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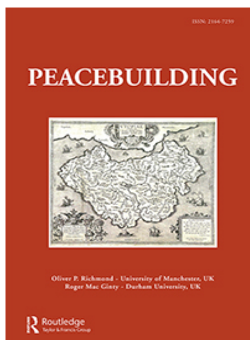

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Young protesters' ambivalence about violence in the 2015 crisis in Burundi: local legacies of conflict and generational change

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ABSTRACT

April 2015, Burundi. What started as peaceful demonstrations against another term of president Nkurunziza, quickly turned into violent confrontations between mostly young male civilians and government forces. The demonstrations signalled the beginning of a new political crisis after a decade of peace. In this paper, we draw on eye-witness accounts of civilians to understand the escalation of violence. We argue that legacies of conflict informed the understanding and escalation of the violence. For instance, memories and skills learned by adults and older peers during the civil war were passed on to novices to organise protests and neighbourhood defence. Yet the legacies of conflict also juxtaposed with protesters' ideals on 'civil' non-violent political dialogue. The ambivalence towards violence experienced and narrated by protesters and witnesses points to intergenerational change, but may also be understood as contradictions in how political dialogue and competition is generally envisioned in Burundi.

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Introduction

In this article, we explore how local legacies of conflict informed the escalation and understanding of violence in the mass demonstrations in Bujumbura, Burundi in April and May 2015 – often referred to as 'the 2015 crisis'.[1] The mass demonstrations marked the country's return to a state of violent political crisis after ten years of relative peace. Burundi has been troubled by repeated outbreaks of political violence mainly fought along ethnic lines since the country's Independence in 1962. Among the most devastating episodes of mass violence are the 'selective genocide' targeting Hutu intellectuals and students in 1972, the massacres in Ntega-Marangara in northern Burundi in 1988,[2] and in 1993 the country was plunged into a state of civil war which lasted until 2005, when a transition government was installed and president Pierre Nkurunziza was voted into power. After the elections that marked the transition to peace in 2005, however, Burundi

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[1]See also, Antea Paviotti, 'Burundi's 2015 Crisis and the Ethnicization of Memory on Social Media', *Conjonctures de l'Afrique centrale* 92 (2018): 91–113.
[2]René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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became seen as an internationally brokered peacebuilding success.[3] That is, until the events of April and May 2015.[4]

In the paper, we investigate how the mass demonstrations evolved from an unarmed citizen movement into the marker of relapse into violent crisis. Uniquely, we explore the perspectives and practices of civilian witnesses and participants in the mass demonstrations, focusing on the early stages when violence escalated. This focus provides an important contribution to extant literature that explores the limits of international peace brokerage[5] and the legacies of the rebellion on political leaders and parties.[6] In this paper, we instead seek to understand the views and practices of civilians at a moment when the outcomes of taking to the street were still uncertain. In this way, we seek to critically investigate the role of 'ordinary people' in shaping the dynamics of war and peace, thus adding to current debates about the 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies.[7] We show that these civilian views and practices exhibit a mix of anticipation and shock, pointing to tensions between modes of conduct that advocate non-violent protest versus war tactics of violent resistance and revenge.

We try to unpack these dynamics with the concepts 'generation' and 'civility'. Regarding generation, we combine the sociological understanding of 'generational cohort' and 'historical generation'[8] with a more classical anthropological approach to generation as a genealogical relation of kinship.[9] These multiple meanings of generation help us interrogate intergenerational change and continuity in the aftermath of the civil war in Burundi, looking at the transmission of memory, knowledge and skills between older and younger kin relations and neighbours. The concept of civility[10] helps us capture some of the new ideas and ideals on political competition that, in the aftermath of the civil war, were increasingly taking root especially among (young) people in Bujumbura, Burundi, where the mass demonstrations started. Civility implies a mode of political dialogue and competition that exhibits tolerance and restraint, different from the violent politics seen in much of Burundi's recent history. At the same time, the concept is inherently ambivalent by being a means of distinction from the 'uncivil' as well.[11]

[3]Devon Curtis, 'The International Peacebuilding Paradox: Power Sharing and Post-Conflict Governance in Burundi', *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (2013): 72–91.

[4]Julia Grauvogel, 'Burundi After the 2015 Elections: A Conference Report', *Africa Spectrum* 51, no. 2 (2016): 3–14; and Tomas Van Acker, 'Understanding Burundi's Predicament', *Africa Policy Briefs* 11, (2015): 1–10.

[5]See, Mike Jobbins and Floride Ahitungiye, 'Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention in Burundi's 2015 Election Crisis', *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (2015): 205–18; Stef Vandeginste, 'Chronique politique du Burundi, 2015–2016', in *L'Afrique des grands lacs: annuaire 2015–2016* (Antwerp, Reyntjens, Filip; ea eds, 2016): 51–68; and Yolande Bouka, 'Burundi: Between War and Negative Peace', in *War and Peace in Africa's Great Lakes Region* (London: Khadiagala, Gilbert M., 2017), 17–31.

[6]Tomas Van Acker, 'Exploring the Legacies of Armed Rebellion in Burundi's Maquis Par Excellence', *Africa Spectrum* 51, no. 2 (2016): 15–37; Katrin Wittig, 'Politics in the Shadow of the Gun: Political Legacies of Rebellion and Authoritarianism for Party Politics After Civil War in Burundi and Beyond' (PhD Thesis, Montréal: Université du Montréal, 2017); and Anne-Claire Courtois, 'Rupture et continuité d'un ethos politique autoritaire: les noms de partis au Burundi', *Mots. Les langages du politique* (2019): 109–125.

