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‘Assuming our place in the concert of nations’: Burundi as imagined in Pierre Nkurunziza’s political speeches*

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ABSTRACT

Pierre Nkurunziza died in 2020, just a few months short of completing his tenure as the first post-civil war President of Burundi. Critics have cast him as yet another rebel-turned-politician who came to office on a promise of a democratic

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transformation but became progressively authoritarian, particularly during his third, disputed term in office. As a political figure, however, Nkurunziza remains poorly understood. What kind of a worldview motivated his politics? Drawing on critical discourse analysis, we identify three recurring themes in Nkurunziza's key political speeches: anti-colonialism; unity and self-sufficiency; and discourse around 'politics of a new beginning'. These themes were stable across time, indicating Nkurunziza's consistent worldview, but became more pronounced and radical as he faced growing challenges to his legitimacy from within and without. Far from being confined to rhetoric, the themes also manifested in concrete policy decisions, underscoring the urgent need to take ideology seriously in understanding the political trajectories of African leaders.

Keywords – Burundi, Nkurunziza, ideology, worldview, political speeches, discourse analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In her article on Western¹ knowledge production on Rwanda, Olivia Rutazibwa deplores the 'binary presentation of a complex place' (Rutazibwa 2014: 292), where most accounts seeking to 'storify' the country's present seem unable to transcend categories such as Hutu/Tutsi, dictator/democrat, or pro-/anti-regime. In this article, we propose that knowledge production about the politics of Rwanda's neighbour, Burundi, has suffered from the same reductionism. This has particularly been the case following the crisis of 2015, arguably the most severe political fallout Burundi has known since the 1990s civil war. Street protests broke out in Bujumbura in April 2015 in response to President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third presidential term, deplored by certain segments of Burundian society as unconstitutional. As far as the Burundian government was concerned, the street protests, which were followed by a failed *coup d'état*, constituted an attempt to undemocratically remove a legitimate head of state. For government opponents, the government's response to the protests was a classic case of an authoritarian regime violently repressing a pro-democracy movement.

Western-based commentators and policymakers, as well as academics, have largely echoed the opposition's narrative, fitting as it does with Western notions of peace, democracy and good governance. This may be neither inaccurate nor problematic in itself; but it does constitute what Rutazibwa calls a 'Wilsonian intervention'²:

Critically invoking Wilson to reflect on our knowledge production ... allows for highlighting the fundamental contradictions and problematics in our contemporary moral diplomacy and the scholarship that goes with it. It highlights a genuine care for peace, democracy and self-determination on the one hand; and, on the other hand, an incapacity to respect that same right to democratic rule and self-determination from the moment that the outcome deviates, or might deviate, from the specific copy/paste script as we know it, thus both perpetuating and

legitimizing external interference, actively trampling the space for self-determination. (Rutazibwa 2014: 293–4.)

Indeed, Burundi's deviation from the Western democratic ideal has meant that the country was 'named and shamed' in international fora, and punished by the withdrawal of bilateral and multilateral assistance on the part of traditional donors following the 2015 crisis. Take, for example, the patronising language in EU statements issued on the heels of the 2015 presidential election:

Despite the efforts of the international community ... it seems clear that insufficient progress has been made in implementing the decisions adopted by the African Union on 13 June and by the East African Community on 6 July. Only by implementing those decisions in full would it have been possible to hold credible and inclusive elections in Burundi yielding representative results. In going ahead with the elections, the government has decided otherwise. In the absence of a meaningful national dialogue ... Burundi will be unable to return to the path of stability, democracy and development ... The EU will therefore launch the preparatory work for specific consultations as provided for in Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement in order to ensure that the Burundian government makes the commitments necessary to remedy the crisis. (European Council 2015).

As in the rest of this article, we do not, by any means, suggest that such statements were not based on factual observations of a deteriorating political and security situation in Burundi at the time, for which the government in charge of the country bore undeniable responsibility. We do, however, follow Rutazibwa by arguing that what is lost in binary representations, such as that of democrats versus autocrats, is an understanding of the complexities and developments on the ground. We propose that this reductionist lens is further exacerbated by a separate but related tendency in the knowledge production on Africa, which is to explain the real or imagined deviations from the expected norm in material terms: political actors struggle for power ultimately to reap its material benefits, and remain in power at all cost in order not to lose them. This text published in the prestigious academic blog *The Conversation* is fairly representative of this framing of African leaders:

Leaders have different reasons for refusing to leave office. In some countries, the answer lies in a lack of succession planning to transfer power. In others, leaders blatantly refuse to resign because of their despotic and kleptocratic tendencies. They abuse their states' minerals, oil and money with their families and friends. Stepping aside would cost them these "benefits". (Maphunye 2018)

This view of African politics as 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1989), while it provides a partial explanation of political leaders' motives, fails to take them seriously as political actors in their own right, cynically reducing them to political entrepreneurs.

Burundi's ex-president Pierre Nkurunziza is a case in point. He and his party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), have been overwhelmingly portrayed through the

lens of belly politics and as corrupt, incompetent, and devoid of a vision for the country. This language will be familiar to anyone who has set foot in Burundi since Nkurunziza came to power in 2005, as it dominated Western expatriate circles. After 2015, this discourse took on an added dimension, with Nkurunziza's regime being portrayed by his exiled opponents as a 'dictatorship', a portrait largely echoed in Western media, policy and academic circles in the context of debates about resurgent authoritarianism and declining democracy on the African continent (e.g. Bond 2019; The Economist 2020; Cheeseman & Fisher 2021).

This is certainly one way of thinking about Nkurunziza and his legacy. In this article, however, we seek to answer Rutazibwa's (2014) call to enrich and nuance knowledge production by acknowledging that there is no one way to truthfully portray a complex reality. Thus, we do not seek to *evaluate* his politics, but rather to explore Nkurunziza's subjective worldview in order to better *understand* him as a political actor. We are specifically interested in gleaning how he imagined and narrated his vision of what Burundi's identity should be, what position it occupies in the world and what role it is meant to play. We do not seek to relativise that, quite aside from his ideological commitments, and to an extent also in their name, Nkurunziza and his government committed no shortage of criminal acts in their years in power, often practicing violent politics as a means of doing away with real or potential opponents. These are well documented in a wide range of media, non-governmental and UN reports, among others.

