

By Athanase Karayenga

Burundi looks like the moon. One side is ever dark. The other side is bright, but its light could soon be switched off.

Burundi is a strange and unique combination. On one hand, political instability, recurrent civil unrest, murders, embezzlements, economic mismanagement and deep-rooted corruption prevail.

On the other hand, Burundi is blooming: There can be found genuine democratic processes, extended freedom of expression, vibrant media and civil society, booming private initiatives in areas as diverse as Internet access and mobile phones. Private universities and higher education institutions are being created, hotels and restaurants are under construction and economic reforms initiated and funded by the World Bank are succeeding.

But at the end of the day, ordinary people in rural and urban areas struggle for a better life, yet hardly survive.

Burundi is a political and economic case study of its own in Africa. It's a ticking time bomb. While there isn't much time left, this bomb could be deactivated. A dreadful race against the clock has started until the next general elections planned for 2010.

Kenya syndrome

There is a link between the corruption in Burundi and the imminent threat to the country's security and stability. Kenya's derailed democratic process could spill over to Burundi and be used as a model by corrupt politicians ready to use violence in order to stay in power or to gain access to the "honey pot."

"The poor of Kenya had used the ballot to send a message to the capitalists in Kenya, but those who stole billions of dollars from the Kenyan Treasury were not above stealing an election," stressed Horace Campbell of Syracuse University in his analysis, "Drama of the Popular Struggle for democracy in Kenya."

Corruption will probably be used by candidates to discredit one another during Burundi's general elections campaign. Scandals such as "Falcongate" will be brought up as political ammunition. It is likely the political struggle will deteriorate into a fight between Hutu and Tutsi. Unless strong initiatives are taken in advance, the tragic Kenyan scenario could be repeated in Burundi.

The Falcongate story

Since 1992, when travelling abroad for official purposes, Burundi heads of state have been flying on Dassault Aviation Falcon 50, an aircraft used by the jet set or very wealthy business people. The aircraft was a gift from the government of France under François Mitterrand.

In 2007, the plane was sold to a private international company. According to a report produced by an independent Belgian auditing organization, decision/analysis partners LLC, its value was estimated at US\$6.8 million.

Two companies competed to buy the Falcon 50. The first company offered US\$5 million, the smaller offered US\$3.2 million.

It was sold for US\$3.2 million. The second company won the competition after a three-day, fake tender process. And where is the difference? Critics suspect it has landed in deep private pockets in Burundi and abroad.

In Burundi, the Falcongate story is on everybody's mind. Media, civil society, members of parliament from the opposition, independent analysts, and international diplomatic bodies have all tried to force Burundi's government to tell the whole truth on this very strange trade, with no success — so far. Burundi Parliament has failed to put up a specific commission to investigate this transaction.

Burundi's government committed itself to put up a special inquiry commission by June 15, 2007. This commission was supposed to produce a report by Sept. 30, 2007. For the time being, independent analysts believe the inquiry commission has been put off indefinitely. The Burundi government is blamed for lack of transparency and accountability and is being held responsible for what critics describe as dramatic embezzlement and massive corruption.

Giving and Taking Bribes – an Entrenched Tradition

Because of impunity extended to cases of large corruption, small bribes are given or taken at all levels. To access better schools, better health services in public hospitals, administrative papers and justice, Burundi must offer bribes to the civil servants in charge.

In Burundi, not a single day goes by without corruption stories in the media. The latest embezzlement and corruption escapades fill the daily news. People seem to be fascinated and depressed at the same time by these “soap operas.”

During his new year’s speech, President Pierre Nkurunziza promised to launch an investigation into embezzlement and corruption allegedly committed by the government before he came into power. For example, Nkurunziza mentioned a case of military trucks and helicopters unable to operate after delivery.

He also mentioned that it was unclear how funds, collected to support the civil war that began in 1993, were spent. Nkurunziza mentioned other alleged corruption cases related to gold trafficking, oil trading and to questionable land grants. He didn’t, however, mention the Falcon 50 case.

The popular civil society organisation, Observatory to Fight Corruption (OLUCOME), raised several other very sensitive embezzlement and corruption cases.

OLUCOME mentioned an old conflict between Burundi and a Belgian diamond sales counter named Lubelsky going back to 1965, a case of fictitious civil servants and compensation paid by the government to a coffee plantation owner near Bujumbura.

OLUCOME also raises other spectacular corruption cases concerning:

- the urban services allocating space for home building in Bujumbura,
- the national customs service,
- the national sugar plant (Mosso),
- the collapse of the former “Banque Populaire” and the liquidation of its assets,
- the maintenance process in South Africa of an aircraft belonging to Air Burundi, the national air travel company,
- the construction of a road that hugs the Tanganika coastline between Bujumbura and Rumonge toward the south.

This list of alleged embezzlement and corruption is far from exhaustive. OLUCOME estimates there are approximately 1,700 affairs of state that the Burundi government has tried to hush up for decades. And the losses are estimated at US\$40 million.

The public is pessimistic about corruption. According to a 2006 study of public perceptions of corruption by Transparency International, Burundi ranked near the

bottom: 132 out of 163 nations. In 2007, the country held the 131st position out of 180 countries.

Yet, the country has specific and supposedly tough laws and institutions commissioned to fight corruption: the Good Governance Ministry, a Corruption Court with a Prosecutor, a specialized Police Squad against Corruption, a State General Inspection service and, finally, a specific law against corruption.

In fact, an official delegation from Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, composed of two members of parliament, two senators and an international civil servant paid an official visit to Burundi on September 13, 2007, to learn more about the "impressive institutions" Burundi has put in place to fight corruption.

But at the end of 2007, during the closing session, the senate chairperson, Gervais Rufyikiri, highlighted the fact that the year was marked by very poor governance. He complained of economic scandal, embezzlement and corruption.

"We would like all the institutions put in place to prosecute and punish economic crimes — in particular the Corruption Court, Squads and the State General Inspection — to show the Burundi people the work being done."

But why is Burundi so crippled by embezzlement and corruption?

Part of the answer lays in the regional economic embargo exerted on the country in 1996 and the long and endless civil war that started in 1993. State authority and discipline have collapsed, leaving the country in the hands of governments unable or unwilling to really stop the descent into Dante's Inferno.