[7]See Mathijs Van Leeuwen, et al. 'The "Local Turn" and Notions of Conflict and Peacebuilding – Reflections on Local Peace Committees in Burundi and Eastern DR Congo', *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 3 (2020): 279–99; and, in this special issue, Pascale Schild, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: In/civility in Peace and Conflict', *Peacebuilding* (2023): 1–12. doi: 10.1080/21647259.2023.2209399.

[8]Karl Mannheim, 'The Sociological Problem of Generations', *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* 306 (1952): 163–95.

[9]Susan Reynolds Whyte, Erdmute Alber, and Sjaak Van der Geest, 'Generational Connections and Conflicts in Africa: An Introduction', in *Generations in Africa: Connections and Conflicts,* vol. 33 (Lit Verlag: Alber, Erdmute ea, 2008), 1–23.

[10]Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (1969); this special issue, Schild, 'Introduction to the Special Issue'.

[11]Melanie White, 'An Ambivalent Civility', *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 31, no. 4 (2006): 445–460; and James Bowman, 'The Incivility of Civility', *The New Criterion* (September 2011): 116–20.

Our argument is twofold. Firstly, in line with ideals of civility in democratic political competition, the mass demonstrations were announced and presented as peaceful citizen protests. Many people, mostly urban young people and members of civil society, participated in the mass demonstrations to enforce change through non-violent citizen protest. Yet, these enactments were immediately challenged by the government through the police force, the national security service (*Service National de Renseignement*, SNR) and the ruling party youth league called *Imbonerakure*, and led to the use and exchange of violence from the first day. Eventually, a failed coup by the army plunged the country into a deeper political crisis.

Second, the quick escalation of violence can be understood in part by the ways in which local legacies of conflict regained relevance during the protests. In this sense, ideas about democracy and civility competed with the wartime logic and practices that prescribed enemy lines between neighbourhoods, methods for neighbourhood self-defence, and norms and values that supported revenge. Notably, these local legacies of conflict built on experiences of people during the war as well as experiences shared with and passed on to novices, including various witnesses to and participants in the protests, who as children had not been or were less directly exposed to the wartime violence than older peers and adults. Consequently, we argue, different ideas of accepted modes of conduct competed; those reflecting notions of non-violent civility versus violent resistance and, with time, ethnic animosity.

Combining perspectives

To explore the escalation of violence during the mass demonstrations in Bujumbura in April and May 2015, we foreground the eye-witness accounts of the second author, who wishes to remain anonymous for safety reasons (henceforth we refer to him as Anonymous). He came of age in Cibitoke after fleeing home and hearth in the countryside when the civil war started in 1993. At the time of the crisis, in 2015, he lived with his family in the neighbourhood Cibitoke in Bujumbura, which became known as one of the main '*quartiers contestataires*' (protesting neighbourhoods). To anonymous, 'Cibitoke is one of Bujumbura's neighbourhoods that knows best what suffering of war entails'. Namely, even prior to the 1993 civil war, 'in 1991, the first attack of Burundi's rebel movement Palipehutu-FNL took place in Cibitoke, 8th avenue, number 92'. (Anonymous, Rwanda, February 2020). A Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences, Anonymous gained research experience as a field research assistant prior to participating in this project. During the writing process, he pursued MA and PhD degrees.

Following up on the first author's suggestion, Anonymous kept a diary about the events unfolding in the first weeks of the mass demonstrations in Cibitoke, retrospectively from 26 April until 8 May and then daily. These daily diary reports, which include notes from short, informal interviews, form the basis of this article. In 2016 and from December 2019 until February 2020, Anonymous complemented this work with phone and in-person interviews with witnesses and participants who at that time were living in exile in Rwanda or had remained in Burundi. These retrospective interviews served to triangulate some of his own experiences and perspectives as well as identify complementary viewpoints and experiences.

Anonymous' work is complemented by that of Lidewyde Berckmoes, the first author. She is an anthropologist from the Netherlands whose work focuses on young people, conflict and generational dynamics in Burundi and Rwanda. From 2007–2011, Berckmoes conducted ethnographic research with young people in Cibitoke and other neighbourhoods in northern Bujumbura.[12] She was in Burundi at the beginning of the mass demonstrations for a research project that entailed fieldwork research in 2014–2015.

In the first weeks of the demonstrations, Berckmoes was largely confined to her temporary home and the compound of UNICEF. Mostly from her home and the compound, she followed the mass demonstrations and the government's responses through traditional and social media updates and information shared through the UN and European embassies and through a Telegram group of expatriate peers. In addition, Berckmoes occasionally met Burundian interlocutors at home or in the town centre, where the situation seemed safer than in other parts of the city. She left Burundi on 11 May 2015, two days before the attempted *coup d'état* drove the country into deeper crisis. From 2016, Berckmoes visited Burundi and Burundians in exile in Rwanda on multiple occasions for short stints of research, each time following up on the afterlives of affected young people and families. Some of these visits also served to analyse and work through the findings and memories of Anonymous and to develop and co-write this article.

