

In Burundi election, Catholic Church could be swing vote

by [Christina Goldbaum](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) They spilled out the wooden doors of the Regina Mundi Catholic Cathedral: Mothers and fathers, Hutus and Tutsis, government supporters and opposition members, all celebrating mass on a recent Sunday, one of the few quiet days left in Burundi's capital.

Since President Pierre Nkurunziza announced he would run for a third term on April 25, Bujumbura has suffered violent protests and a failed coup that has sent opposition leaders, activists, and journalists into hiding or exile.

"Burundi is full of fear," said Ignance Nkurunziza, a priest (no relation to the president), preaching to the roughly 500-strong congregation at the cathedral. "We make our brothers our enemies and they become animals to us . . . but it is the body of Christ that will bring peace."

The Roman Catholic Church here has the support of more than two-thirds of Burundians, who see it as a moral pillar. The church criticized coup leader Jean-Baptiste Bagaza during his tenure as president in the 1980s and denounced the 1993 coup against the country's first elected president. That opposition has come at a significant price, with two archbishops assassinated in the past.

So people listened when the Catholic Bishops of Burundi announced two weeks ago that the church was withdrawing its priests from the electoral commissions tasked with organizing the election, saying it "cannot support elections that are full of shortcomings."

Parliamentary and presidential elections have since been rescheduled to mid-July, but doubts remain as to whether the security and political openness needed for free and fair elections can be established. The Catholic Church's unprecedented decision to revoke its approval for the elections, if not reversed, could shatter the credibility of whatever electoral processes do occur.

“People respect the church as a moral authority in Burundi,” said Willy Nindorera, a researcher on civil issues here. “The bishops repeatedly issued declarations denouncing the massacres during the civil war, even when, within the church, they were divided about doing so.”

The church's broad base is a key factor.

“The fact that they are ethnically cross-cutting puts them in a position to speak with a moral authority and mobilize masses of supporters,” said Rachel Beatty Riedl, professor of political science at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. “It elevates their role in the country.”

Election credibility

In response to the Catholic Church’s decision, the National Electoral Commission said it will make changes to ensure rescheduled elections can proceed as planned. The church has yet to release a statement since the delay was announced.

“They are sending a clear message internally and internationally that we are not facing an election process that is credible, free, or fair,” Nindorera said. “Especially because the church supported the electoral commission in the 2005 and 2010 elections.”

According to Bujumbura Archbishop Evariste Ngoyagoye, the church agreed to participate in this year’s election commission on the condition that the priests appointed could leave if they had ethical objections.

Since President Nkurunziza’s announcement, all non-state radio stations—the main source of news in Burundi— have been shut down, protesters and police have faced violent standoffs in the streets, and nearly 100,000 have fled for neighboring Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“There are certain requirements you have for a fair election, like free media and security,” said Archbishop Ngoyagoye. “We do not have those right now, so we cannot take part.”

Despite withdrawing their operational support, Catholic Bishops in Burundi did encourage people to vote, though warning against doing so “by threat or intimidation.”

For opposition supporters in rural areas, some of whom have been the victims of attacks by members of the ruling party's youth wing, the Imbonerakure, going to the polls could mean putting their lives at risk.

"We trust the Catholic Bishops, so if they tell me to vote, I will go vote," said Bivyangari Ve'Ponique, a teacher in Ngozi Province. "But we are afraid. The Imbonerakure have attacked many people here. We are afraid they will attack us again."

Government backlash

Already the church is experiencing backlash from the government for its decision. Long a staple on Burundi's government-run radio, Sunday mass has been wiped from the airwaves.

"It's the sign of a new relationship between the public authorities . . . and the Catholic Church," Nindorera said.

Soon after the announcement to withdraw support of the elections on May 28, there were rumors that Archbishop Nyogagoye would be targeted that following Sunday.

"I heard there was a plan to disturb the mass I was presiding over, that there were a group of people who were going to come and kill me," he said.

The mass went on uninterrupted. But with journalists, activists, and other prominent figures already in hiding after vocally opposing a third term, many fear figures in the Catholic Church could be the next target.

"The way leaders are mobilizing people now, there is a high risk of repeating history," said Nyogagoye, sitting by the window in his hilltop home. "Killing me? . . . It's a possibility."