



BURUNDI: Does its experience mean anything to Tanzania?

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I trot back to Africa this week and the focus is Burundi, the country that is trying to unwrap itself for a new beginning.

Last Friday, it marked an important milestone in its effort to end, hopefully, 12 years of civil war between Hutu rebels and successive governments.

The inauguration as President of Pierre Nkurunziza, former Hutu rebel leader also ends an extended four-year transitional period of government that ushered in democratic rule.

“I pledge to fight all ideology and acts of genocide and exclusion, to promote and defend the individual and collective rights and freedoms of persons and of the citizen,” Nkurunziza said in a ceremony attended by 10 African Heads of State, including President Benjamin Mkapa.

Early this week Nkurunziza named his 20-member cabinet which included seven women, with key posts going mainly to Nkurunziza’s National Council for the Defence of Democracy — Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party.

Under the power-sharing Constitution adopted in February the Cabinet can comprise no more than 60% Hutu and 40% Tutsi, and at least 30% women.

The Hutus make up 85% of the population, and the Tutsis 14%. Peace brokers are hoping that such a deal would prevent the country from plunging again into civil conflict.

For that we have to wait and see. In Lebanon, a more or less similar power sharing arrangement among the country’s main religious sects was struck and enshrined in its constitution in 1958 but it did not prevent a bitter civil war erupting in the 70s.

Such fears notwithstanding, the new beginning for our tiny western neighbour, which, if history had its say, would have been part of Tanzania rather than landlocked as it now is, and whose main export to us has been streams of refugees, is the latest illustration of efforts by Africa in solving its widespread ethnicity problems.

Or let's put it more correctly: Burundi is the latest example where African politicians have been seen to be at their best in fighting and finally 'solving' the manifestations of the ethnicity problem. The single quotes are put on purpose.

Of course, there had to be a war, and over 300,000 miserable deaths in the tiny country before African politicians, those in the proximity in particular, realized that the evil called ethnicity, which has been around and chipping away at that country's political and social fabrics for decades – read: since independence – is actually a monster that kills and so has to be fought vigorously.

In that Burundi has not been alone. The continent's ethnic struggles for the control of the State continue unabated.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and oil-rich by all standards, the struggle of the powerful 'trinity' between the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups to determine the political contour and character of the country is still to be worked out.

The Biafran war fought over three decades ago was one aspect of the manifestations of these struggles. Sudan is undergoing a similar competition, even though some tend to describe it as more religious than ethnic.

So has been Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and even South Africa. However, the area that has been making many headlines in recent past and continues to do so is the Great Lakes Region.

It is very poignant that the blight of colonialism is still killing the people of this region. The 1994 atrocities in neighbouring Rwanda that continue to haunt the region is testimony to that.

However, scholars of history many also agree that the two clans the Tutsis and Hutus had seen better days.

Before Germans, and later Belgian invaders arrived, the two groups lived as one, speaking the same language and intermarrying.

The colonialists shrewdly manipulated them with their age-old, highly effective 'divide and rule' strategy. It is just too bad that people's memories do not go back that far, and all those alive today know no better.

(Incidentally, the 'divide and rule' policy is what the Americans are now doing for Iraq.

The just proposed draft constitution, reached by the Iraq legislators under the threat of guns and deadlines of US occupiers breaks the country into three parts for Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, a phenomenon that did not exist under Saddam.)

This is not to say that ethnic conflicts did not exist in Africa prior to this period. The history and oral traditions of most African societies contain elements of conflicts, including ethnic conflicts, as well as intra-ethnic conflict situations.

The only difference with the problem at present is the rage and magnitude of these conflicts because they have taken different shapes and tensions that distinguish them from those of the pre-colonial era.

Many of them have been, and are still groomed and exacerbated by leaders and other politicians who do so in defence of their interests, the interests of those of the ethnic groupings to which they themselves belong, or even have other stakes, political or economic in them.

As stated earlier, historically, Burundi (and Rwanda) were part of the territory administered by Germans from about 1886 to 1918 under what was called Deutsch Ostafrika, with the other part being Tanganyika (now Mainland Tanzania).

After the defeat of Germans in Europe in 1918 (after World War I), its African colonies were divided up among other colonial powers and so fate had it that Burundi and Rwanda were handed over to Belgians who were also ruling Congo (now DRC).