In both *in situ* and remote data collection phases we encountered several limitations. *In situ* fieldwork research was mainly affected by acute security risks related to the violence accompanying the mass demonstrations, which restricted access to places and people affected, and regularly shifted our priorities away from research. In addition, in the midst of the chaos, it was not always easy to 'read' what was going on. For instance, Anonymous spent some days mainly inside his house due to insecurity, limiting the sources of information about what was going on:

> My sources of information are the [national radio station] RTNB, which gives unreliable information (. . .) 'France 24' which gives very summarized information and sometimes repeats the same situation, and WhatsApp, of which the information is charged with very intense emotions. . ." (Anonymous, research diary, May 2015)

Limitations like these made it important to, in the years after, contact people to learn about their perspectives of and experiences during the mass demonstrations. Continued security risks meant, however, that we had to rely primarily on members of our existing networks. While in Rwanda, for instance, Anonymous was often warned by friends and family to be careful about who he would approach and ask for an interview, as spies might be in their midst: 'My friends frequently warn me: "Make sure you don't talk to a wrong guy. You never know where it can reach"'. (Anonymous, research diary, December 2019). Participants were therefore selected based on the authors' abilities to connect (sometimes at distance) and build trust, which in large part relied on prior acquaintance and pre-existing trust. Most interlocutors identified as 'young', 'male' and 'Tutsi' and were raised in Cibitoke or adjacent neighbourhoods on Bujumbura's northern

[12] Lidewyde Berckmoes, 'Elusive Tactics: Urban Youth Navigating the Aftermath of War in Burundi' (PhD Thesis, Amsterdam: VU University, 2014).

periphery. They have different educational backgrounds and were sympathetic to various political parties.

By foregrounding the eye-witness accounts of the second author in this article, we also hope to contribute to diversifying the ideas and voices heard in the production of knowledge about Burundi,[13] especially regarding the 'diametrically opposed readings of the 2015 crisis'.[14] These readings largely reflect the political 'sides' in the conflict – pro and contra incumbent regime – and even when rigorous, are prone to being interpreted in these terms. Bringing together findings and insights from a witness and young researcher from Burundi, and those from a Dutch anthropologist engaged in long-term research in Burundi, we aim to pinpoint to hitherto under-researched dynamics of legacies and generational change among civilians in processes of conflict transformation in Burundi.

Anticipation and its twists

> We thought things were going to change, like in Rwanda. They went through hardship, but it ended, and now they are focused on development. (. . .) But as you can see, it's not what was expected that took place. . . . All started by this issue related to the third term.
>
> (Jean Marie, interview notes, Cibitoke 2017)

In the years since the end of the civil war, Burundi booked important successes in terms of democratisation and peace. For instance, the Arusha Peace Agreement signed in 2000 stipulated ethnic power sharing in the government and political parties with both Hutu and Tutsi representatives; the last remaining rebel group turned into a political party in 2009 to participate in the 2010 national elections; and a thriving civil society was developed with dedicated support of international actors; also enabling a relatively pluralistic and critical media landscape.[15] Nonetheless, poverty was widespread, and concerns about low-intensity violence and insecurity, corruption and repression continued, and were increasing since the 2010 elections.[16] Moreover, the electoral calendar became a roadmap for the alternating periods of relative stability versus violence.[17] In this regard, many Burundians feared there could be trouble again in 2015. In the months prior to the scheduled elections, for instance, people in Cibitoke and elsewhere could be seen seeking travel documents, exchanging local currency into dollars, and some people even closed their businesses. In Anonymous' own family, they decided to sell their up-country plot; the home they had fled during the civil war. The dwellers had since long been asking to buy it. Yet when offered to buy, early April 2015, they refused, saying: 'It is easier to flee with cash than with land'. (Anonymous, Rwanda, 2020).

[13] See, Devon E.A. Curtis, 'What is Our Research For? Responsibility, Humility and the Production of Knowledge about Burundi', *Africa Spectrum* 54, no. 1 (2019): 4–21.

[14] Andrea Filipi and Katrin Wittig, 'Burundi', *Africa Yearbook* 16 (Brill, 2020), 296–306. See also, Vandeginste, 'Chronique politique du Burundi, 2015–2016'.

[15] Curtis, 'The International Peacebuilding Paradox'; and Marie-Soleil Frère, *Media Sustainability in a Postconflict Environment: Radio Broadcasting in the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda*, no. 2013/244530 (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2013).

[16] Human Rights Watch, 'Closing Doors: The Narrowing of Democratic Space in Burundi' (November 23, 2010); Grauvogel, 'Burundi After the 2015 Elections'; and Van Acker, 'Understanding Burundi's Predicament'.

[17] Lidewyde Berckmoes, '(Re) Producing Ambiguity and Contradictions in Enduring and Looming Crisis in Burundi', *Ethnos* 82, no. 5 (2017): 925–45.

The mass demonstrations started several weeks prior to the scheduled elections, on Sunday 26 April 2015. This was the day after the ruling party announced that incumbent president Pierre Nkurunziza would run for presidency. Nkurunziza's candidacy was controversial because of the third term a re-election would represent, which by many was deemed a violation of the Constitution and Arusha Peace Agreements, which had been pivotal in brokering the end of the civil war and agreements on ethnic power sharing. The announcement of Nkurunziza's candidacy was nonetheless anticipated. Civil society organisations and opposition parties had already called for civil, mass demonstrations should Nkurunziza become the presidential candidate. The demonstrations were announced as a non-violent movement with the slogan '*Sind'umuja*' (I am not a slave). The slogan expressed rejection of the ruling party's efforts to increase their power at the expense of citizen influence.[18]

Yet while the controversial candidacy, mass demonstrations, and, to some degree, trouble was anticipated,[19] the quick escalation and sustained nature of the violence ensuing, took many by surprise. Tellingly, in the days prior to the party congress, Berckmoes' Burundian colleagues advised her to prepare for a short-lived lock-down: '. . . for at least three or four days' (Berckmoes, research diary, April 2015). However, days turned into weeks and longer. Within a few months, the events had led to more than 1000 deaths, an unknown number of disappeared, and more than 200,000 Burundian refugees in neighbouring countries.[20] As Jean Marie, the young man quoted at the start of this section, narrated: *But as you can see, it's not what was expected that took place*. Jean Marie, a young man who like Anonymous grew up as a child in war-torn Cibitoke, had been hopeful that the demonstrations would lead to a change in leadership and policy, enabling economic development similar to that in neighbouring Rwanda.

