

Escalating political crisis belies Burundians' strong support for democracy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 68 | Thomas Bentley, Abel Oyuke, Peter Halley Penar, and Christophe Sebudandi

Summary

Burundi is in the midst of a violent political crisis sparked when President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to seek, and then claimed, a controversial third term. Hundreds have been killed and more than 200,000 have fled (Office of the UNHCR, 2015) since Nkurunziza's decision in April 2015 to ignore term-limit provisions of the Arusha peace agreement and the Burundian Constitution, as well as strong criticism from civil society and the international community.

Public protests and government repression, including the use of torture and lethal force (Amnesty International, 2015), continue to escalate since Nkurunziza was awarded a third term after July 2015 elections that the main opposition parties boycotted, the African Union (AU) refused to endorse through election observers (Daily Maverick, 2015), and United Nations (UN) observers said were neither credible nor free (Guardian, 2015).

The government's actions stand in sharp contrast to the convictions that Burundi citizens expressed in the most recent Afrobarometer survey, in September-October 2014, including support for democracy, for free and fair elections, and for limiting presidential terms to a maximum of two. In particular, Burundians value democracy as the protection of civil liberties and personal freedom and as peace, unity, and power-sharing – all of which are threatened by the current crisis.

As a confrontation between citizens' democratic aspirations and the government's power, the worsening crisis raises serious questions about Burundi's international commitments under the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, to which it has been a signatory since 2007.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys (2014-2015) are currently being completed. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Burundi, led by the Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui au Développement des Initiatives Démocratiques (GRADIS), interviewed 1,200 adult Burundians in September and October 2014. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- Overwhelming majorities of Burundians believe that democracy is preferable to any other form of government (86%) and that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections (85%).

- Burundians strongly reject authoritarian forms of government such as one-man (90%), military (83%), and one-party (82%) rule.
- Above all other attributes, Burundians define democracy as the protection of civil liberties and personal freedom (70%) and as peace, unity, and power-sharing (47%).
- A majority of Burundians (62%) favour a two-term limit on presidential mandates, as provided for by the Constitution of Burundi.
- In 2014, a majority of Burundians viewed the AU and the East African Community (EAC) as “somewhat” or “very” helpful to their country, but respondents were divided as to whether neighbouring countries should get directly involved in their politics to support human rights and democracy.

Overwhelming support for democracy

In September-October 2014, months before the current crisis began, Burundians were about evenly divided as to whether their country was heading in the right direction (52%) or the wrong direction (47%). About two-thirds saw Burundi as “a full democracy” (33%) or “a democracy with minor problems” (38%), and a similar proportion were satisfied with the way their democracy was working (66%).

Events have overtaken, and likely changed, such time-bound assessments. They have also confirmed fears – expressed by seven of 10 Burundians as they looked ahead to the 2015 election season – of violence and intimidation.

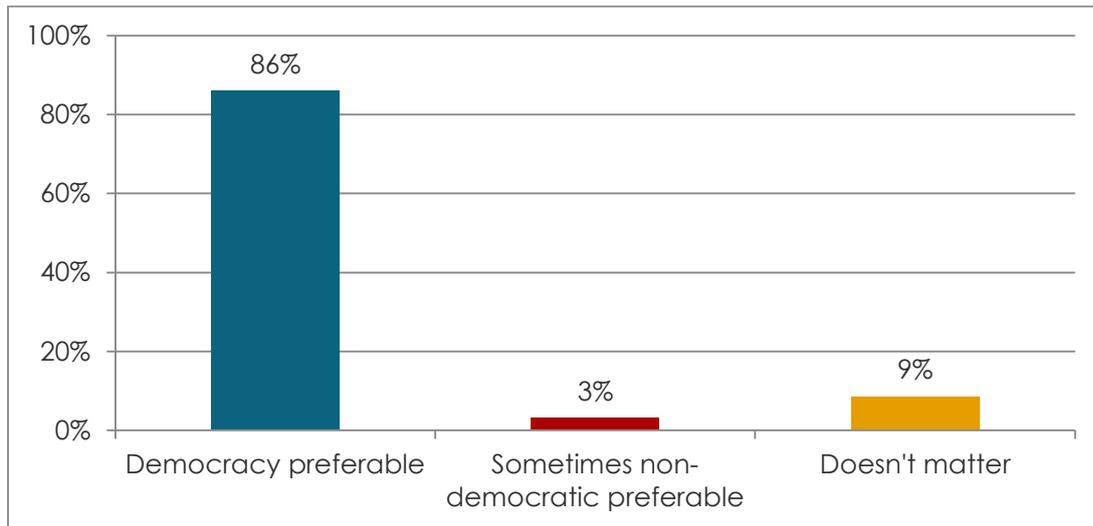
The president's actions, a failed coup attempt, violent government repression, and questionable elections have posed a direct challenge to a core political value documented in the Afrobarometer survey: overwhelming public support for democracy. Almost nine of 10 Burundians (86%) prefer democracy over any other form of government; only 3% say that non-democratic alternatives can sometimes be preferable (Figure 1). Support for democracy is high regardless of respondents' gender, urban or rural residence, educational level, and political party affiliation. The biggest gap occurs between men (92% support democracy) and women (80%, with 17% saying that the kind of government they have doesn't matter or they don't know). Rural dwellers (87%) are slightly more likely than urban residents (81%) to prefer democracy.