We can only speculate what would have been the course of history in respect of Burundi (and also Rwanda) had the whole of the former German colony been handed over to the British for administering and became part of Tanganyika.

Would the two tiny nations' ethnic problems have developed the way they did?

The answer to this question was hazarded last week by the current EAC Secretary General, Amaniya Mushegga, albeit in speculation.

He said that had the two Central African nations allowed to join the former EAC and if the regional body had not been allowed to collapse as it did in 1977, their ethnic conflicts would not have come into being and that the 1994 Rwanda genocide would not have taken place. As stated it was only a speculation.

Nonetheless, it was quite significant to see President Mkapa delivering one of his finest, and very moving speeches (in such events) at Nkurunziza's swearing in ceremony last week.

He told the Burundi people: ``I encourage you to live up to the expectations of durable peace, of reconciliation, of reconstruction and of development.``

Mkapa then challenged the new government ``to pave way for development in

the country, which had been locked in civil conflicts for years.’’

Fine words Mr President. Very fine words.

No one denies that he and his government have been instrumental in seeing Burundi reach the milestone hence his concern in seeing Burundians live in durable peace and reconciliation.

The reasons for this are very clear Tanzania has been a major recipient of refugees fleeing that country’s ethnic conflict, which has been playing havoc to Tanzania’s resources.

So Mkapa’s concern in having a peaceful Burundi is, as many would agree, quite understandable.

Understandable? There something out of the ordinary in this concern of his, something, one would say, that borders things not adding up at all.

Isn’t there also an ethnic conflict that has been brewing within his country’s borders for years now, and that has been defying solutions because it also appears to be groomed and exacerbated by politicians or groups serving their own interests?

I am talking about the Zanzibar problem. There have been repeated calls, for example, from within and outside the country for Mkapa, who is completing his ten-year term as Union president early November, to show his sincere concern to this homegrown problem. Many people are forgetting that Zanzibar’s problem is also an ethnicity problem – with historical roots just like the one that has been plaguing Burundi.

If the Germans, and Belgians had discerned the ethnicity problem in Burundi, and used it to serve their own colonial interests and then left the country to burn, it is also true for Zanzibar if in the correlation, one replaces the Germans and Belgians with Arab rulers and British colonialists.

The two, Arabs and British discerned the problem, used it to serve their colonial interests and left the Islands burning. The blaze came to the surface at the introduction of multiparty politics in the country in early 90s.

The problem therefore only resurfaced, as it was all there, under wraps since pre-revolution days because post-revolution politicians did not want to heal those wounds that was causing it. They only used it to further their own interests.

And even, at the introduction of multiparty politics, successive politicians acknowledged the problem’s existence, they did nothing at all to find a permanent solution for it except aggravate it – also designed to serve their own interests.

So, nobody denies that Mkapa inherited the problem when he came to power in 1995, but one wonders how come, after ten years the issue is still defying any solution and is in fact worsening.

With the election time just eight weeks away it becomes a nightmare for many, if the unceasing tough talk from the two political divides is any indication.

The blunt truth is that nobody appears to be caring at all as that part of the Union races towards a precipice.

It's very amazing how politicians can elect to be so naïve as not to draw lessons from a country right next door.

Sure, the two toughies in this precarious game have met but it appears that they only discussed about the respectable way to race into the precipice.

This is so because the only statement that came out of that encounter stressed the need for avoiding mudslinging campaigns.

It beats the wits out of me! Does the Zanzibar problem really need such hurried pledges for solution?

Or eleventh hour presidential appeals for people to abandon campaigns of hate?

There are so many things that have been and are still going wrong there that need not only right solutions, but also some explanations, failure of which it would be prudent even to postpone the polls.

Mkapa himself appears to be in a huge dilemma as he steps down in eight weeks time.

He does not want to be the only CCM Union president to hand over the Isles to the opposition, nor does he want to go into retirement leaving Zanzibaris butchering one another in a civil conflict.

The most judicious decision for him to make is the one that would aim at averting any bloodshed –a bold decision which has to override any other considerations.

But some argue that he had ten long years to put such things right even at the expense of giving his back to the Burundi problem. Doesn't, as they say, charity begin at home?

* SOURCE: Guardian