Our argument unfolds across four sections: The first section provides the article's rationale, contribution to the existing literature, our theoretical framework and methodology. Second, we take the reader on a brief excursion into major events in Nkurunziza's life that informed and shaped his worldview. The third section takes a quantitative and qualitative look at the ideological content of selected political speeches. The conclusion summarises our main findings and suggests possible avenues for future research.

EXISTING LITERATURE AND THIS ARTICLE'S CONTRIBUTION

Existing scholarship has mostly studied Nkurunziza's party, the CNDD-FDD, in the context of the 'rebel-to-party', 'politics after war' and 'neither-peace-nor-war' literature. In line with the overwhelmingly critical narrative on the CNDD-FDD's pathway to (and in) power, scholars have analysed the facade transformation of the movement from an armed rebellion to a political party, as evidenced by its continued reliance on violence (Nindorera 2008; Rufyikiri 2017); the legacies of rebellion and broader authoritarian footprints on the CNDD-FDD's trajectory (Wittig 2016); the progressive departure from democratic behaviour (Burihabwa & Curtis 2019); the merging of the party and the state (Van Acker 2018); and the erosion of power-sharing provisions of the Arusha Accord (Vandeginste 2019).

As for Nkurunziza in particular, there exists only Paviotti's (2019) analysis of his image as President, which she sees as having undergone a gradual

transformation from a self-styled ‘popular’ president to a ‘sacred’ one who revived monarchical and religious traditions. Manirakiza (2017) has analysed how, under Nkurunziza’s presidency, the centre of gravity of Burundi’s political life shifted from the traditional elite spaces of Bujumbura (‘officers’ mess’) to popular spaces such as football clubs (‘Haleluya FC’), the latter making an explicit reference to the football club that Nkurunziza founded. Nkurunziza’s wife has published an autobiography in which she recounts the pitfalls of being married to a rebel, but does not delve into deep discussions of her husband’s politics (Bucumi-Nkurunziza 2013). There is also the blog of Gahimbare (2013), a Burundian novelist with affinity for Nkurunziza and his ruling party, with a detailed biography of ‘Pita’ (as he is popularly known) that includes interesting insights into his life. To our knowledge, Nkurunziza himself has not left behind a substantive body of written work or an authorised biography. How, then, can we glean the political ideas of this enigmatic figure, a liberator to some and an oppressor to others, a political figure often mocked for his love of football, religious zeal, lack of intelligence and striking timidity, but who nonetheless succeeded in warding off a range of challengers and dominated the political scene of his country for 15 years of a rocky post-war period? In this article, we hope to piece together some answers through an examination of the ideological content of some of Nkurunziza’s key political speeches.

Political scientists most often infer the worldviews of political leaders through an analysis of their behaviour (Maynard 2013). This approach reflects the dominant belief in the primacy of observed behaviour over the spoken word, which is often seen as a mere rhetorical device (Gutiérrez Sanín & Wood 2014). However, we argue that an analysis of the spoken word provides an important window into how leaders perceive and make sense of the world around them, which in turn shapes their political behaviour (Gerring 1997). Moreover, the analysis of political leaders’ life trajectories helps us to trace critical junctures in their life, making and remaking their worldview in a dynamic manner (Stremlau 2018).

We use the term ‘worldview’ to describe consistent ideas about the world that leaders convey to their constituents with the intention of shaping their interpretations of the world around them. We sometimes use the term ‘worldview’ interchangeably with ‘ideology’, especially when employed in the form of an adjective (‘ideological’), as worldview lacks an adjectival form. In general, however, we consider that ‘worldview’ is not synonymous with ‘ideology’, as the latter denotes a more doctrinal set of beliefs shared by a political community (i.e. communist ideology), whereas our interest lies at the level of views and perceptions about the world held by an individual, grounded in his or her specific life experience.

Following Foucault, we see language as a social practice reflecting the speaker’s subjective interpretation of the world, which is in turn socially constitutive in that it creates notions of what is perceived as ‘truth’ in the world (Foucault 1972). According to this theoretical lens, physical reality has no meaning

outside of discourse, i.e. the way that the speaker talks about reality. In our critical discourse analysis, we are concerned with the political aspects of communication and the way that leaders use language to achieve political goals. We see ideas about the world communicated through speech as helping political actors to justify the exercise of political power (Fairclough 1984), and thus as generative of political power. Therefore, even if political leaders' words and deeds are not always aligned, both are meaningful for our understanding of the exercise of power.

For political leaders, speeches are key instances to imagine their political community (Anderson 1991: 6). Political speeches thus provide an excellent material to explore how political ideologies are framed, discussed and negotiated. To the extent that scholars have examined political speeches, they have largely limited themselves to Western leaders, most notably the likes of Barack Obama, Tony Blair, Boris Johnson or Donald Trump (Campbell & Jamieson 1990; Hammer 2010; Charteris-Black 2018). Contemporary African leaders have been studied much less frequently through political speech analysis, with the notable exceptions of Israel & Botchwey's (2017) study of Ghanaian leaders and Oluoch's (2020) recent study of Kenyatta. As discussed above, research mostly portrays current African leaders through the prism of nepotism, clientelism and belly politics (Gallagher *et al.* 2016), while only independence leaders seem to be recognised as driven by ideology. Thus, we do find in the existing record research into the discourses of Kwame Nkrumah (Nartey 2020) or Nelson Mandela (Dwivedi 2015), though more so from scholars in linguistics than political science.