Reinforcing their expression of support for democracy, Burundians resoundingly oppose non-democratic methods of being governed, including dictatorship (opposed by 90% of respondents), military rule (83%), and single-party rule (82%) (Figure 2) – a clear rejection of efforts by the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy and the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) to establish a state party in Burundi. More than six of 10 respondents “strongly disapprove” of each non-democratic alternative. As with support for democracy, rejection of non-democratic alternatives is overwhelming regardless of respondents' gender, urban or rural residence, educational level, and political party affiliation.

Similarly, 85% of Burundians agree (including 52% who “agree very strongly”) that regular, open, and honest elections are the best way to choose their leaders (Figure 3). In opposition to this basic tenet, the July 2015 elections were widely perceived as illegitimate: Major opposition parties boycotted them, and for the first time in its history of observing elections, the AU refused to send a formal election observation mission (Daily Maverick, 2015), urging instead that the elections be postponed until negotiations could produce the requisite political and security conditions.

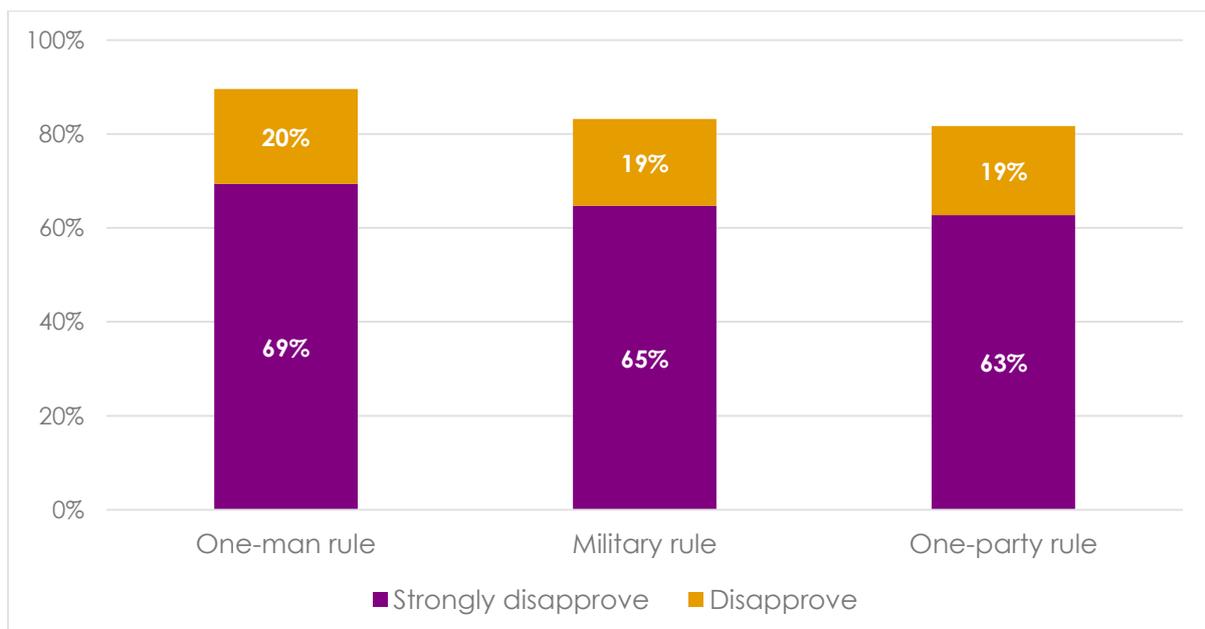
When asked to define what democracy means to them, and allowed to give up to three responses (so percentages for responses total more than 100%), Burundians emphasize the protection of civil liberties and personal freedom (cited by 70% of respondents) as well as unity, peace, and power-sharing (47%) (Figure 4) – particularly noteworthy in the current context of civil strife with curtailed freedoms of expression and assembly.