Mass demonstrations

> At the start [n]obody wanted to hear us. . . . Seeing that they were refusing, we started with a number of 16 people, we went into the streets and blocked it. Everybody in the neighbourhood went outside to see us. They looked at us as if we had become crazy. We faced policemen who were armed up to their teeth. Seeing them, we could easily understand that they had come with the permission and intention to kill. They shot at us. We spread, fleeing into the neighbourhood and then returned an instant later. Gradually, repeating the pattern, we became more numerous . . . (Eugene, Cibitoke, May 2015)

In this section, we narrate the events witnessed in the mass demonstrations of 2015. Following the declaration of Nkurunziza's presidential candidacy, leaders of civil society

[18]The slogan was taken after a short sermon given by a Bishop in December 2014, and was often aired by RPA, a private radio station associated with the political opposition: https://www.yaga-burundi.com/2016/yaga-decodeur-sindumuja-naissance-dune-devise/. See also, André Guichaoua, 'De la consolidation d'une démocratie autoritaire à l'instauration d'une démocratie sécuritaire au Burundi, State-formation and the Dynamics of Mobilization, Contestation and Conflict in "Postwar" Burundi' (6th European Conference on African Studies, Sorbonne, Paris, 8–10 juillet 2015).

[19]Simon Turner and Lidewyde Berckmoes, *Fearing the Violence to Come: An Ethnographic Exploration of How Past Violence and Flight Shape Anticipation of Danger in Burundi*, Research Proposal, (Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 2016); and Andrea Purdeková and Gerard Birantamije, 'Theorising Repeated Displacement: The Role of Anticipation and Precedent. The Case of Burundi', *Political Geography* 100 (2023): 102795.

[20]UNHCR, 'Burundi: Regional Refugee Response Plan', (2015) [Updated 2016], https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Burundi%20RRRP%20Jan-Dec.%202016%20-%20December%202015%20%28Updated%20July%202016%29.pdf, consulted June 6, 2023.

organisations and political opposition parties called for peaceful demonstrations on the next day. Eugene, quoted at the start of this section, described his experience of the first hours of demonstrations in Cibitoke, where protesters marched up and down the streets signing politically tinged songs, unarmed.

In these first hours, Anonymous was in the adjacent Ngagara, on his way home from church. Here, we narrate Anonymous' experiences as a witness, using the first person to show his vantage point.

Anonymous:

The beginning

It was about 10:30 AM. From a distance, I heard a lot of gunfire coming from Mutakura. I saw people running, fleeing from Mutakura and Cibitoke towards Ngagara where my church was based. Together with another church member, we wondered what was going on. We were used to hearing gunshots whenever police faced armed bandits, but on this day the shooting was especially heavy. People running past us were saying: 'Don't go there, it is too hot, "it" has started'. (Later, we learned that around that time, a teenage boy, down on his knees and with his hands up, was shot dead by the arresting police officer. The boy became a symbol of the *Sindu'muja* movement.[21]) Reluctantly, and despite the gunshots and people fleeing from the direction where we were heading, we decided to continue our way to Cibitoke. After all, Cibitoke was our home and our family was there. To find courage, we convinced ourselves that the sounds were coming from Mutakura rather than *our* neighbourhood. We first went to my friend's house. We stayed inside, watched TV, and once and again went outside to ask passers-by what was going on. People outside said that policemen were trying to scatter the evolving mob.

With time, danger seemed to increase rather than subside, so I decided to go home. When I reached the main road, I came across a group of agitated young people. They were collecting tires and burning them in the street. They had also pulled a big stone into the road to prevent cars – associated with the SNR – from passing. There was a lot of shooting and people were running to all sides. I overheard a journalist interviewing a young man in the group. Replying to the journalist's question why they were protesting, he answered: 'We just heard over the radio that one of our friends in Musaga has been shot. Now, we'll also start. Let them [police] come and kill us all!' I recognised the young man as a member of the regular Sunday 'sports club' *Amasekanya*. This was a Tutsi youth militia that found its origin in the civil war.[22] On Sundays, we heard the young men of this group jogging while singing songs with lyrics including lines such as: '*Tuzobatema, tuzobarasa*' (We will kill them with machetes, we will kill them with guns). (Most

[21] See, Rachel Nicholson, 'Jean Népomuscène Komezamahoro, fauché en pleine jeunesse par la police', (2018) https://afrique.lalibre.be/25836/jean-nepomuscene-komezamahoro-fauche-en-pleine-jeunesse-par-la-police/ (consulted August 12, 2022).