Using Charteris-Black's definition of political speech as a spoken discourse delivered 'for a specific purpose on a political occasion' (Charteris-Black 2018: xiii), we take the occasions of Burundi's Independence Day, and the presidential inauguration, as prime opportunities for Nkurunziza to outline his vision of and for Burundi. While most political leaders deliver a wide range of public and media discourses in the course of their tenure, it is these key annual and beginning of tenure occasions that serve as highly performative acts. During the inauguration speeches, Nkurunziza laid out a broad vision for his presidential mandate and, during the independence speeches, a summary of the main achievements of the past year and objectives for the year ahead. The two types of speeches therefore complement each other to understand Nkurunziza's evolving worldview over the 15 years of his presidency.

Our primary sample comprises a total of 18 speeches delivered between 2005 and 2020, including 15 Independence Day and three inauguration speeches. The analysis builds mainly on the official French texts of the speeches.³ These may not represent a literal translation of the speech delivered in Kirundi, as the speaker might take the liberty to go off script during his speech, or the French text might be adjusted for an international audience. We used a mixed-method approach, utilising NVivo software for automated textual analysis, coupled with deep qualitative textual reading.⁴ Drawing on NVivo to identify the most prominent words employed in Nkurunziza's speeches, we then

zoomed in on the context in which these key words were employed to pinpoint three major themes and their evolution across time. Building on Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis (1984), we progressively moved from description (studying the word choices of the speaker) to interpretation (seeking meaning of those choices) and eventually explanation (illustrating social practice by showcasing how discourse manifested in concrete policy decisions).

The primary speech material was complemented by secondary sources, including scholarly publications on Burundi as well as biographies and documentaries on Nkurunziza. Given that individuals' worldviews are constituted by their own perspective and the life experiences that it has cast them into, we begin with an excursion into Nkurunziza's life before turning to an in-depth analysis of his political speeches.

ORPHAN, REBEL, PRESIDENT: THE WORLD OF PIERRE NKURUNZIZA

Pierre Nkurunziza was born in 1964 into a relatively affluent family in the village of Buye in what is now the northern Burundian province of Ngozi. His mother, Domitille Minani, was a Tutsi and worked as an assistant nurse, having been trained by Anglican missionaries. His Hutu father, Eustache Ngabisha, got involved in politics during the anti-colonial struggle alongside his close political ally Prince Louis Rwagasore, Burundi's independence leader and first prime minister. Rwagasore's assassination just months before independence, however, created Burundi's founding trauma which set in motion a cycle of ethnically motivated violence, military regimes⁵ and rebellions that was to afflict the country for the following decades. Nkurunziza's father served as Member of Parliament and local administrator in Ngozi before being assassinated in 1972 in the context of the 'selective and retributive genocide' against Hutu elites (Lemarchand & Martin 1974).⁶ With the father gone, the mother unemployed and the family's property seized, the trauma of the 1972 *ikiza* ('scourge') hit the family hard and would leave a lasting footprint on Nkurunziza's political consciousness.⁷

Schooled first in his native Buye and then in Gitega in the heart of the country, Nkurunziza is remembered as a timid student (Gahimbare 2013) who nonetheless took up leadership positions at school, including as class representative and head-boy. From a young age, he played soccer and became a passionate athlete. Due to discrimination against the Hutu at the time, he faced tremendous hurdles to enter either the national military academy or the university, especially in his desired subject of economics (Ngabo 2010). Following the political opening in the late 1980s, he was eventually admitted to the University of Burundi to study physical education. There, he sympathised with the resistance ideas of the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People – National Forces of Liberation (PALIPEHUTU-FNL), the first of several Hutu rebel movements that would emerge over the next decade. After his academic studies, he taught at the university and at the military academy, where he forged important

contacts with a small number of newly admitted Hutu cadets. Many of them would later join rebellions, notably the CNDD-FDD, in the wake of the 1993 assassination of Burundi's first Hutu President, Melchior Ndadaye (Reyntjens 2009).

In 1995, with the country now swept up in a civil war, Nkurunziza narrowly escaped an assassination attempt during the university purges of Hutu. This experience pushed him to officially join the rebellion 'to resist and to die if necessary with guns in hand, not like our fathers slaughtered in 1972 like sheep' (Bucumi-Nkurunziza 2013: 94). In the bush, Nkurunziza reportedly became a born-again Christian after surviving a near-fatal shooting. For months, Nkurunziza hid in remote swamp areas and later recounted visions that God had promised him to rule the country (Gahimbare 2013). He quickly rose through the ranks of the CNDD-FDD, eventually becoming its leader. Nkurunziza fostered internal cohesion of the movement by staying close to the troops, which earned him the moniker *umuhuza* ('unifier') (Ngabo 2010). Having initially been excluded from peace talks that led to the 2000 Arusha Accord, which were only open to actors who renounced political violence, the CNDD-FDD eventually did enter negotiations under Nkurunziza's leadership, culminating in several accords on political and military power-sharing in 2003.

After a stint in the post-war transitional government, in which he served as the Minister of Good Governance, the Parliament elected Nkurunziza President after his party won a landslide victory in the 2005 elections at all levels of administration.⁸ His first presidential mandate was accompanied by much enthusiasm for change, with the UN regularly casting Burundi as a major success story and 'a "laboratory" ... of the latest donor approaches to peace' (Curtis 2013: 74). Initially benefitting from a broad social support base post-2005, Nkurunziza and his ruling party soon faced successive challenges, with subsequent electoral cycles engendering electoral disputes and political violence. The violence came to a peak in 2015 when civil society organisations, opposition parties as well as critics within his own party organised demonstrations against Nkurunziza's 'third term', culminating in a failed *coup d'état* and his controversial re-election. After changing the Constitution through a referendum in 2018, many expected Nkurunziza to run again in 2020. Yet he stood down and left his place to a successor, Evariste Ndayishimiye, an influential former General in the CNDD-FDD's rebellion. Merely 20 days after the election of Ndayishimiye, Nkurunziza died unexpectedly, officially of cardiac arrest.