Figure 1: Support for democracy | Burundi | 2014



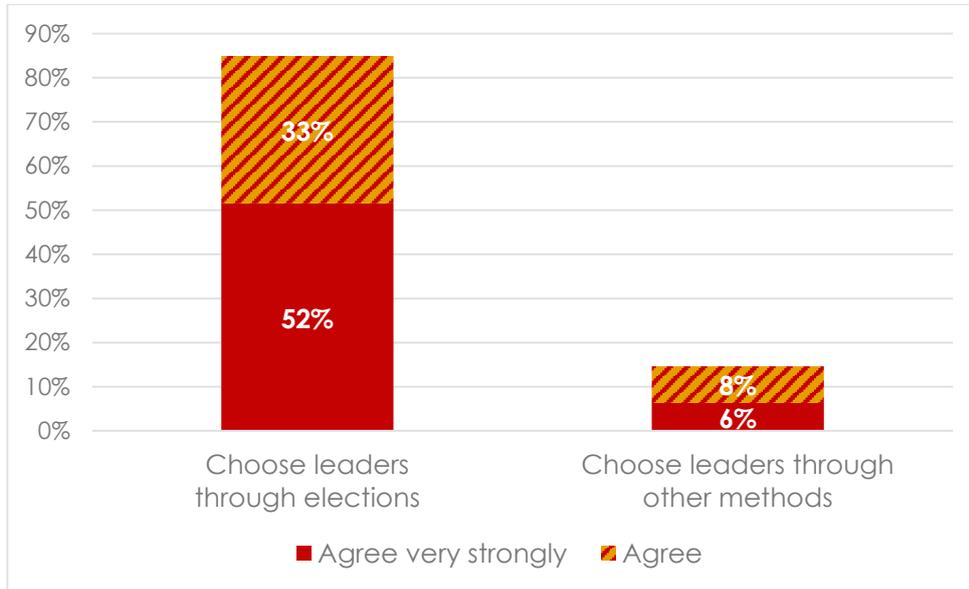
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
 Note: Due to rounding, numbers may not always total 100%.

