



Jean-Paul Nizigiyimana

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## Protests in Burundi are about more than asserting political pressure

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Jean-Paul Nizigiyimana explores the various overlapping motivations of protesters who have claimed the streets of Burundi's capital over the last 30 years. Providing demonstrators with both outlets for voiced frustrations and even financial opportunism, Nizigiyimana nuances the functions of these protests, including but not only those organised around the controversial 2015 elections.

*This blog forms part of the [Idjwi Series](#) which results from a writing retreat on Idjwi Island in Lake Kivu, DRC during which regional researchers gathered to present and refine their own research in November 2019.*

### Various shades of activism and opportunism

Burundi experienced its initial wave of political protests from 1995 to 1996, with citizens contesting a 'legitimate' and 'democratic' regime in power. In the

grips of the 1993 Burundian civil war, protesters, predominantly secondary school students, demanded that President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya be deposed. During sports activities, songs were often heard insulting the President – in full view of his defence forces. Accusing him of failing to secure peace in the country, these protests succeeded in weakening president Ntibantunganya's popular support. Formal negotiations for the Arusha Accords began in 1998 to bring an end to Burundi's civil war. During this period, private radio stations including UMWIZERO were established to inform the population about peace processes and to promote freedom of expression. Later in 2000, the Arusha agreement was signed and seemed to have resolved years of the country's cyclical crises. Since 2005, the ruling party National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) has attempted to demonstrate its efficacy in realising a respect for freedom of expression. Despite this claim, various attempts by the ruling party to restrict such rights have been observed. Burundian protesters, for their part, have continued to resist such actions. The whistle-blowing demonstrations that occurred in November 2011 are examples of such resistance. Every day around 12h30, residents of Bujumbura, the country's capital, blew their car horns in support of Burundian media, in defence of their freedom of expression and the liberty of the press. Radio stations, particularly private ones, continued to support demonstrators by broadcasting these mass demonstrations. Another wave of protests occurred between 2014 and 2015. These were possible thanks to Burundian authorities' gradual recognition of the right to freedom of expression and a free press over the past decade. As an observer of these protests, I propose that they served multiple functions including means of expression, exertion of political pressure as well as resource-generating activities for protesters.

## Popular and media support for demonstrators

Of note during this second wave of protests is the support of Burundi's media for demonstrators. An example is served by the treatment of **Bob Rugurika**, the director of the Radio Publique Africaine (RPA). He was imprisoned in January 2015 following his investigations into the murder of three Italian nuns in Bujumbura three months earlier. Following calls for his release by demonstrators, upon his release on 19 February 2015 a crowd of motorcycle

taxi drivers welcomed him from where he was released in Bugarama (a 45-minute drive from Bujumbura) in a cavalcade of support up to the RPA headquarters. Some refer to this protest as a 'manifestation of joy' in the streets of Bujumbura, claiming that Rugurika's release is testament to real and sustainable change in Burundi. These protests were not only organised without any ethnic or partisan motivations, but also without monetary interest. As an illustration, one of the protesters interviewed reported to have offered to give his last 2,000 Burundi francs (1.10 US\$) to help pay Bob Rugurika's bail. During Rugurika's release, protesters sang *Urabaza abo ba DD iyo ukuri kwaroye*, literally meaning 'ask the CNDD-FDD members where the truth has gone'. This song later became the favourite slogan of protesters against Pierre Nkurunziza's **third term presidential candidacy**, synthesising about him popular complaints. On 25 April 2015, a crowd consisting of members of the ruling party descended upon the streets to support the announcement of the President's candidacy for a third term. The song *Abagumyabanga twese turi umwe, ntakizodutandukanya*, which means 'As the secret keepers, we are one and nothing will separate us', was sang in front of the RPA headquarters in response to the first song. The demonstrations served as a means of expression and an exertion of political pressure for supporters of the government as well as the opposition.

## The protesters and their motivations

The profile of protesters is similar on both sides – those in favour of and those opposed to the president's third mandate. They are young unemployed citizens or those with low paid jobs. As such, they are open to easy manipulation, both ideologically and financially. To this end, demonstrations have also gradually become income-generating opportunities, a means to secure livelihoods. Some protesters testify to having received promises of money, beer or food at the end of their day in exchange for participating in the protests. Organisers of pro- and anti-regime protests made promises of a better future. Importantly, the exercise of political power is seen as providing opportunities, 'a cake', as it is called in Burundi, to those who show support to the ruling party. Everyone wants a slice. Protests have enabled activists to express their opinions of the given political context, their support as well as their criticism. Young activists have invaded the streets and continue to do so, making their voices heard and

amplifying those of organisers. Moreover, protests have made earning a living possible amidst the extreme poverty that prevails in Burundi. Consequently, the enthusiasm of these young Burundians has become their daily survival, and the more virulent they are in their protests the more they are appreciated by organisers. Notable, since the *coup d'état* on 13 May 2015, the only protests allowed (aside from the recent electoral propaganda) are those organised by the ruling party. The protests are a crucial form of expression for Burundians, used to make public claims or simply to access means of subsistence. Since protests were regularly organised with the support of some private media in 2010, after their disproportionate repression and the **closure of those media outlets in 2015** they have become a luxurious tool only available for people who want to demonstrate their support to the regime. But even in these demonstrations, both activism and opportunism are the ruling principles of participation. The Idwji Writing Retreat was jointly funded by The Open University's **Strategic Research Area in International Development and Inclusive Innovation** and the **Centre for Public Authority and International Development** (CPAID), LSE. *'Clashes in Burundi', 2015. Credit: REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic is licensed under creative commons (CC BY-NC 2.0).*

### About the author



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Jean-Paul Nizigiyimana holds a BA from in Political Sciences and International Relations from the Université du Lac Tanganyika. Since 2012, he has been working as a research assistant and consultant on issues related to peacebuilding and identity politics in the Africa's Great Lake Region. He is the author of numerous reports. He contributed to academic publications, including *Conjonctures d'Afrique Centrale*.

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