

AFRICA

Burundi Government Says It Has Crushed Coup Attempt

By SADI NIYUNGEKO and DAN BILEFSKY MAY 15, 2015



Photo

Loyalists carried Willy Nyamitwe, a spokesman for Burundi's president, in Bujumbura, the capital, as they celebrated news that a coup attempt had been thwarted. Credit Jennifer Huxta/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

BUJUMBURA, Burundi — Loyalist police and army officers have crushed an attempted coup in [Burundi](#), the government said Friday. The announcement followed two days of confusion over who controlled the central African country, which has been shaken by weeks of violent protests over the president's ambitions to stay in office.

Despite the official declaration that the overthrow plot had been defeated, it was by no means clear that stability would soon return to [Burundi](#), which has suffered a long history of upheavals. United Nations officials expressed fears about retribution and further violence.

"I would like to thank the army and the police for defeating the wrongdoers," the president, Pierre Nkurunziza, said in an afternoon speech from Bujumbura, the capital, broadcast on state radio and television. "There is peace in the country, including the capital city, where those coup plotters were operating."

Still, the extent of the overthrow plot and how it had been thwarted remained murky. A presidential spokesman, Gervais Abayeho, added to the uncertainty with [contradictory statements quoted by Reuters](#) about whether the lead coup plotter, Maj. Gen. Godefroid Niyombare, had been arrested.



Photo

Boys ventured into Bujumbura's streets behind a patrol of troops during a period of quiet on Friday, but it was not clear stability would soon return to a country with a history of upheaval. Credit Goran Tomasevic/Reuters

The whereabouts of General Niyombare, who just two days earlier had [decreed on state radio that the president had been deposed](#), was not clear as of late Friday.

An acute political crisis in Burundi has been developing since last month over the president's decision to seek a third term in the June 26 election despite a constitutional two-term limit. His opponents, who accuse him of corruption, human rights abuses and other crimes, viewed the decision as a bald attempt to extend his power, and street protests turned deadly.

The coup attempt on Wednesday appeared timed to occur while the president was visiting neighboring Tanzania for a conference. He returned to Burundi on Thursday, first landing in his home territory in the northern part of the country to rally support before traveling to the capital to make clear that he was still in charge.

The president's critics have called for more protests. Many fear that he will now systematically crack down on civil society groups, independent press, activists and anyone who may be perceived to have supported the coup attempt. Their concern was shared by the top human rights official at the United Nations, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein.

"I am deeply worried by the extremely tense situation in Burundi," he said in a [statement](#). "We are receiving alarming messages from human rights defenders and journalists fearing for their safety."

There is also fear that revenge attacks will worsen a refugee problem as Burundians worried about persecution flee to neighboring countries.

"While the coup attempt is reported to have been foiled, the situation in Burundi's capital, Bujumbura, remains tense with sporadic outbursts of violence reported this morning," the United Nations refugee agency said in a [statement](#).

It said that more than 105,000 people had fled, mostly to Tanzania, and that the rate of departures had doubled in the past week. The rush of refugees was overwhelming an encampment in Kagunga, Tanzania, Karin de Gruijl, a spokeswoman for the refugee agency, told reporters in Geneva. "The lack of clean drinking water, latrines and shelter is acute," she said.

In Bujumbura, the streets were quiet on Friday morning, with many people deciding not to go to work. Clutches of police officers and soldiers loyal to Mr. Nkurunziza could be seen maintaining order. The gunfire of the past few days had largely subsided.

Later, throngs of Mr. Nkurunziza's supporters could be seen celebrating in the streets.

The violence surrounding his effort to prolong his rule reflects a wider phenomenon in Africa — particularly in countries that are trying to achieve stability after conflicts — in which leaders have clung to power, sometimes for decades. Regional experts said the coup attempt, even though it appeared to have failed, was nonetheless a sobering message to other longtime African leaders.

"The administrations in Uganda and Rwanda and other leaders in the region will be looking at Burundi and registering that there is a very high price to be paid for miscalculating the level of popular support for repeatedly extending presidential mandates," said Michela Wrong, the [author](#) of several books on Africa.

President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, one of Africa's longest-serving leaders, has been in power since 1986, when he toppled Tito Okello, a dictator who had overthrown the country's democratically elected president. But in recent years, opposition to Mr. Museveni has grown amid rising concerns that he is determined to be president for life.

In Rwanda, supporters of President Paul Kagame, whose influence extends across the continent and who has support in the West, have been clamoring for a constitutional change that would permit him to run for a third

term, in 2017. He was elected in 2003 but has been in control of the country since the aftermath of the [Rwandan genocide](#) in 1994.

Ms. Wrong said Mr. Nkurunziza's aspirations of longevity were part of a power pattern in much of Africa: Leaders of countries torn by civil war or other conflicts seek to perpetuate their rule, abetted by weak democratic institutions and an unwillingness to groom successors or yield to rivals.

"They stay in power because the economy is in the hands of a tiny elite of cronies surrounding the president, and if they leave, they or their families can risk being prosecuted," she said.

Burundi's Constitution stipulates that the president can hold office only for two five-year terms. Mr. Nkurunziza has been in office since 2005, but he contends that his first term should not count toward the limit because he was not directly elected when he first became president.

A court [ruled that Mr. Nkurunziza could run](#) again because he was appointed by Parliament, but his opponents have questioned the legitimacy of that decision.

The country has been recovering after a protracted civil war, which began in 1993 and left an estimated 300,000 people dead, after the first president to be elected from the country's Hutu majority, [Mechior Ndadaye](#), was killed by troops from the Tutsi minority.

During the civil war, Hutu rebel groups fought against the army, which was under the control of the Tutsis, fostering anger and resentment among the Hutu majority. Mr. Nkurunziza had led a rebel Hutu group.

Sadi Niyungeko reported from Bujumbura, and Dan Bilefsky from London. Isma'il Kushkush contributed reporting from Kigali, Rwanda, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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