Figure 2: Rejection of non-democratic alternatives | Burundi | 2014



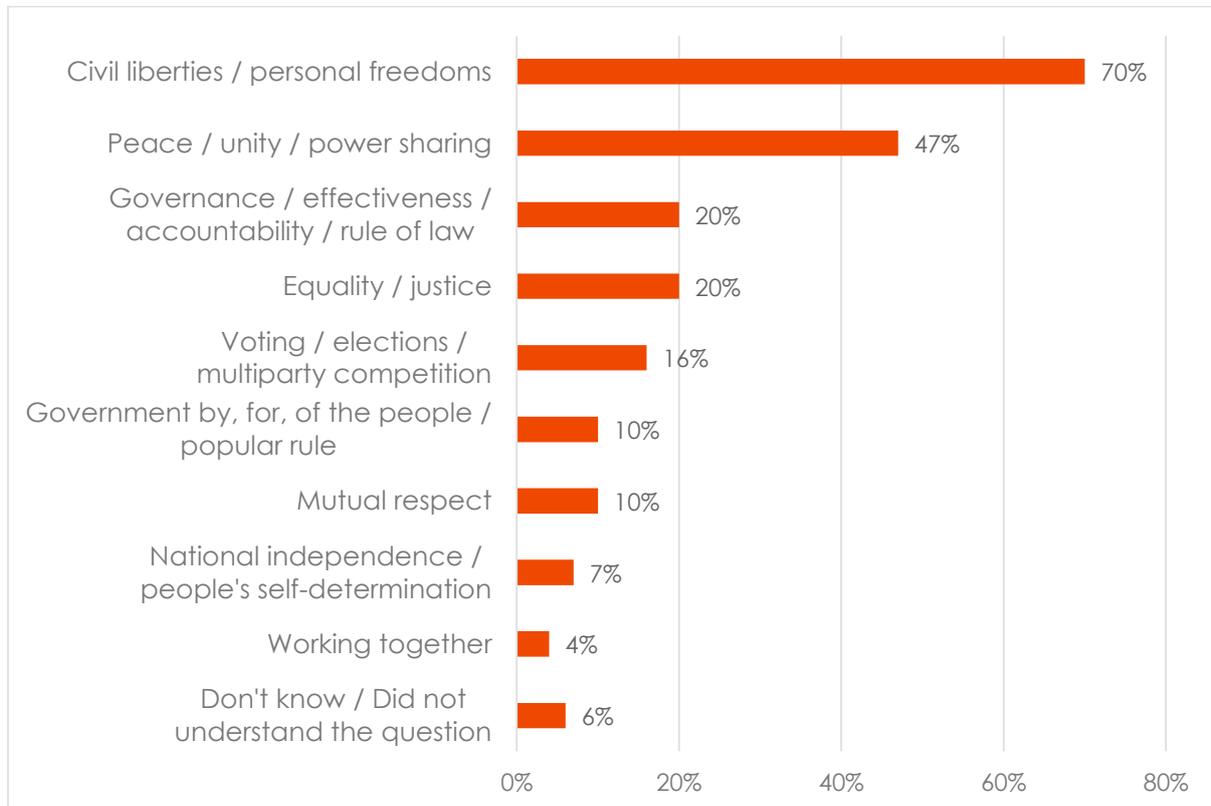
Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything? The army comes in to govern the country? Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? (% who "strongly disapprove" or "disapprove" of each option)

Figure 3: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods | Burundi | 2014



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree very strongly" or "agree" with each statement)

Figure 4: Meaning of democracy | Burundi | 2014



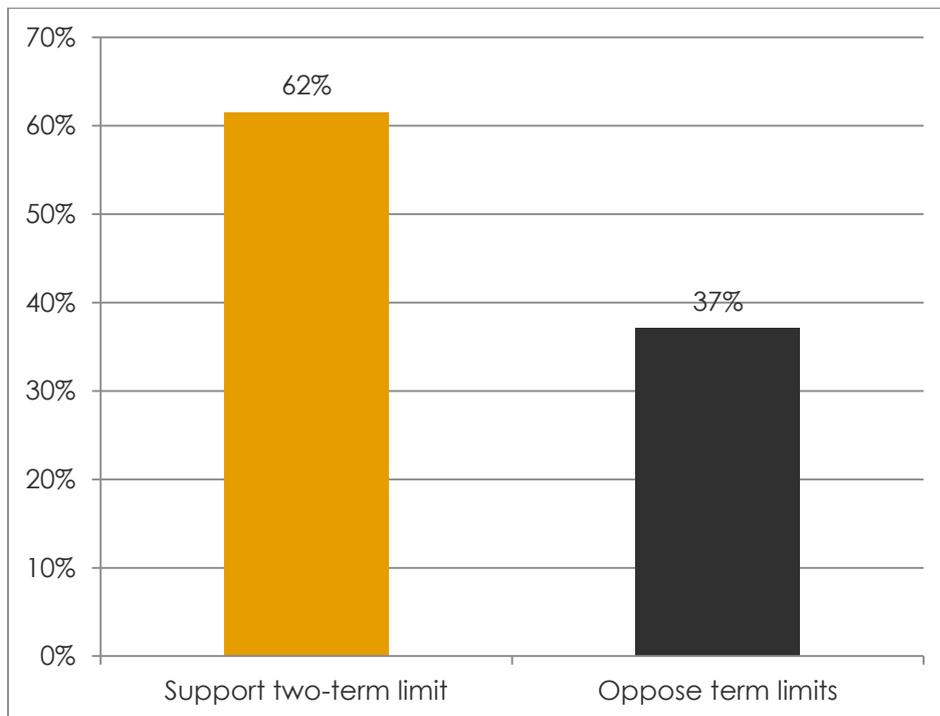
Respondents were asked: What does "democracy" mean to you? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses, so cumulative responses total more than 100%.)