A few insights can be drawn from the above glance at Nkurunziza's life history. First, Nkurunziza's life is deeply intertwined with the complex history of his country. Starting with the traumatic loss of his father in the 1972 *ikiza*, his political consciousness was further shaped by his own experience of discrimination and by ethnically motivated killings around him, which he himself only narrowly escaped (unlike one of his brothers). Tragically, these experiences in no way set Nkurunziza apart from his compatriots but rather unite him with them. In view of the recurrent cycles of violence since independence, there is

hardly any Burundian without a tragic personal history to share. Second, the omnipresence and indeed normalisation of violence as a means of political contest created a certain political ecosystem that shaped Nkurunziza's understanding of what kind of violence is permissible, and, by extension, necessary, in politics.

Without denying that all political actors have choices, we caution against the reductionist narrative of his critics, which casts Nkurunziza as someone who was handed over a country at peace and had all the opportunities to rule as a Western-style democrat, but failed spectacularly.⁹ Not only was Burundi still very much a place at war with itself in the early 2000s, Nkurunziza was also an intimate product of this reality. Finally, nowhere is Nkurunziza described as a dynamic leader or a valiant military strategist. On the contrary, his shyness was evidently noticed as early as in secondary school. And yet, he rose to the highest ranks of power, first in his rebel movement and later in the country. The moniker of *umuhuza* makes a clear reference to his ability to influence those around him through speech alone. In the next section, we thus turn to discourse analysis, gleaning major themes in his key official political speeches in order to draw a portrait of his worldview and, by extension, how it shaped his politics.

BURUNDI'S PLACE IN THE WORLD ACCORDING TO NKURUNZIZA

For Nkurunziza's speech analysis, we drew on quantitative word analysis through NVivo coupled with deep qualitative textual reading. We started with an NVivo word analysis to identify the most prominent words employed by Nkurunziza in the 18 selected speeches. The word cloud in [Figure 1](#) illustrates the 50 words most prominently used, with the size of each word proportional to the number of times it appeared in the speeches. Of these, 'we', 'Burundi', 'independence', 'security', 'development', 'peace', 'elections', 'God', 'friends' and 'work' are the most frequently employed.

Using code sourcing and nodding through deep textual reading centred around these key words, we identified the three most recurrent themes in Nkurunziza's discourse, namely anti-colonialism, unity and self-sufficiency, and the 'politics of a new beginning'. Moreover, we show that even though these three themes recur over the 15-year period of his presidency, they evolve over time, becoming grounded in more radical discourse. We interpret this as Nkurunziza becoming more assertive with increasing political power, as well as more intransigent vis-à-vis criticism, nationally and internationally. We discuss each of these evolutions in the sections below. The setting of the speeches also serves as a testament to the radicalising political environment over the course of Nkurunziza's presidency: whereas in 2005 he spoke at a national stadium filled to capacity, in 2015 he sat behind bullet-proof glass on a half-empty tribune, and was sworn in during a last-minute inauguration to safeguard against attempts on his life.



Figure 1. Word cloud query by NVivo.

Anti-colonialism

Critique of colonialism and its legacies constitutes the most omnipresent ideological theme in Nkurunziza's speeches. For Nkurunziza, the relationship with former colonial powers and the West more broadly has never been smooth. After all, Nkurunziza's rebel movement fought a civil war against a system of racial domination and discrimination which had clear continuities from the colonial era. To him, the 'international community' not only colonised Burundi, it also supported the independence-era Tutsi minority regime. And when Hutu mobilised the population and took up arms against this system, it took years of struggle before they were brought to the negotiating table and taken seriously as political actors.

Nonetheless, in his early years in power, Nkurunziza and his party were both obliged, and saw it as beneficial, to collaborate with the international community and its peace and security architecture (such as the UN's peacekeeping and political presence in the country). Nkurunziza and his fellow ex-rebels were the 'new kids on the block', suddenly finding themselves at the helm with little experience in running state affairs and, thus, needing international support. Thus, particularly in his earlier speeches, we identify a tension between asserting sovereignty while simultaneously appealing to international partners for development assistance.

We bring to the attention of our fellow citizens that independence does not mean isolation ('nyamwigendako'). Quite the opposite! The good relations that we have

with the international community reinforce this independence. It is therefore now the occasion to say thank you to all those who have lent us their supporting hand, especially for the peace process and the reconstruction of our country. We are citing here the United Nations, African Union, European Union, our neighbours and all country friends. (Independence Day Speech 2008: Paragraph 49)

This tension gradually disappeared in later years, when what was perceived as an unending diktat by the international community of how the government should conduct its business was met with an increasingly obstinate stance by the Burundian government. From openly inviting the traditional international donors during his first mandate to come work in Burundi, Nkurunziza began to set clear conditions, and finally cast international engagement as a form of neo-colonialism, especially during his last mandate.

We are asking the international organisations that work in Burundi and those that want to come work here to do it by respecting the laws of the country. The Burundians, we are used to being satisfied with the little that we have, we will not tolerate those who hide behind the aid to make us return to slavery. (Independence Day Speech 2017: Paragraph 27)

Foreigners never wanted Burundians to be free and independent. They have always looked for a way to put us under their feet so that we do not even look up. They wanted to find a way to keep control over our administration, our politics and our economy. Burundi was put to the test, but this has not left it traumatised. (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraph 25)

Explicit negative references against Belgium and, to a lesser extent, Germany started appearing after the 2010 elections, and became more frequent following the 2015 crisis, with Nkurunziza threatening that Burundi was ready to cut ties with these countries to protect its sovereignty. This stance stemmed from the government's conviction that, under the banner of democracy promotion, not only were these foreign powers providing support to actors excessively critical of the government, they were actively working with these actors to promote regime change.

