

(UN)DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY IN THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION

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The last months of 2015 have been politically intense for the African Great Lakes region. In Uganda, elections are scheduled for this month and the campaign has been the most contested since Yoweri Museveni came into power in 1986, pitting not only his traditional adversary - Dr. Kizza Besigye - against him, but also his former prime minister, Patrick Amama Mbabazi. Ten years ago, in July 2005, a constitutional reform removed restrictions on the number of presidential terms and Museveni, who was re-elected in 2006 and in 2011, will likely win the next term in office, pushing is permanence in power past 30 years.

Constitutional changes extending indefinitely -or almost indefinitely- the number of presidential terms are not typical of Uganda alone. In Rwanda the Parliament passed a bill in October allowing President Paul Kagame, whose second seven-year term expires in 2017, to run for an

additional seven-year term and then again for two terms of five years each (thus potentially allowing him to stay in power up to 2034). In a referendum held in December, Rwandans showed massive support for the bill, which was confirmed with 98% of the vote.

In neighbouring Burundi things went very differently when in April President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his intention to seek a third term in office in the upcoming political elections. According to the 2005 Arusha peace agreement (signed to end the decade-old civil war started in the early '90s) the Burundian Presidency can be held only for two terms. Nonetheless, Nkurunziza run again and won the elections, and his intention not to relinquish power pushed the country into a serious political crisis with violent implications and a lingering fear of a return to civil war.

With an eye set on the future of the region, T.wai and University of Torino organized a round table in November titled "Conflicts in the Great Lakes Region: A Critical Perspective", bringing together Luca Jourdan (University of Bologna), Frederik Laker (London School of Economics), Cecilia Pennaccini (University of Torino) and Stefano Ruzza (T.wai and University of Torino).

COUNTRY	PRESIDENT	IN OFFICE SINCE	NEXT ELECTIONS SCHEDULED FOR	POLITY IV INDEX SCORE (2014)	FREEDOM HOUSE RATING AND STATUS (2015)
Burundi	Pierre Nkurunziza	2005	2020	+6	5.5 - Not free
DRC	Joseph Kabila	2001	November 2016	+5	6.0 - Not free
Rwanda	Paul Kagame	2000	2017	-3	6.0 - Not free
Uganda	Yoweri Museveni	1986	February 2016	-1	5.5 - Not free



By legally removing or otherwise by passing limits to terms in office, several African leaders are pushing democracy to its edge, and the outcomes of these processes can be extremely different, as recent events in Rwanda and Burundi have shown very clearly.

The referendum in Rwanda, though criticised by the opposition as hasty and undemocratic, came after 3.7 million people signed a petition asking for a constitutional change in order to allow Kagame a third term. He is largely perceived to be responsible for the stability and economic growth of the country, and strong popular support in his favour was also confirmed by a survey by IPSOS (a world-renowned research agency).

In Burundi, on the other hand, both Nkurunziza's government and his opposition have been accused by UN officials of fuelling ethnic violence. According to Medecins Sans Frontieres, about 1000 people flee to Tanzania every day to escape violence. Since last April, the country has witnessed an attempted military coup d'état and waves of protests and uprisings, often quelled violently. The latest outbursts include the attacks of last December against army barracks in the capital Bujumbura, the first launched against military targets since the unrest started. That same month Nkurunziza declared the African Union's decision to deploy 5000 peacekeepers to protect civilians from growing political violence to be a violation of sovereignty, and threatened to fight them.

Eyes will soon set on Joseph Kabila, President of the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2001, as his term will expire in 2016. Kabila has yet to confirm whether he will step down, as he should under law. His spokesperson has so far stated his will to respect the constitution, but the opposition has accused him of trying to postpone the election and amend term limits, denouncing his intentions of a "constitutional coup d'état".

The lack of leader turnover, even when justified with claims of stability and prosperity, comes at

the expenses of democratic quality. Of fifty sub-Saharan countries, only 12% are ranked free by Freedom House (which uses a scale from 1, the highest degree of freedom, to 7, the lowest). The Centre for Systemic Peace has its Polity IV index which summarizes democratic quality on a scale from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy). The latest available data show a +5 for DRC that needs to survive past the upcoming elections, while Rwanda and Uganda - with a score of -3 and -1 respectively - lean already toward the autocratic end of the spectrum. Given the events the last year, Burundi will likely be downgraded from +6 in 2014, while Freedom House confirms its rating of 5.5 (i.e. "not free").

Shrinking democratic quality is also linked to broader concerns about security. As Freedom House reports, "In Uganda, a series of recent laws that targeted the opposition, civil society, the LGBT community, and women led to serious rights abuses and increased suppression of dissent. Burundi's government cracked down further on the already-restricted opposition in advance of 2015 elections, and critics of the authorities in Rwanda faced increased surveillance and harassment online." As the region steers through a round of critical elections in the 2015-17 period, political improvement will hardly come about. Still,

the need to map the effects of this (un)development on security is a major reason to keep an eye steadily focused on the region and its political processes.

Dr. Stefano Ruzza (T.wai and University of Torino) at Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda) for the Italian Ethnological Mission to Equatorial Africa (10 December 2015)



T.wai and University of Torino joint workshop: "Conflicts in the Great Lakes Region: A Critical Perspective" (4 November 2015)

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