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What Burundi teaches us about political crisis and displacement

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Based on research insights shared at Burundi Research Network Conference in Nairobi in July 2019, Andrea Purdeková invites us to reverse the mainstream relationship between empirics and theory. Taking the example of Burundi, Purdeková illustrates why the framing of 'crisis' and displacement means we need to reconsider our conceptual lens and further disengage from the colonial gaze.

Part of the Idjwi Blog Series, this blog introduces the Burundian contemporary context along with key epistemic motivations to support regional researchers to be lead authors of their own research – a goal pursued during the writing retreat on Idwji Island, Lake Kivu, DRC, in November 2019.

As Burundi awaited official results of another round of high-stakes elections in May 2020, five years after Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term unleashed protests, repression and the closing off of Burundi from the international community, the country had been enveloped in common tropes of 'crisis' and 'cycles' of violence yet again. Now more than ever this occurs from a distance, epistemic and physical, only exacerbated by COVID-19. Even as the global North distances, it does not avert its gaze. If anything, the pandemic has an amplifying effect on the imaginaries of violence in Africa.

In what follows, I show how the 'Burundi crisis' frame limits our understanding of conflict-related displacement and how lessons from Burundi disrupt rather than affirm what we thought we knew and prompt us to re-examine our conceptual lens.

Re-displacement as political exit: the limits of the crisis frame

One of the starkest events of 2015 was a rapid and massive displacement of close to half a million Burundians, numbers matched only at the height of the civil war itself. Less than a decade later, Burundi as a success story of mass resettlement turned into a case study of mass re-displacement linked to electoral turmoil. In April 2020, most of those displaced in 2015 (around 330,409 people) remained abroad. How do we best conceptualise this displacement? Does the trope of 'political crisis' help us grasp recent displacement in Burundi?

While in 2015 the government proclaimed people were 'fleeing peace,' it was long before this that Burundians in rural areas questioned whether they really had 'peace', pointing to continued insecurity, simmering local conflicts over land and the problematic nature of return. Where the re-engineering of the state-citizen bond is key to reintegration, Lukunka shows many returnees 'felt erased from the political landscape'. It is in this context that the crisis label readily embraced by foreign

commentators since 2015 completely obscured longer-term dynamics and the perspectives from rural spaces, privileging instead the mass protests and violence in urban areas.

The crisis discourse is particularly problematic in the Great Lakes where conflicts are interconnected, spanning over decades and borders. The crisis frame reduces this complexity to disconnected, acute instances of mass violence. This excision makes it difficult to adequately explain the recent, rapid mass wave of post-war displacement. Indeed, displacement from and within Burundi between 2013 and 2015 at the cusp of the 'crisis' upends the notion that election-related instability in any simple way 'caused' re-displacement. A different perspective – one from local post-war arenas and their inhabitants – directly invites us to contemplate and complicate broader assumptions, concepts and theories of post-war displacement.

Re-displacement and conflict: three theoretical considerations

The crisis frame obscures and mischaracterises at least three issues when it comes to the conflict-displacement nexus: how unrest and displacement interact, how displacement itself shapes conflict, and the nature of re-displacement.

First, the crisis frame assumes that the 2015 crackdown directly produced mass displacement. Looking at the UNHCR refugee flow data, the picture is more complex: most people fled in anticipation of a major escalation, not in response to it. Burundians were leaving in large numbers since April 2015, with crossings peaking 24–26 April when Nkurunziza announced his intention to run, and thus just before mass protests erupted in Bujumbura. Numbers of displaced people then peaked again during a single weekend in June 2015, just ahead of the parliamentary elections. Most people were not leaving from urban areas

wrecked by open confrontation and increasing violence, but from rural areas.

In addition to anticipation, people left for a number of reasons, only one of which was violent crackdown. A full 26% of people surveyed by Schwartz left solely due to local level issues, while only 28% left exclusively due to national unrest, the rest mentioning a mix of factors. The nature of 'insecurity' implicated in their move was also more complex than one of direct violence: it embroiled localised land conflicts, intimidation, memories of past violence, unemployment, and poverty –- including in areas of resettlement. In sum, we see at least three key factors complicating any simple link between violent crackdown and displacement: anticipation, exacerbation (of pre-existing conflicts), and multiple motivations. How do we then conceptualise the cause of this anticipatory displacement in a way that reaches beyond acute violence?

Second, the crisis lens not only portrays displacement as an effect of open violence, but it tends to view it through a depoliticised, humanitarian lens. Instead, Burundi teaches us displacement is transformative of conflict and produces lasting political dynamics. In a recent article, Lichtenheld shows how displacement is 'assortative' and produces greater legibility of loyalties. But displacement not only signals to the regime. It is also a very real clearing of opposition organisers and voters from the political arena. Burundi shows displacement in a context of political succession – rather than civil war where it is still predominantly theorised – is not either/or, but is at once assortative, punitive and politically pragmatic. In 2015, repression and vast displacement dampened opposition, unworked protest and produced a very different 2020 election. How does 'peace-time' or 'post-war' mass displacement shape electoral dynamics and regime durability?

Third and finally, Burundi 2015 events in a longue durée perspective make us question how we conceptualise displacement itself. Many people who fled Burundi in 2015, especially those heading to Tanzania,

returned to their former sites of refuge. Re-displacement is a unique feature of the refugee flow, but as a term it is limiting too. What we face is not just another 'wave' of refugees, but instead people are entrenching in displacement. How should we conceptualise political community and belonging for those for whom 'return' to a country or origin is but an interlude?

A careful analysis of the massive displacement ahead and around the 2015 re-election in Burundi brings forth new questions and an important epistemic re-articulation: displacement is not indicative of crisis as disruption, a dissolution of order, but rather an intensification of much deeper dynamics. Growing from an 'unsettling peace', displacement is reflective of a particular post-war order. Building on rich exchanges in Nairobi last July, the Idjwi Blog series authors further illustrate the need to revert the unequal relations between empirics and theories when it comes to the study of identity, civil mobilisation, politics, precarity and insecurity in the African Great Lakes region.

Photo. Burundian refugee camp in Lusenda, South Kivu province, 2015. Credit: MONUSCO / Abel Kavanagh is licensed under creative commons (CC BY-SA 2.0).

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