Support for presidential term limits

The issue of presidential term limits was a key catalyst for the current political tensions and turmoil, as opponents of Nkurunziza took the position that an additional presidential term would not be acceptable under any circumstances. The ruling party has characterized Nkurunziza's additional term as a second "elected" term because his first term was the result of an indirect election by members of the National Assembly and Senate, rather than a popular election. This position was upheld by the Constitutional Court of Burundi, although the court's vice president, Sylvere Nimpagaritse, who fled the country, said the decision was taken under pressure and threats (New Times, 2015; BBC News, 2015a). Like Burundi's Constitution, the Arusha Agreement that ended Burundi's 1993-2004 civil war explicitly calls for term limits. A challenge to term limits may undermine other parts of the accord as well, such as power-sharing arrangements.

In September-October 2014, more than six of 10 Burundians (62%) supported a two-term limit (Figure 5). Even a majority (54%) of supporters of the ruling CNDD-FDD favoured a two-term limit.¹

Figure 5: Support for presidential term limits | Burundi | 2014



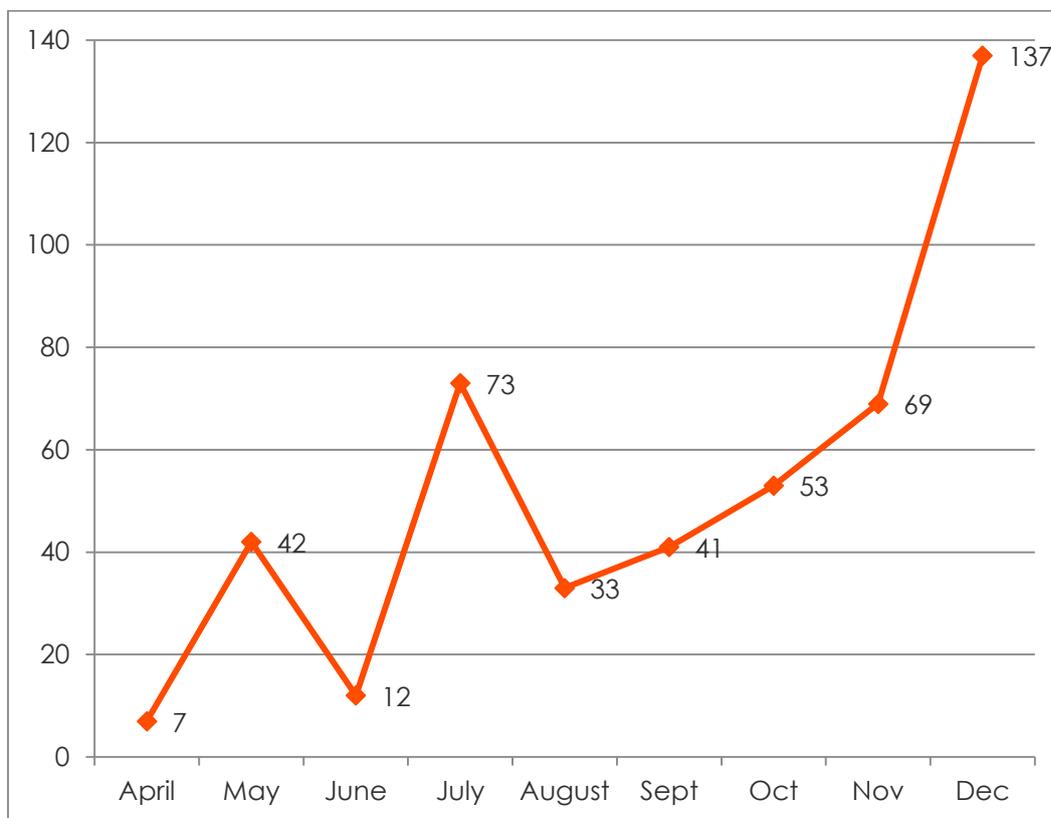
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

