lecturer in political economy at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Cape Coast where he has lectured political sociology, social change, and political economy since 2010. He was appointed as a junior faculty member of the Institute of Global Law and Policy (IGLP), Harvard Law School, in 2015 where he lectured in the area of 'Society of Global Corporations' in a writing workshop held in Qatar.

Prior to that he had participated in the writing workshop in 2013 and earned him a member of the IGLP alumni network. He is also a member of the International Political Association and the Ghana Sociological and Anthropological Association.

He served as a co-consultant to the International Labour Organization on projects which produced background data on employment in the agriculture and agro-processing sectors as well as the infrastructure sector in 2017. Since February 2018, he has been serving as a co-consultant for the Ministry of Energy, Ghana, on a Charcoal Value Chain Analysis project.

He has also served as a resource person to a number of workshops on Energy Justice (2017) and Sustainable Livelihoods (2018) organized by Kultur Studier, in The Netherlands.

## End notes

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