Nkurunziza often reflected on the long but inevitable road to independence, referencing the Kirundi proverb *Nti hari aho gutuma umwana* ('it was not a task to leave to the children'). In his speeches, Nkurunziza vividly laid out the role of the colonisers in depriving the Burundian nation of its potential, in subjecting innocent populations to exploitation and in fuelling the ethnic divisions that spoiled the country's social fabric and trajectory as an independent state:

We cannot forget the virus of ethnic divisions that they have injected in the hearts of Burundians, an absolute evil ... which has caused a lot of human and material damage ... You will remember here the time when we measured Burundians according to the length of the nose, their height and other criteria ... to pit us against each other, and they succeeded. That's right, they left, but they had already poisoned us. (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraph 13)

He would emphasise, however, that the *colons* could not have done this alone. His speeches point out that foreign interveners have always worked with what he labels Burundian ‘traitors’, often seducing very trusted individuals through material promises. But, Nkurunziza warned, they always paid for their betrayal:

We would like to invite those who are still being manipulated by foreigners and we ask them to leave the world of the dead to join the world of the living, and to stop destroying their own home like goats. Let’s keep in mind that nobody who has betrayed their country has found internal peace. (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraph 49)

He would give the example of Kilima and Maconco, king (‘Mwezi’) Gisabo’s relatives, who at the turn of the 19th century aligned their troops with the German empire in order to challenge Mwezi Gisabo’s rule. To preserve his kingdom’s unity, Mwezi Gisabo instead decided to make peace with the Germans, signing the Treaty of Kiganda in 1903 that formally established German colonial rule. This prompted the Germans to drop their protégés, with Maconco subsequently executed and Kilima exiled (Mworoha 1977).

Speaking of misguided ‘traitors’ in the midst, Nkurunziza is hinting at the events of 2015, when the planners, supporters and executors of the attempted coup worked together, in the government’s view, with the international system to install a new regime in the country that would be at the service of outside powers rather than at the service of Burundians (Ndayicariye 2020). It was indeed after 2015 that the President’s anti-Western, anti-colonial rhetoric became both more frequent and more unforgiving, likening international actors’ actions to enslavement:

Please think about how to strengthen our independence even more, especially given that those who wanted to return us to slavery and colonization have not ceased to disrupt us until this day. ... Let these foreigners know that they have a debt for the wealth that they have taken, the victims and widows, the tears and fears left in Burundian families. Instead of adding insult to injury, instead of continuing to worsen the situation, it would be good for them to ask Burundians for forgiveness and to ensure reparations. This is a clear path to improving relations. (Independence Day Speech 2017: Paragraphs 4 and 18)

In this section, we have highlighted the coherent anti-colonial rhetorical stance on the part of Nkurunziza. In the above excerpt, Nkurunziza takes aim at the arrogance of Belgium and other colonial powers, which instead of atoning for their crimes continue to present themselves as well-meaning powers acting in the name of justice.

Asking for reparations was not just a rhetorical stance on the part of Nkurunziza, but manifested in concrete policy decisions. For example, even before the Black Lives Matter movement galvanised global introspection about the legacies of racism, slavery and colonialism in 2020, Burundi joined other African countries to demand apologies and reparations from its former colonial powers. Furthermore, when it finally operationalised a Truth and

Reconciliation Commission (CVR) in 2018 that was first envisioned in the 2000 Arusha Accord to examine crimes of the post-independence period, the Burundian government expanded the scope of the CVR's mandate to cover crimes dating back as far as 1885 – to clearly cover colonial-era crimes.

Unity and self-sufficiency

While many opponents of Nkurunziza's regime, particularly after the 2015 crisis, have sought to portray the CNDD-FDD as akin to the Hutu power movements of the past responsible for genocidal violence against the Tutsi (Purdeková 2019), it is notable that Nkurunziza devoted significant energy to painting the Tutsi–Hutu divide as a brutal colonial legacy to be shed. As we saw above, this does not mean that Nkurunziza did not perceive the world as divided along binary lines into the 'faithful' and the 'traitors'; but it suggests that the enemy in this worldview was not an ethnic group but rather anyone who undermines unity and challenges the CNDD-FDD, idealised as the rightful and legitimate winner of the post-war elections. While this stance is problematic for the healthy functioning of state and society if it amounts to not tolerating opposing views, it is one that puts Nkurunziza in a long line of other liberation leaders who saw political opposition in a similar light, as undermining independence and siding with the coloniser. In this reading, some of the CNDD-FDD's controversial policies that seek to bring more Hutu into positions of power might be read as efforts to undo historical patterns of discrimination in the spirit of affirmative action, and to achieve more hegemonic political control (Vandeginste 2019), rather than as motivated by a visceral hatred of the Tutsi. This is not to suggest that some members of the CNDD-FDD establishment may not hold such views, but that this is not necessarily the ideological undercurrent of Nkurunziza's, or his party's, worldview.

Nkurunziza's speeches project a 'mythico-history' (Malkki 1995)¹⁰ of a golden age of a united, stable and peaceful Burundi before the arrival of the colonisers, much in the spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's harmonious state of nature devoid of any social conflicts, which was subsequently destroyed through the introduction of dependency as epitomised for Rousseau in the creation of private property and division of labour (Rousseau 1998). In the Burundian case, it is the arrival of the coloniser and the introduction of capitalism that, according to Nkurunziza, destroyed Burundi's peace and put the country into chains.

Before the Germans came to Burundi and before the year 1903, Burundi was a marvellous country, a country of milk and honey. Our country was politically, economically and socially stable and well organised. ... The unity of Burundians translated itself into everyday life through cultural practices of working the fields together, grazing the flocks without excluding any cattle from anyone and in the collaborative organisation of celebrations. (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraphs 5 and 9)

Nkurunziza would recount a proud tradition of unity and self-sufficiency under the guidance of great kings and heroes, which needed to be revived if

Burundi's true potential were to be realised. This, interestingly, is a radical departure from the ideological roots of the CNDD-FDD as a rebel movement. What in 1994 eventually emerged as an official rebel group CNDD-FDD can be traced back to the Movement of Progressive Burundian Students (MEPROBA), a student organisation founded in Belgian exile at the end of the 1960s and widely considered the spiritual parent of the various Burundian Hutu emancipation movements. MEPROBA advocated a Marxist interpretation of the Hutu–Tutsi divide as primarily a class-based (not ethnic-based) conflict, with roots in what it saw as a conflict-ridden pre-colonial era, in which the Tutsi were portrayed as invaders who imposed a system of exploitation on the Hutu and the Twa groups (MEPROBA 1972). In addition, Nkurunziza's mythical portrayal of an idealised Burundian pre-colonial past is inextricably linked to his ideological anti-colonial stance: if it was colonial politics that resulted in the racialised subjugation of the Hutu (Mamdani 2001) which extended to the era of independence, then an alternative identity to which Burundians must 'return' as a nation must be found elsewhere – in the pre-colonial era.