[22] *Pa Amasekanya* (Puissance d'autodefence Amasekanya) was founded in Bujumbura in 1995 by Diomede Rutamucero to train (Tutsi) youngsters from Bujumbura to protect themselves against rebels, whilst advocating for the acknowledgement of a Tutsi genocide in Burundi in the aftermath of the murder on the first democratically elected (Hutu) president 21 October 1993. About youth militia groups, see also: Lemarchand, *Burundi*; Jean-Salathiel Muntunutwiwe, 'La mobilisation politique des jeunes au Burundi à travers les élections démocratiques de 2010', *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est/The East African Review* 46–2 (2013): 115–33; and Lidewyde Berckmoes, 'Youth, Politics and Violence in Burundi: Gullible Followers or Tactics Actors', in *L'Afrique des Grand-Lacs: Annuaire 2014–2015* (Antwerp: Reyntjens, Filip, ea, 2015), 21–39.

wartime youth militia groups have long been dissolved, yet this group continued some of their activities until at least early 2015.[23]) Meanwhile, protesters jogging up and down the streets were hissing at people who were coming from their houses, to entice them to participate. Many boys started to join the protesters. Others came to watch, and some quickly went back into their houses.

Beyond 'civility'

The next level of escalation was reached when one of the neighbourhood *Imbonerakure* youth leaders threw a grenade into the protesting crowd. The grenade did not explode, and the young *Imbonerakure* fled the scene. Many people gathered to look for the culprit. Fear rushed through my body seeing them run to his house. The crowd reacted shouting that they would burn the house. It was not clear who was the leader, they seemed to move as a whole. One of my friends, a neighbour to the *Imbonerakure* youth leader, ran towards the crowd to stop them from burning the house. He was hit on his forehead and felt down unconsciously. The angry crowd was about to kill him with stones, when one of his family members, who was in the crowd, saw that it was his cousin who was about to be killed. He cried out and found a way to rescue him, pulling him aside. The victim was rushed to the hospital by a man from the neighbourhood. Later, when the victim came back from the hospital, he told me: 'When I saw they intended to burn the house, I remembered what recently happened in Ngagara, where several houses using the same electricity wire were all burned at the same time. I realised that if I let them burn that house, ours will also be burned' (Jerome, interview notes, Cibitoke 2015). In the end, the protesters destroyed the windows and doors of the house and an office of the ruling party on 9th street before returning to jogging on the main road.

The next day one of my friends came to find me and asked: 'Are we going to wait for them [*Imbonerakure* from Kamenge] to come and slaughter us like goats? Open your eyes. Let us organise night rounds. Why not search for guns! The others [*Imbonerakure*] already have them. Haven't you heard it on the news broadcasts? All the *Imbonerakure* of the country are now well equipped. Have you ever seen an emptyhanded civilian overcoming an armed person?' (Evariste, diary, April 2015). One of the reasons my friend approached me rather than others, was that that we are sons of plot owners – and therefore had more to lose than many of our renting neighbours.

His call made me reflect. I realised how critical the situation had already become. It reminded me of the civil war when ethnic segregation between Cibitoke and Kamenge was violently enforced. Today, Cibitoke had become one of the main opposition neighbourhoods, while adjacent Kamenge was associated with the ruling party (CNDD-FDD, a former Hutu rebel movement) and SNR. At the same time, I could not convince myself to be involved in a resistance movement against the government, as I felt it clashed with my Christian convictions. I felt my faith forbid me to stand against authorised power. Isn't it so that all authority comes from God?[24] But again, my life was in danger. Notwithstanding the confusion, many of us residents realised that self-defence against

[23]One interlocutor we met in Rwanda in 2020 recounted that in the weeks prior to the mass demonstrations, next to the place where he stayed until early April 2015, some members of this group obtained weapons and were training youngsters on how to handle them.

[24]e.g. Bible, Roman 13.

the violence by authorities or members of the ruling party and its youth league, was inevitable. In my diary notes I wrote: 'No difference in ethnicity or political affiliation, we have a common enemy, the government through the police and SNR and the ruling party through its militia *Imbonerakure* together with the *Interahamwe*' [25](Diary, 27 April 2015).

Organization and mobilisation

Some of the residents who had experience in military strategy, often ex-soldiers, helped to plan nights rounds from the second day of protests. Like during the war, all able-bodied boys and men of more or less of 15 years and older were called to participate in the rounds, which started around five or six in the evening. Following the organisation of public administration, each 10 plots had their own leadership, rules and strategies. Participation was considered a duty for everyone. (A neighbour and ex-soldier I interviewed later in the month reminded me: 'When I was a soldier, I conducted night rounds far from my home, without even knowing the situation at home (. . .) But now I am watching over people in front of my house, [while] my wife and children can sleep in peace. How could I go inside and sleep? Me, wife and children? No. I am the pillar of the gate (*igikingi c'irembo)*'.[26] (26 May 2015) If someone was not present during his round, various strategies were used to pressure him to join at least the following night. Information about best strategies to motivate or force people to participate – such as locking someone up in their own house – were exchanged across sections.

Activities during the day also required increasing organisation. For instance, protesters were unable to earn or prepare their daily meal, and most of them depended on daily earnings to survive. Political parties and civil society actors started to help in the organisation of cooked meals. Many civilians willingly gave money to support these initiatives. My friend summarised the increasingly shared organisation as follows:

> Then the population from different places, some affiliated to political parties, others not, all together, because they were frustrated, . . . stood up [and] aligned to what politicians were saying. [S]ome went in demonstrations, others contributed with what they could, others went to night rounds so that the job they assigned to themselves ends well.
>
> (Jean Marie, remote interview notes, Cibitoke, 2017)

Resonating ethnicization

The situation deteriorated day by day. SNR agents, helped by *Imbonerakure*, started to come to the neighbourhoods and pick up young people who were more visibly involved in the movement than others. For instance on 2 May 2015, Kazungu, a member of the SNR who was building himself a name as one of the most brutal agents, tried to remove a person in Buterere, a nearby neighbourhood. The person was able to resist his arrest with the help of friends. Interviewed by a journalist on the

[25]Rumors had been circulating about the government having invited the notorious *Interahamwe* to help. They are a Rwandan Hutu extremist rebel group held responsible for the ethnic cleansing during the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, and since then are in hiding in the region.