¹ Party affiliation was determined by asking, "Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that?" Among the 866 respondents (72% of all respondents) who said they feel "close" to a party, the ruling CNDD-FDD led the field with 77%, followed by Unité pour le Progrès National (UPRONA) (5%), Front National de Libération (Agathon Rwaswa) (FNL) (5%), Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi (FRODEBU) (2%), Mouvement pour la Solidarité et la Démocratie (MSD) (2%), and Sahwanya-FRODEBU Iragi rya Ndadaye (2%). Other parties were selected by less than 1% each, and 6% of respondents refused to answer the question.

A role for regional organisations?

As violence and fatalities continue to mount, including 109 deaths on a single day (11 December) (Figure 6), calls for external mediation have increased. The UN system encourages regional organisations to take the first steps to end conflicts. In line with this approach, the East African Community (EAC) became the focal point of mediation efforts before and after the July 2015 elections. The AU has also been actively engaged, including a recent fact-finding mission that cited reports of torture, killings, and the closure of civil society organisations and media outlets (BBC News, 2015b). The AU has also authorized the deployment of 5,000 peacekeepers, which the Burundi government has called an "invasion force" and threatened to fight.

Figure 6: Deaths from armed violence, April-December 2015 | by month | Burundi

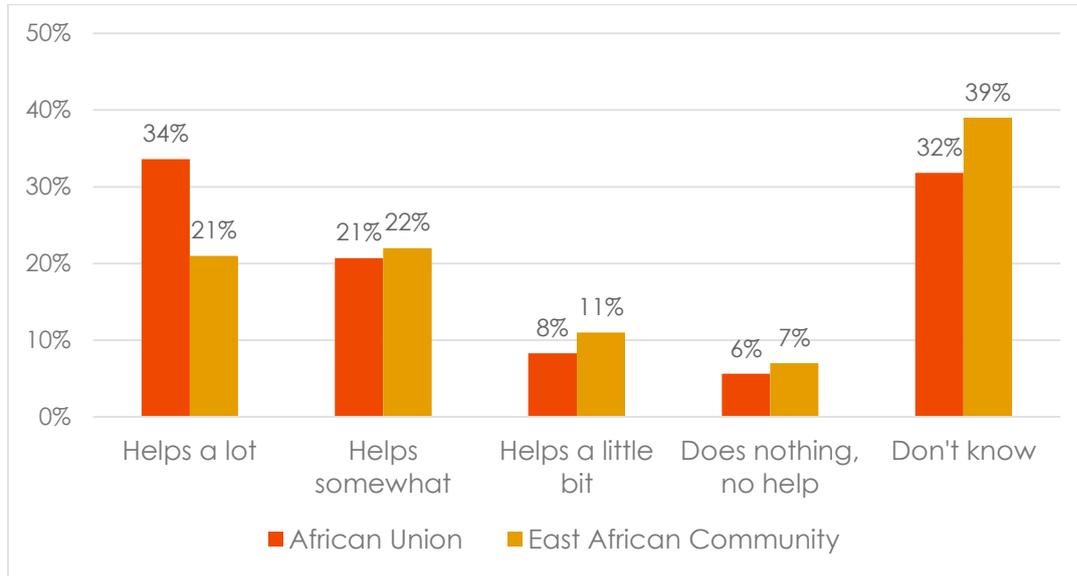


Note: Values for this figure are from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Project (ACLED) (2015).

In general, Burundians see the AU as helpful to their country: In September-October 2014, a majority said the AU helps "a lot" (34%) or "somewhat" (21%). While one-third (32%) said they didn't know enough about the AU to respond, only 6% said the AU "does nothing" helpful (Figure 7). This suggests that most Burundians have a basic foundation of trust in AU actions, which could be mobilized to support mediation efforts in Burundi.

