

THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE OF BURUNDI

General Secretariat

The Second Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Burundi ahead of the 2015 Elections.¹

Let's promote peace and reconciliation as we prepare for the 2015 Elections. (See Eph 6: 15)

To our Brothers and Sisters in the Faith,

To all the people of Burundi

May the Peace of God be with you all!

1. Although we already issued a pastoral letter about the 2015 elections, we are again sending out another one; we felt that it was appropriate to call on all of you to treasure the fragile gains of peace and security we acquired after countless efforts of hard work. Such efforts should not be sabotaged by evil people who spread false rumors across the country about the upcoming elections.

2. As a whole, we appreciate the level of security in the country despite the fact it faces many challenges. We hold in equally high regard the voter registration process taking place under the best of conditions so far. We commend the National Independent Electoral Commission for extending the registration deadline for those who failed to register for various reasons.

3. However, we are seriously beset by the paralyzing fear of the population across the country, a fear well justified by the divergent interpretations of some articles in the Constitution of the Republic of Burundi pertaining to the election of the President. For instance, some argue that the Constitution and the Electoral Code do not prevent the incumbent President from seeking another term in office. Others on the contrary vow to take to the streets if the president attempts to stay on.

As usual, proponents of either position may want to convince a majority of citizens to follow them through various means of corruption or intimidation using the platform of political parties, religion or ethnic affiliations. Some might even take advantage of the pastoral letter of the Catholic Church that addresses some of these major issues as a political tool to manipulate the faithful for the purpose of winning them over.

4. In this message, we, your bishops and guardians of the Church in Burundi intend first and foremost to remind you that the Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor is she tied to any political system. She is at once the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person (cf. Second

Vatican Council, *Gaudium Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n.76, §2).

From time immemorial and through her teaching, the Church has always affirmed that she can collaborate with leaders of any political regime without any distinction whatsoever of religion or ethnic affiliation. No one should take advantage of the Church for the pursuit of political purposes. In this way, we will protect our country from the backlash of divisions based on religion, something that is against her teaching and nature. In any political regime, the Church seeks to defend the fundamental values she upholds and teaches, drawing from the light of the Gospel that Jesus Christ handed down to us. It is as follows: the respect of the human person, the truth, justice, love, peaceful coexistenceand other spiritual values which respect and promote the dignity of the human person as intended by God and which encourage the pursuit of peace.

5. As to the current controversy pertaining to the number of terms in office of an elected president, we wish and request that the constitution be interpreted in the spirit of the Arusha Peace Accords that constitute its very foundations. The spirit aims at promoting peace and reconciliation through a democratic process.

6. With the same vision in mind, we, the pastors of the Catholic Church of Burundi, aware of the peace agreements and the constitution that stems from the agreements charter (article 8, 96, 103 et 302), listening to our consciences and as citizens who love their country and are faithful to their duty as church leaders who should prevent their country from relapsing into sectarian violence, division and war, make the following statement: the truth is clear. The president elected by the people of Burundi must not exceed the two terms of five years stated in the constitution.

7. Let us remember. When there were attempts to amend some parts of the constitution, we, your pastors, made our voices heard: “this constitution has provisions that aimed to bring the country slowly back on track,” therefore it should be left the way it is (cf the communiqué of the Catholic Bishops conference, December 3, 2013). We even highlighted those provisions that pertain to power sharing and the respect of political term limits....” (Idem). On this, our position has not changed. Such provisions should be respected. Even the National Assembly which represents the people of Burundi didn’t make any change to the fundamental law.

8. The real solution to the problem is a true democratic process. One important feature of any good democracy is the timely and peaceful renewal of its institutions through free and fair elections. We invite our leaders and other politicians to read and interpret the constitution in the spirit of the Arusha Peace Accords. The accords got us out of the war; leaders and politicians should not fall into the trap of misinterpreting the constitution to suit their vested interests.

9. Now that our country faces turbulent times, we, the pastors of the Church, as always, remind our elected leaders, those of political parties and politicians alike to choose the path

that discourages violence and vengeance but which actively promotes peaceful electoral process and national unity. This path will give the opportunity to every citizen to freely choose his/her representatives. That is why we are sounding the alarm now. Please, let us all choose the path of wisdom and put forward the good of our nation as we continue to improve our democracy.

10. With regard to the candidates that you, our faithful, may want to deny or cast your vote for, you know very well our position, we compel no one to vote for this political party or that politician. Each one is free to choose the party based on its manifesto. The same applies to the time of casting the ballot. Everyone must listen to his/her conscience in prayer and choose the one according to the will of God. This is our fervent wish in the upcoming elections.

11. Be ready for the elections and do not cave in to any form of intimidation or anything that could jeopardize the peace and security of all, lest you corroborate the position of those who are against the electoral process. Dear faithful, we are in communion of faith with you as we remember the words of St Paul to the Philippians, we make the same recommendation to you:

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”.

This prayer calls for peace in our hearts as informed by the words of Pope Francis for this Lenten Season, we pray for the priests who are your guides. We suggest that they organize in all parishes or elsewhere a novena of prayer from March 13-21, 2015 to implore Christ, the King of peace to bestow on our country the renewal of its political institutions in a spirit of peace and security through free and fair elections.

12. In summary, we wish you all a fruitful time of Lent, time of grace, of renewal and of conversion of hearts to lead the fight against our evil tendencies and to seek out what is good as we look forward to the joy of Easter.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Peace and St Joseph, the Just, intercede for us so that God may answer our prayers.

Bujumbura, March 06, 2015

ⁱ Translated from French by Africa Faith & Justice Network’s Policy Analyst, Rev. Barthelemy Bazemo, MAfr