References to harmonious pre-colonial and monarchical traditions, according to which Burundians during those times worked together in unity for the development of the country, grew over the course of Nkurunziza's presidency. His call to re-establish the moral values of an idealised pre-colonial Burundi went hand in hand with appealing for a revival of traditional cultural practices, such as the annual sorghum festival (*umuganuro*), as well as traditional clan identities (*imiryango*) instead of ethnic identities (*amoko*) imposed by the colonisers (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraph 6). He cast the clans as the authentic social organising units, which were specialised in a way to uniquely contribute to the kingdom, and as a source of moral and devotional rejuvenation (Paviotti 2019: 13). Nkurunziza proudly celebrated his affiliation with the *Abahanza* clan, a Hutu aristocratic clan closely associated with the monarchy. The glorification of the ancient monarchy fuelled speculations that Nkurunziza ultimately aimed to restore the monarchy. Nkurunziza's sudden death put an end to such speculations; regardless, these references did serve to legitimise Nkurunziza's 'rightful' rule over the country.

In his speeches, Nkurunziza often describes Burundi as a country that has everything it needs and can fully provide for its population. The term *gukora* ('to work' or 'to do') regularly features in the themes chosen for independence celebrations. In his speeches, Nkurunziza makes an urgent request to the population 'to redouble' their work efforts to push forward the development of the nation:

To the whole of the Burundian people, we ask you to roll up your sleeves and to get to work so that development is discernible all over the country. To shopkeepers, businessmen and farmers, we ask you to redouble your efforts in your activities. When it comes to us, we will take all measures necessary to get our economy back on an even keel. The period of sitting down and crossing our arms is over. (Inauguration Speech 2005: Paragraph 4)

This is far from an empty rhetoric given that, aside from his passionate engagement in football and his ostentatious public prayers, taking part in the mandatory weekly Saturday community work (*ibikorwa rusangi* or *travaux communautaires*) completed Nkurunziza's signature style. Here, it would be hard to accuse Nkurunziza of not leading by example. Practically on a weekly basis, he would don his usual sportive outfit and get his hands dirty in a variety of small-scale works intended to improve the services for the population, whether in the form of a clean-up of public spaces, planting and harvesting, or construction of various public infrastructural projects.

Nkurunziza's community work was widely visually mined by the government for legitimation purposes, and grew to become an aspect of CNDD-FDD rule that all dignitaries seemingly had to buy into, with selfies in farmer/worker attire featuring prominently in the Twitter accounts of many CNDD-FDD cadres. The widespread participation of CNDD-FDD dignitaries, which continues under Nkurunziza's successor, serves as another example where the rhetoric in the late President's speeches finds expression in concrete political acts.

During the community works, the government, in collaboration with the population, has constructed schools ... it has constructed health centres, hospitals, offices for all administration levels; it has also constructed stadiums, playgrounds, markets, villages and water conveyances ... Even more, since we have started up communal works again, it is during this year that we have inaugurated a lot of spectacular works. We warmly congratulate all those who gave themselves wholeheartedly to the community works. Stay strong and steadfast for the fight. (New Year's Speech 2017: Paragraphs 35 and 36)

Work ethic as a means to unity and self-sufficiency attained a strong emphasis in Nkurunziza's speeches, especially after the 2015 crisis, when Western countries cut their development aid to Burundi. Working became a patriotic act to fight foreign interference.

We are also celebrating this independence one year after we have elaborated, by ourselves, the ten-year National Development Plan. And the means to implement it will come in large part from funds that we will collect here in Burundi. Lastly, we are celebrating at a moment when the law on the general state budget for 2019–2020 has been promulgated and 84% of the budget will be collected in the country, while, in 2015, Burundi depended to 52% on external funds for the national budget. This is an important step in the history of Burundi. We have no doubt that the objective to generate 100% of our national budget ourselves will be attained in three years. (Independence Day Speech 2019: Paragraphs 32 and 33)

Words directly translated to policy: Despite the significant drop in foreign development assistance, Nkurunziza and his ruling party were able to offset the negative impact by resorting to domestic borrowing, which succeeded in reducing the economic shock, at least in the short term (Dom & Roger 2020). This measure also provided the government with 'evidence' that the

country does not need Western support, presenting Burundi as an example that the African continent should follow. To underscore the point, the government also largely self-funded the 2015 electoral process by collecting contributions from the population. This proved to be a highly controversial endeavour, however, with reports of forced contributions ultimately leading Nkurunziza to suspend the collection programme.

Politics of a new beginning

Anti-colonialism as well as unity and self-sufficiency tie into what we refer to as Nkurunziza's 'politics of a new beginning', in which he discursively breaks with the past to depict his and his party's rule as bringing about 'true independence'. Nkurunziza cast the advent of the CNDD-FDD's rule as a 'new departure' for the country.

We have protected the national heritage, especially minerals and industrial crops. This is a new departure that will lead us to true independence, political autonomy through economic independence. (Independence Day Speech 2012: Paragraph 39)

He aimed to set himself apart from his predecessors, whom he depicted as having confused independence with the appropriation and exploitation of power in the image of the colonisers. By so doing, the rhetoric of Nkurunziza isn't unlike that of the current government in neighbouring Rwanda, where 'true independence' only came on the heels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front's victory in the civil war and ensuing 1994 genocide. The period from independence in 1962 until this victory is described as false independence, as the country lived ethnically divided and at the service of former colonisers.

