

The Human Right Situation in Burundi in the Upcoming Elections

Burundi is again thrown in a “Metrix” as a click of disgruntled military gurus attempted an unsuccessful coup after the President Mr. Pierre Nkurunziza announced his candidacy ahead of the presidential election on 26 June 2015.

Mr Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said: “I am deeply worried by the extremely tense situation in Burundi. We are receiving alarming messages from human rights defenders and journalists fearing for their safety. I urge the Burundian authorities to ensure their protection and to guarantee that there will be no unlawful reprisals following Wednesday’s failed coup” .

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Right (the Commission) have also express concern regarding the deteriorating situation in Burundi. The Commission contends that:

[...]the Government of Burundi’s efforts to restore calm, law and order within Burundi; and specifically, urges it to investigate and hold accountable all those who are responsible for perpetrating human rights violations and to urgently take measures to put a stop to the violence and the use of inflammatory language which could increase tensions and spark inter-communal conflict;

The Commission reiterates the contents of its Resolution ACHPR/Res.293 (EXT.OS/XVII) 2015: Resolution on 2015 Elections in Africa, and calls on the Government of Burundi to safeguard the human rights of all citizens including the freedom of movement, assembly, association and expression during this electoral period, as well as equal access to media during campaign for all stakeholders in conformity with its international and regional obligations;

The Commission also calls on the Government of Burundi to take all necessary measures to guarantee the credibility of the electoral process in accordance with international and regional rules and standards and to collaborate with all stakeholders towards ensuring respect for human rights throughout the country.

However, the Commission cautioned that all forms of violence, intimidation or harassment perpetrated against its citizens should be frown against. This led me to restate Prof. Mahmood Mamdani during a talk in The Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University titled “Palestine’s South African Moment?” He said:”We live at a time when political violence has

been conflated with criminal violence, when all forms of resistance are being re-defined as terror; when repression is embraced as war on terror.”

On 17 May 2015, President Nkurunziza re-surfaced in the Capital Bujumbura after the failed coup; in his address to the nation, he focus on the threat post by Islamic militants from Somalia. At a news conference, Mr. Pierre Nkurunziza said he was “very preoccupied” by the threat posed by the al-Qaida-linked militant group al-Shabaab. “We take seriously the threat of al-Shabaab.” The events that unfold after the failed coup in the country is unpleasant said the Guardian News that reported that:

Zedi Feruzi, the head of opposition party UPD, and his bodyguard were killed in the Ngagara district of Bujumbura, said Anshere Nikoyagize, the head of the civil society group Ligue ITEKA. Residents said he was killed near his home.

Burundi is facing its deepest crisis since the end of an ethnically fuelled civil war in 2005. The unrest was triggered by the president’s decision to seek another five years in office. Opponents, such as Feruzi, have said it is unconstitutional.

As indicated earlier, many Burundians have fled to neighboring countries for safety; the UN says about 90,000 people.

East African leaders recently in a summit held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania have urged Mr. Nkurunzizi to postpone the elections due to take place in June, 2015 in order to maintain peace. His determination to go in for the third term as a presidential candidate has attracted criticism; for instance:

Protest leader Pacifique Nininahazwe, as quoted by AFP, said on Sunday: "We are disappointed because the summit said nothing on the question that we are concerned about."

"We are going to stage even bigger demonstrations than we have done so far in order to get Nkurunziza to leave office," he added.

The African Commission on Human Rights have called for cooperation and peace to enable the country return to normal, it is unclear what lie ahead of Burundians as the election date draw closer. One can only speculate that the election will take place but it is unclear whether the process will be fair as many have raised doubts about the election including foreign actors.