Similarly, a majority of Burundians saw the EAC as helping at least "a little bit," although the proportion that perceived the EAC as helping "a lot" was 13 percentage points less than for the AU, perhaps reflecting regional entanglements between EAC member countries (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). Stability is fragile in the region as thousands of Burundians flee into neighbouring states for protection. The stakes are high for the EAC's ability to facilitate a peaceful solution in Burundi, as remnants of the civil wars that have gripped much of the region, from Burundi and Rwanda to the eastern portion of the Democratic Republic of Congo, remain a visible consequence of the failure to do so.

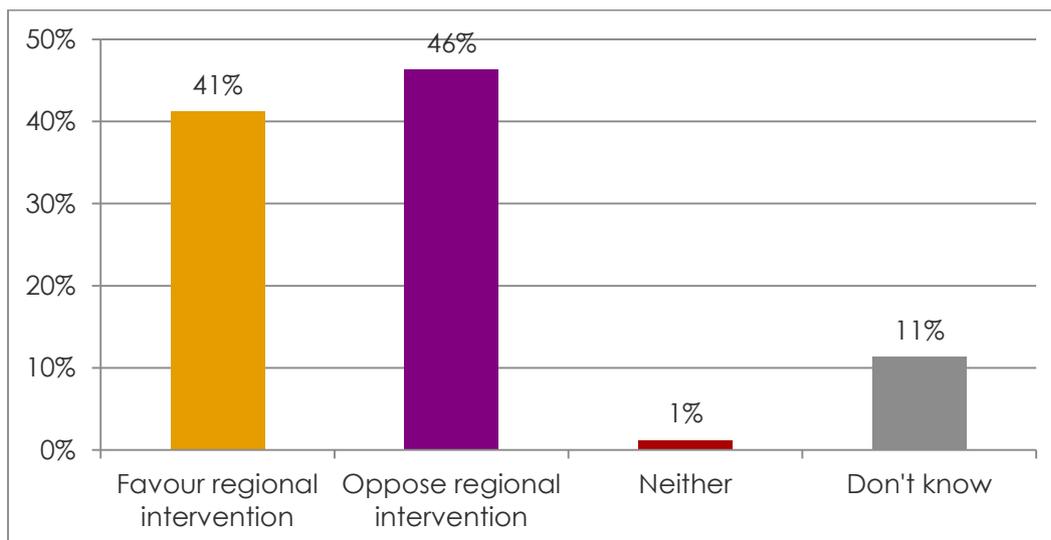
Figure 7: Perceptions of support from African Union and East African Community
 | Burundi | 2014



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much do each of the following help your country, or haven't you heard enough to say: African Union? East African Community (EAC)?*

Even though a sizeable proportion of Burundians see these organisations as at least somewhat helpful to their country, people are divided as to whether their neighbours should get directly involved in their politics. Asked whether states should intervene to prevent human rights abuses and ensure free and fair elections in neighbouring countries, 41% of Burundians said in September-October 2014 that neighbouring states should intervene if necessary, while 46% opposed such intervention (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Support for regional intervention | Burundi | 2014



Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your own opinion?*
 Statement 1: *The governments of each country in East Africa have a duty to try to guarantee free elections and prevent human rights abuses in other countries in the region, for example by using political pressure, economic sanctions or military force.*
 Statement 2: *Each country in this region should respect the independence of other countries and allow them to make their own decisions about how their country should be governed.*

Conclusion

Burundi's worsening crisis, a threat to the country's democratic progress and to regional stability, can be seen as a confrontation between state power and citizen aspirations. Burundians overwhelmingly support democracy and the selection of their leaders through free and fair elections, and a majority favour presidential term limits. In ensuring an additional term for President Nkurunziza, orchestrating elections viewed as illegitimate by the international community, and sanctioning violent repression of dissent, the government has clearly placed itself at odds with these popular convictions.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has laid out potential courses of action to quell the escalating violence, including the establishment of a political support team and intervention by a UN or AU peacekeeping force. Action to resolve the crisis is a priority, as the possible consequences of inaction are all too fresh in Burundians' memory. Ultimately, a lasting political solution will have to take account of Burundians' insistence on democratic governance.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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