Those who came to power after Rwagasore have worked like the colonisers, and instead of fighting divisionism, they encouraged it: the military coups were recognised as a new mode of accessing power. The nascent democracy was strangled at birth, the one-party regime set to have its rightful place, and peace and security were regularly compromised. (Independence Day Speech 2012: Paragraph 17)

In this connection, Nkurunziza's discourse on Rwagasore is worth examining. While he honoured the role of Burundi's independence leader, praising his aim to reunite all Burundians across partisan and ethnic lines, he never missed an opportunity to highlight that Rwagasore was only one of many heroes who helped to free Burundi 'from the whip and from a foreign administration' (Independence Day Speech 2005: Paragraph 3). This ideological commitment found a concrete expression in the renaming of the national stadium in Bujumbura from Prince Louis Rwagasore to Intwari ('heroes') Stadium in 2019. This is a significant departure from the pre-2005 political establishment discourse, which idolised Rwagasore as a founding father of a democratic, free and independent Burundi. Nkurunziza's relativisation of Rwagasore's significance can be interpreted as an ideological act accomplishing several effects: Rwagasore had been the leader of UPRONA, the party which was to become

Burundi's single party for the first three decades after independence and which quickly came to represent the minority 'Tutsi rule' despite its cross-ethnic roots during Rwagasore's times. As such, unseating Rwagasore from his pedestal is a way of diminishing the liberation role of UPRONA, which in turn serves to underscore that the CNDD-FDD, and not UPRONA, has brought 'true' liberation. Finally, it again reflects Nkurunziza's political effort to situate the most cherished of the country's heroes in a more distant era, namely the pre-colonial period.

In its quest for 'true' independence, Burundi is portrayed as a possible model for the rest of the continent. The theme of a new beginning echoes the 'ethos of liberation' (Gutiérrez Sanín & Wood 2014: 220) identified in other liberation movements across the world, casting a narrative intended to claim exclusivity for the revolutionary liberation of the country. The liberation ethos attempts to impose a hegemonic reading of the past based on a stark division between those on the right side of history, the 'patriotic' liberators, and those on the wrong side of history, the 'unpatriotic' enemies of the nation. What emerges in Nkurunziza's political speeches are grand narratives of liberation and messianic destiny, with the CNDD-FDD claiming the title of the legitimate representative of true liberation and independence.

In the opening lines of the Burundian anthem, 'Our Burundi' (*Burundi Bwacu*), adopted upon achieving formal independence from Belgium in 1962, Burundi is described as now being able to 'plant its spear down' (*shinga icumu mu mashinga*), an expression referring to the idea of finding a home among those of others as an equal member.

Reinforcing the independence of our country, something that is so well translated by the wish of 'finding our place in the concert of nations' (**Shinga icumu mu mashinga**), and which allows us to walk with our head held high, stay upright, without bowing our back, and to take sovereign decisions for the good of our people. (Independence Day Speech 2010: Paragraph 16; bold emphasis in the original)

So how has Burundi under Nkurunziza sought to find its place in the concert of nations? Some of the government's least popular international policy decisions criticised by human rights activists and Western-based institutions should indeed also be understood through the government's worldview of restoring Burundi's 'true' independence. Among the most important was the government's refusal of an African Union intervention force championed by the international community in the wake of the 2015 crisis; Burundi's withdrawal from the International Criminal Court in 2017 after the Court opened an investigation into possible crimes against humanity committed in the 2015–2017 period; non-cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, resulting in the Office's closure in Burundi in 2020; and finally, the government's successful pressure on the UN Security Council to be removed from its agenda, on the grounds that the situation in Burundi did not constitute a threat to international peace, also came to fruition in 2020.

CONCLUSIONS

When Nkurunziza died on 8 June 2020, debates and rumours about the cause of his unexpected death were as politicised as discussions around his legacy. For his supporters, ‘Pita’ liberated Burundi from decades of oppression against the Hutu majority at the hands of the Tutsi minority, and his accession to power paved the way to a more democratic Burundi. For his adversaries, Nkurunziza, as part of the wider CNDD-FDD regime, grew increasingly authoritarian and forcefully stood for an unconstitutional third term in 2015, putting the final nail in the coffin of Burundi’s democracy. This debate is not going to be settled by the current generation of Burundians and Burundi-watchers. Whatever the eventual outcome, we have underscored in this article that the answer is unlikely to fall into any one binary category. Following Rutazibwa (2014), our aim was to go beyond the lens that can only make sense of the complex politics of any one place by reducing it to a battle of democrats against autocrats.

In the Western academic and media discourses especially, discussions of ‘democratic backsliding’ and ‘resurgent authoritarianism’ have taken a front seat in recent years (Bond 2019; Przeworski 2019; The Economist 2020; Cheeseman & Fisher 2021). Since the 2015 crisis which saw Nkurunziza successfully push for a third term in office, shut down media outlets that were most critical of the government, stifle street protests and relentlessly pursue all those believed to have sympathised with the attempted *coup d’état*, including through forced disappearances and killings, it is difficult for an outside observer not to place Nkurunziza’s tenure into the authoritarian category. The Wilsonian gaze is certainly correct in judging Nkurunziza as having deviated from the democratic path defined by Western liberal democratic standards. The question that these same academic and media discourses typically leave unanswered, however, is why?

In this particular case, how do we make sense of a man who was once a popular Minister of Good Governance (2003–2005) and who inspired hope when first elected President in 2005, only to later come to be seen as someone who is willing to use violence and bring his country to international isolation just to remain president for five more years? Most existing writing about Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD party have not addressed this question. For its part, literature on African politics more generally often tends to paint a classic ‘politics of the belly’ picture of leaders who come to be corrupted by power and money. In similar vein, Nkurunziza’s opponents and critics, both home and abroad, have cast the President’s and the government’s growing intransigence toward the international community as a sign of unwillingness to face justified criticism.

