Losing Balance in Burundi

by Nancy K. Hayden

In 2007, after more than a decade of civil war, Burundi began exporting peace as the newly integrated Burundi Forces de Defense National (FDN) contributed the second largest contingent of troops to the UN-authorized African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). During this time, a fragile peace was also emerging in Burundi. But in the past several months, that peace has unraveled in reaction to the proposed third-term candidacy of President Nkurunziza with violent protests, extensive repression, an attempted coup and political assassinations.

It is tragically ironic that AMISOM mandated the Burundi troops, alongside their Ugandan partners, to create security conditions for a national government to establish itself peacefully in Somalia, while protecting civilians and respecting human rights – the very factors lacking in Bujumbura today. As part of my dissertation research at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, I traveled to Burundi in August 2014 to interview FDN troops about the challenges they faced in carrying out the AMISOM mission. On the road from the Bujumbura International Airport to my hotel, the loads carried on the back of bicycles challenged belief. Tired-looking, bare foot laborers from the fields joined modern, energetic “taxi” drivers as we neared the city, balancing enormous, unwieldy burdens over bumpy, pot-holed and congested roads.

Down the street from the Ministry of Defense, I conducted interviews at offices of the Security Sector Development Program (DSS) – a reform initiative jointly operated by the Dutch and Burundi governments since the end of the civil war to integrate and train police forces. I started my interviews with the question, why did Burundi take up this dangerous mission that no one else wanted? Why did they stay in Somalia as soldiers were killed in the early years, enjoying few victories, facing overwhelming odds and lacking adequate supplies?

With more than 80% of the population living below poverty and severe underfunding of the security sector, many say the Burundi army is in the peacekeeping business for the money and training – which greatly exceeds that which is provided for the police at home. But I discovered something deeper – a commitment to peace motivated by the past efforts of the international community and regional leaders to stabilize Burundi, which culminated in the Arusha Accords. “In our culture, when you receive, you give back what you can. And we felt that it was time for African troops to bring peace to Africa, not troops from other continents.”
The Burundian troops described climbing aboard the military transport planes to Somalia with their hearts fully committed to the AMISOM mandate. They returned home transformed after liberating communities from Al Shabaab and participating in humanitarian relief efforts. The ideals taught in training camps – using their power to create a space for peace and justice with the primary goal of protecting civilians and human rights – became real in the process. As one officer told me, “The soldiers stand taller when they get back to Bujumbura.”

And there is the rub. All of the soldiers I met embrace the principle that the security sector should protect civilians and their communities, not just political elites. Moving towards the 2015 elections, however, they foresaw the precarious balance required to uphold these principles at home, and expressed deep frustration at the lack of public space or partners for acting on what they learned abroad. This frustration is most likely to be the root cause of the attempted coup, not a personal grab for power.

Today, the Minister of Defense who hosted my visit is in Belgium; his assistant has fled to Ethiopia. Many more officers I met are unreachable, as violence escalates in the rural areas, from which more than 100,000 have fled. These military officers and soldiers are critical for providing a moderating influence over those fomenting violence and a return to ethnic divisions in the security sector. In the wake of the attempted coup, they need a space and a partner for doing so. One such partner could be the Catholic Church, a dominant actor in Burundi with a legitimate and influential public voice for peace.

Punishing the Burundi army as a whole for the missteps of a few and threatening to cut them off from their role as peacekeepers is counterproductive. We need to provide space for voices such as the last soldier I interviewed. One of the first to risk his life disembarking from the plane in Mogadishu when it was still under control of Al Shabaab, he ended our interview by giving thanks to God for bringing me to Burundi to hear his story and learn of the hope that had been born his heart to become an importer, as well as an exporter, of peace. We should be doing all we can to help him keep his balance in navigating toward that peace, while carrying the burden of the past.

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Hayden's research in Burundi was supported in part by the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).