[26]The saying refers to Rundi philosophy in which the pillar of the gate symbolizes the protection of the entire compound.

ground, one of the unnamed friends announced that as '"they" had now been provoked, they too would participate in the mass demonstrations' – seemingly referring to the members of the political opposition party FNL, as Buterere was known as a FNL party stronghold. On Monday 4 May, mass demonstrations started in the streets of Buterere.

On 7 May, I went to visit the youth centre *Centre Jeunes Kamenge*. On my way, I was stopped and searched by an *Imbonerakure*. It was right in front of a group of policemen, next to 6th Primary School in Kamenge neighbourhood where exams were taking place. To my shock, the policemen just let the search happen. They were apparently considered a legitimate security force?! The *Imbonerakure* searched my backpack and then let me go, saying that he wanted to make sure that I had no grenades with me to throw at the classrooms.

After several hours, it appeared impossible to take the same route back. I realised I had to take a road that would lead me to *inside* Kamenge. Involuntarily, I remembered the wartime violence against Tutsi in Kamenge, when neighbourhoods were segregated along ethnic lines. I felt my heart beating in my chest like never before, even if I believed that the demonstrations were not inspired by ethnic difference.

Gradually with time, more doubts about the salience of ethnic background grew. Pro-government media sought to frame the mass demonstrations in ethnic terms, equating all *quartiers contestataires* with 'Tutsi neighbourhoods'. In the media, developments in Buterere, known as pro-FNL and inhabiting many Hutu, were ignored, and the early initiatives for protest which we heard had been suppressed in Kamenge, similarly went unmentioned. Civilian witnesses and protesters also increasingly took into account ethnic logic, as my interview excerpt with Alfred, below, shows. Alfred is a young man who came of age in a displacement camp for Tutsi in central Burundi. In 2015, he was a neighbour in our street. In his childhood, Alfred had regularly accompanied the military as a *kadogo* (child-combatant).

Anonymous: 'What did you do in 2015?'

Alfred: 'I spent that day in bed. On one side my heart was telling me: "Stand up and fight against your enemies!" On the other side, my mind was saying: "Don't get involved in it!" I couldn't sleep because of a lot of thoughts. I said to myself: "These are not the same Hutus I fought in my childhood". The next day, without anyone telling me, I was the first to attend the demonstrations. I fought against policemen and *Imbonerakure*. The following days, we started getting guns. None knew to use them. I said, give me those guns and a group of ten young people. (...) I started training them in servicing a gun. They were asking: "Where did you learn all of that?" I said: "Do you want me to teach you or to know from where comes my knowledge? Keep quiet and learn". We used to go and provoke policemen and fight with them. I was one of the leaders. I suddenly decided to not teach Hutus anymore. I said: "Why should I teach them? These are the one who will turn and start to kill us". Everyone told me: "No Alfred, this is not an ethnic group war". They started realising [it was] in August and September [2015].' (Interview notes, Rwanda, December 2019)

Failed coup

My diary entry on 13 May shows: 'Since last night, rumours circulate that something is going to happen. Perhaps a *coup d'État*' (Anonymous, research diary, 13 May 2022).

Then, on the radio, general Godefroid Niyombare is proclaimed to be the '*chef de la commission de redressement de la concorde national*' (leader of the committee to redress national harmony). I noted further: 'A joy, a madness is seen in Cibitoke. Nobody can retain their smile. Everybody goes into the streets. The police hide. The military are seen as the national heroes'.

But around 6PM, on the waves of the government supported radio-television station Rema FM, the advisor of the president, Willy Nyamitwe, announced that an attempted *coup* took place but failed, and that the situation was secured. A silence fell over our neighbourhood. The following days and weeks, the mass demonstrations continued, but government forces increasingly managed to clamp down on the protesters. Stories about violent incidents and narrow escapes proliferated, along with more and more arrests of young people and political leaders. The mass demonstrations were marked by increasing chaos, Eugene said to me in late May:

> If things continue like this, I will withdraw and quit this neighborhood. Things are getting out of hand. (. . .) Yesterday, when we came back from Buterere our food had been thrown upside down on the ground. Someone said: 'let's burn down the police post in *commune* Cibitoke [in retaliation] . . . They did not even think about a strategy to use, all decided to follow . . . (Interview notes, 26 May 2015)

The arrest and refuge of many of the leaders of the political opposition, civil society, and protesters, left few in place to lead the movement. [End]

Anonymous left the neighbourhood a few days later. By then it was clear that the movement that sought to defend the fragile Arusha peace had not led to the aspired change, but had given way to what would become known as 'the 2015 crisis'.

Generational dynamics

Anonymous' account reveals how in April 2015 in Cibitoke, Bujumbura, mass demonstrations started and were met with violent repression by government forces and their youth ancillaries. The events quickly spiralled into a crisis situation in which civilian protesters did not shy away from using violence either, pursuing armed self-defence and retaliation rather than, as it started, civility.