We do not suggest that this angle does not provide a partial explanation of Nkurunziza’s behaviour, or of that of political leaders’ more broadly. In this article, we aimed to expand and nuance this narrative by highlighting that political leaders, including on the African continent, are driven not just by greed

and a possible ‘fear of prosecution’ but also by specific worldviews, shaped by their particular life circumstances. For instance, while not seeking to absolve Nkurunziza for his continuation of Burundi’s path of violent politics, we highlight clues from his life that make violence seem inevitable, permissible and necessary in the conduct of politics.

Official speeches do not provide a complete picture of a political leader’s worldview. Critics might argue that official speeches are not as indicative of the leader’s ‘real’ ideas as might be other instances of off-the-cuff remarks at political rallies or elsewhere. We accept these objections as necessary limitations of our research findings. For us, looking at Nkurunziza’s official speeches constitutes the beginning of a conversation. A researcher with a different background from ours, i.e. one who might not be an outsider coming from Europe or who might be fluent in Kirundi, may have chosen a different way of gauging Nkurunziza’s worldview, and may consequently arrive at different observations.

We have argued that, regardless of what one might think of Nkurunziza’s politics, there is a consistent worldview underpinning his political behaviour, and key policy decisions of the Burundian government under his helm. We do not disagree that the truthfulness of Nkurunziza’s speech content, much like that of any other politician, can be challenged. Our goal in this article, however, has not been to precisely measure discourse against action, but to treat political speech in its own right, for it is also constitutive of power. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, we have shown that Nkurunziza’s ideological themes ‘matter’, because they were translated into social practice on the ground. There is, naturally, no way to truly gauge the extent to which all topics in political speeches are used instrumentally, and to what extent they reflect a genuinely held worldview. While we would answer that any political statements are likely to be a combination of both, we do take seriously those critics who would point out the discrepancies between rhetoric and reality. In other words, Nkurunziza might claim to champion Burundi’s self-sufficiency, while ‘in reality’ his economic policies might be keeping the population in poverty, or else, he might be selling off the country’s mineral wealth to foreign contractors. Others might argue that even though he spoke of ethnic unity, his regime discriminated against and in some cases pursued the Tutsi, particularly after 2015. Future research could delve deeper into comparing Nkurunziza’s discourse and action in specific policy domains.

Another observation concerning Nkurunziza’s worldview was that his positions radicalised over time. For their part, many of Burundi’s bilateral and multilateral partners also adopted an increasingly acerbic language toward Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD, culminating in 2015 when many donors cut funding and engaged in harsh public criticism, coupled in some cases with an imposition of sanctions. The regime’s intransigence and refusal to negotiate with ‘putschists’, whom the West saw as pro-democracy actors, contributed to Burundi being seen as a pariah state by the Global North for much of the subsequent five years.

We propose that this is a case of a clash of epistemologies. On the one hand, one would be hard-pressed to criticise Burundi's donors for sounding caution and taking preventive and punitive measures vis-à-vis a country with a deep history of cyclical violence and genocide, especially in light of instances of hate speech on the part of some individuals within Nkurunziza's administration during the crisis. On the other hand, the approach of foreign actors, particularly from the Global North, toward Burundi seems like a perfect case of a 'Wilsonian intervention' paradigm. Burundi's performance as a country, indeed its very sovereignty, was being measured against an imagined democratic ideal from which it was departing, and as a result it was deemed acceptable for it to be punished. This paternalist, inter-governmental political dynamic is only possible in the context of existing global power hierarchies, themselves legacies of the colonial era.

Finally, Nkurunziza's anti-colonial ideology cannot be delinked from decolonial politics elsewhere on the continent or the globe. The legacies of the post-Second World War global architecture allow for interventions into the sovereignty of some states more than into others, and this unequal world order has been and continues to be challenged, particularly in the Global South, which sits on the disadvantaged end of this inequality. Burundi has hardly been the only country to reject the jurisdiction of the ICC or the UN Security Council's involvement, although it has received disproportionate criticism for these political acts compared with any of its sister nations. An analysis of this comparatively louder condemnation, though beyond the scope of this article, is clearly merited.

NOTES

1. We use 'West' and 'Global North' interchangeably. Although there are nuances between the two terms, for our purposes here, both refer to the part of the world that holds most political, military and economic power, i.e. the group of countries at the UN referred to as 'Western European and Other States' and comprising 28 states, including Western European countries, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey and Israel.

2. Called as such after former US President Woodrow Wilson, seen as the founding father of the modern peace and democracy architecture. This is not to suggest that recent scholarship has not critiqued Wilson's role, but that this continues to be his dominant image nonetheless.

3. Most of the selected speeches are available in French and archived on the official website of the Burundian Presidency. Five speeches that are only available in Kirundi were translated into French by a native Kirundi speaker. The English quotes cited in this article are the authors' own translations from French. We note here that neither of us speaks Kirundi and thus all of our contact with Burundi and Burundians is limited to and mediated by those who speak French or English.

4. Where applicable, we complemented our qualitative analysis with content from speeches delivered on New Year's. However, as several of these are not publicly available, we did not include them in our NVivo analysis.

5. Shortly after independence, Burundi came to be governed by successive military dictatorships whose leaders all hailed from one faction of the minority Tutsi, from the same locality in Bururi province, and even from the same extended family. These were Michel Micombero (1966–1976), Jean-Baptiste Bagaza (1976–1987) and Pierre Buyoya (1987–1993), all coming to power through a military coup.

6. Until today, there is considerable debate among Burundians and scholars alike about whether the 1972 events should be labelled as double genocide, genocide, partial genocide, or ethnic cleansing (Lemarchand 2008).

7. This traumatic event marked an entire generation, and many of today's CNDD-FDD leaders are orphans of the 1972 killings.
8. The fact that Nkurunziza was elected by Parliament and not through direct vote for his first term in 2005 is what led to contentious interpretations of the two-term limit during the 2015 crisis over his 'third' term candidacy.
9. <https://twitter.com/ThierryU/status/1271509337379426307>.
10. In her study of Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania, Malkki (1995) defines 'mythico-histories' as a recasting of history in fundamentally moral terms to sketch their subjective interpretation of Burundian history.

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