The quick escalation and use of violence also by civilian protesters, we argue, reveals the reactivation of local legacies of conflict. The mass demonstrations were largely 'driven by urban youth, and tacitly supported by larger parts of society'.[27] Young people like Jean Marie were motivated by deep-seated frustrations about failures of the incumbent regime to address not only economic and social, but also political aspirations of especially the younger generation.[28] Many of them were born just before or during the civil war, and as adolescents, experienced a relatively open democratic space. Moreover, earlier in

[27]Van Acker, 'Understanding Burundi's Predicament', 7.
[28]Ibid; Guichaoua, 'De la consolidation d'une démocratie autoritaire à l'instauration d'une démocratie sécuritaire au Burundi'.

the year, for instance, young people in Burundi witnessed 'successful' non-violent civil protests, like when public pressure led to the release of journalist and human rights activist Bob Rugurika (19 February 2015).[29] Consequently, many young people started out with the idea that the (civil) protests could forge political change.

The non-violent form of political resistance was challenged by the violent response by government actors. This triggered, among the civilian population, various neighbourhood defence tactics reminiscent of those employed during the civil war. These included, for instance, barricading roads to prevent cars from security forces entering the neighbourhoods and the organisation of night rounds in ways similar to when the war thrived, as Anonymous recounted. But also the use of whistles to warn neighbours in the event of suspicious movement at night, or making sure that childrenwore clothes in bed to facilitate eventual flight (fieldnotes, Berckmoes, May 2015). In addition, on several occasions demonstrators sought revenge, throwing stones, burning vehicles, and on 7 May, killing a suspected *Imbonerakure*.[30] Notably, many of these wartime modes of conduct and reasonings about il/legitimate violence were taken up already on the first and second day and night, suggesting how, rather than invented in response to the events, past knowledge and experience was being reactivated. In this regard, for Anonymous, the legitimacy of revenge resonated with the stories he heard as a child about heroic violence by soldiers and Tutsi youth militia groups, killing Hutu in the name of revenge. During the war, young men from these groups seemed to be 'above the law', and praise was extended especially to the ones with no mercy. Indeed, Anonymous and other young people of his generation came of age in strong contact with military life, learning and admiring the life style, adopting a military vocabulary, and for some, like Alfred or Anonymous' elder brothers who had joined/been enlisted in the paramilitary *Gardiens de la paix*, having knowledge about military tactics and techniques, such as handling weapons.

The mass movement and its repression also provoked wartime memories of ethnic segregation and violence. It led Anonymous and others to fear and avoid neighbourhoods associated with the political opposition – which still largely coincided with ethnic constituencies.[31] In this regard, Anonymous recalled how, during the war, he had thought, 'I cannot imagine a Tutsi going to Kamenge or a Hutu coming to Cibitoke again!', but that to his own surprise, he had 'felt at ease again visiting Kamenge' (Anonymous, February 2020).[32] Yet the intimidating encounter he had with the *Imbonerakure* in Kamenge early in the morning of 7 May, involuntarily revived fear about passing through streets in the former enemy neighbourhood. For others, like Alfred, who *suddenly decided not to teach Hutu anymore*, the relevance of ethnic fault lines also gained ground with time, and media played upon this latent fear. Anonymous'

[29]See https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-bob-rugurika, (consulted October 3, 2022).

[30]Human Rights Watch, 'Burundi: Deadly Police Responses to Protests', https://www.refworld.org/docid/556d69544.html (Consulted June 28, 2023).

[31]Many political parties had a past as (Hutu) rebel group or were associated with (Tutsi) military rule. The political parties most involved in strife in the 2010 electoral period, were the ruling party CNDD-FDD and FNL – formerly known as Palipehutu-FNL. Both former rebel groups competed for political followers drawing on their wartime struggles to keep and gain political following. See Van Acker, 'Exploring the Legacies of Armed Rebellion in Burundi's Maquis Par Excellence'; and Courtois, 'Rupture et continuité d'un ethos politique autoritaire: les noms de partis au Burundi'.

[32]In the aftermath of the war, many people had come to feel that ethnicity was no longer important in daily life. For a nuanced exploration of the meaning of ethnicity in the aftermath of the civil war, see Lidewyde Berckmoes, Chapter 4, 'This is not about ethnicity', in *Elusive tactics: Urban youth navigating the aftermath of war in Burundi*.

neighbour, an older woman, commented in this regard: ‘Do you know why we adults don’t flee easily? It is because we have seen worse. Like in 1993, it was worse than what you see now. But if the politicisation or ethnicization of this conflict succeeds, then I will flee. [Then] I won’t be here anymore, and neither will my children’. (Cibitoke, 26 May 2015).

In brief, the escalation into violent crisis resonated strongly with the experiences of many civilians, perhaps especially in neighbourhoods like Cibitoke, where residents had been hit hard by the civil war. Yet perhaps as important as lived experiences, were the close relations between civilians and former/armed actors in neighbourhoods like Cibitoke. This facilitated the circulation of stories about wartime memories, knowledge, values and skills and enable the transmission to novices, youngsters at the forefront of the protests.[33] Think, for instance, of Anonymous’ neighbour, who recounted his wartime experiences of night rounds to convince others to participate in the new night rounds. In addition, a relatively large number of civilians have experience with armed neighbourhood defence and combat. Cibitoke was surrounded by ‘enemy neighbourhoods’ and soldiers were dispersed all over the country to fight the war. Therefore all able-bodied men were called upon to defend the neighbourhoods. In some periods during the war, they were also trained to handle guns and enlisted in paramilitary groups. These past experiences mean that many people – neighbours, brothers, cousins – had military experience to share.

Ambivalent in/civility

Despite the use of violence by protesters, many young people, including protesters, were critical about how the mass demonstrations panned out. For instance, Jean Marie reflected:

> We’re living problems that started long ago . . . Looking at how it started and the way it is managed, you find that there is similarity. [People] do not know peaceful resolution of conflicts. Even though it was taught in many seminars, the knowledge is not integrated in the hearts. (remote interview notes, Cibitoke, 2017)

Jean Marie was referring to the trainings and workshops organised by national and international organisations to promote non-violent political dialogue and democratic electoral competition. These were widespread especially in the run-up to the 2010 and 2015 elections. Yet rather than seeing the trainings and workshops as unproductive, we belief that the understandings of violence by protesters may reflect a more general ambivalence in how political dialogue and contestation is envisioned in Burundi. Namely, also during the previous periods of electoral campaigning and political mobilisation, we met various young people who told us how in party meetings political leaders gave their followers contradicting messages about the use of violence. On the one hand, they would underscore the importance of dialogue and peace – civility. On the other hand, they would ask the youth members to be prepared for ‘resistance’ – which said youngsters understood as covert calls to prepare for the use of violence. In other words,

[33]Notably, having experienced extreme difficulties in the aftermath of the civil war, some older youth who had been involved in violence in the war, tried to warn younger peers about their apparent enthusiasm for violent action. In this regard, a friend recounted how he saw that a former (wartime) Tutsi youth militia member tried to convince his younger peers that ‘[weaponry] was not a joke’ (Rwanda, February 2020).

the ambivalence seems to point to a duality inherent in prevailing ideas on political action.

Such ambivalence we also find in the uses of civility in political contestation elsewhere in the world. Civility is attributed with virtues of tolerance, dialogue and restraint, but anthropologists have often pointed to their role in the production of inequality and the legitimisation of violence as well.[34] Similarly, political commentator James Bowman, speaking about civility in electoral campaigns in the United States, argues that claims to civility and incivility are employed towards others – opposition partisans – but not in reflections on themselves.[35] In Burundi, similarly, civil society and political opposition parties denounced the violence committed by police and other government forces. At the same time, the latter engaged in a sustained campaign to show the violence committed by protesters, calling them insurgents and criminals.[36] As a result, some scholars have described the seemingly contradicting statements by the different sides as a contest in 'framing' or a 'communication war'.[37] Yet is this not precisely the power of claims to civility and incivility in the political realm?

Concluding remarks: porous boundaries

The 2015 political crisis increased awareness of the limits of international peacebuilding in Burundi. In addition, it provoked strong interest in the role of local legacies of the civil war.[38] To date, most research into the local legacies of civil war in Burundi have focused on continuities between rebel groups and political parties, foregrounding the views and practices of armed actors and political leadership.[39] In this article, we described the relapse into violent political crisis in Burundi from the perspective of civilian witnesses and participants. Doing so, we seek to contribute to debates about the 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies, which reveal struggles with conceptualisation of the 'local' and 'civilians' as more than victims of violence or promotors of peace.[40]

Our findings revealed ambivalent understandings about the use of violence among protesters during the mass demonstrations, which we unpacked through the lenses of 'generation' and 'civility'. We argued that ambivalence about violence pointed to generational dynamics in changing norms and practices about political conduct in the post-war context. However, rather than clear generational fault lines, particularly the porous boundaries between older and younger 'youth', and the close proximity of civilians with and without combat experience in war-affected neighbourhoods like Cibitoke, enabled the speedy uptake of reasonings for violent resistance and revenge. In addition, the presence and tensions between wartime and 'civil' reasonings about political action (e.g. violent versus peaceful protests) were perhaps accentuated because of the

[34]Sharika Thiranagama, Tobias Kelly, and Carlos Forment, 'Introduction: Whose Civility?' *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 153–74.
[35]Bowman, 'The Incivility of Civility'.
[36]See Ministère de la Justice, Commision d'enquete chargée de faire la lumière sur le mouvement insurrectionnel déclenché le 26 avril 2015 On the front page is a picture with the caption 'image illustrating the violence committed to police by insurgents in Buterere' (our translation FR-NL).
[37]Vandeginste, 'Chronique politique du Burundi, 2015–2016', 51; and Vircoulon, Thierry, in Ibid.
[38]Grauvogel, 'Burundi After the 2015 Elections'.
[39]See, Van Acker, 'Exploring the Legacies of Armed Rebellion in Burundi's Maquis Par Excellence'; Wittig, 'Politics in the Shadow of the Gun; and Courtois, 'Rupture et continuité d'un ethos politique autoritaire: les noms de partis au Burundi'.
[40]Van Leeuwen, 'The "Local Turn" and Notions of Conflict and Peacebuilding'.

ambivalence inherent in 'civility' or political action itself. Indeed, the different sides accused the other of incivility seemingly to delegitimize the opponents, rather than to call for an alternative in terms of dialogue and restraint.

We made these arguments while foregrounding 'local' experiential knowledge and witness accounts by Anonymous. Doing so, we hope the paper becomes part of broader discussions on voice, representation and recognition in academia. By combining 'local' and 'outsider' perspectives, we sought to tie in with discussions on the role of researchers versus participants, ethnographers versus informants. Our approach and writing is particularly inspired by the work of Paloma Gay Y Blasco and Liria de La Cruz Hérnandez, who argue that ethnographic knowledge is made by ethnographers and informants and should be owned by both.[41] In our article, we went one step further, perhaps, by showing how the boundaries between these categories may sometimes be difficult to draw. At the same time, in conflict-prone contexts, tensions between recognition and safety may hamper co-ownership of knowledge, with for us difficult decisions about anonymising authorship as a result.

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[41] Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria De la Cruz Hernández, 'Friendship, Anthropology', *Anthropology and Humanism* 37, no. 1 (2012): 1–14.