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Political Leadership, Corruption and Development in Burundi

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between political leadership corruption and economic development in Burundi, particularly analysing corruption's multifaceted impact on local/international aid, social cohesion and institutional integrity. Drawing mainly from secondary sources, the paper examines how Burundi's long history of political instability entrenched corruption among the Burundian political elite, making corruption almost a norm than an exception. The catalogue of recent cases of high-profile corruption in the country and how they have hampered efforts to foster sustainable development, scared away development partners and exacerbated socio-economic backwardness were also analysed. Based on the analyses, the paper concludes that corruption, particularly on the political leadership level poses significant challenges to the development trajectory of nations, with Burundi being no exception. Given the failure of isolated individual attempts to mitigate political leadership corruption in the Burundi case, institutional reforms, civic engagement and international cooperation remains the most

viable approach to counter political leadership corruption. Such approach can foster transparent and accountable governance that encourages investment and economic growth.

Keywords: *Burundi, Corruption, Development, Political leadership, Sustainable development.*

Introduction

Political leadership plays a central role in the development trajectories of any nation, particularly in countries grappling with socio-economic challenges like Burundi in East Africa. Political leaders are expected to shape governance frameworks, allocate resources efficiently, and promote policies that foster long-term development. However, in many African nations like Burundi, leadership is often undermined by endemic corruption, which stalls growth and leads to widespread poverty and instability (Kelsall, 2013). Instead of fostering accountability in resource management, as emphasized by Okeke (2003), Burundi's political landscape has been plagued by widespread corruption and ineffective leadership, severely hindering its economic development. The natural expectation of Citizens of Burundi from their leaders to spearhead social and economic progress is dashed by corrupt political leadership. This has negatively influenced the trajectory of Burundi, jeopardizing not only national development but also individuals' efforts toward personal and economic advancement.

This paper explores the complex relationship between political leadership, corruption, and development in Burundi, highlighting how the country's corrupt political leadership has influenced its developmental outcome and suggesting ways forward. With a population of 13.2 million in a landlocked 25,680 square kilometres, Burundi is one of the most densely populated nations globally (World Bank, 2024). Burundi has a long history of political instability, ethnic conflicts, and civil wars, which have had devastating impacts on its development. Since gaining independence from Belgium in 1962, the country's political landscape has been shaped by violent power struggles, coups, authoritarian rule, military regimes, fledgling democracy and contested elections, particularly between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups, all of which have failed to ensure stable political governance or meaningful

development. According to Nindorera (2012), Burundi's general political environment has largely been characterized by elite competition for power, often at the expense of the public good, resulting in long standing ethnic conflicts, civil wars and political instability. Its political system is characterized by a centralization of power, frequent changes in leadership, and endemic corruption that permeates various levels of government as leaders, who prioritize personal and ethnic interests over the collective good and national development. Transparency and accountability are systematically undermined. Both grand and petty corruption have become pervasive across all sectors of Burundian society, eroding public trust in institutions, weakening the rule of law, and obstructing development (Ahitungye & Nemecek, 2015).

Hence, a key issue at the heart of Burundi's developmental challenges, more than its historically protracted internal conflicts, is the pervasive corruption that infiltrates every level of governance. Corruption in Burundi is systemic, deeply embedded in both the public and private sectors, and reinforced by the political leadership making it a norm rather than the exception (Persson et al., 2013). Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks Burundi among the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2020). The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) assigns Burundi a score of 20 out of 100, a ranking that positions it as 162nd out of 180 globally, indicating a pervasive perception of corruption within both the public and the private sectors.

It is no wonder then that the country's economy has severely weakened with a GDP per capita of just \$230 in 2024, making Burundi one of the poorest nations globally (IMF, 2024). In this lowest rung of poverty, the struggle for the available few has further fractured the nation, leading to an ongoing power struggle for control of the state apparatus, known locally as the "Reta" (Varma, 1999) where political elites often use their positions of power to divert public resources for personal gain, engage in bribery, embezzlement, and patronize systems that stymie development efforts (Ndikumana, 2005). Also, in the 2024 Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Burundi's accountability performance is critically low. The index which measures how facets such as government transparency, corruption control, and public service accountability reflects significant governance deficits in countries, ranked Burundi 40th out of 54 African nations, placing Burundi below both the sub-Saharan African and East African averages (Mo Ibrahim, 2024).

Specifically, in the accountability indicator, Burundi was placed 36th, again falling below regional benchmarks.

Furthermore, the developmental indicators in Burundi are also alarming. The country remains one of the poorest in the world, with low levels of human development, high levels of unemployment, and poor access to basic services such as healthcare and education. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Burundi ranked 185th out of 191 countries on the 2022 Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022), underscoring the depth of its developmental crisis. Expectedly, the corruption driven poor development indicators of the country discourages foreign investments, weakens international partnerships, and severely limits the effectiveness of development assistance. Hence according to the World Bank (2020), the country's economic performance remains sluggish, with a GDP growth rate of barely 1.8%, far below the levels needed to improve living standards or to reduce poverty. What is particularly worrisome is the resource 'curse' phenomenon, whereby the country's natural resources, rather than being a source of prosperity, have been a source of conflict, corruption, and underdevelopment.

Beyond the very gloomy human development indices, corruption in political leadership has also fostered a culture of impunity in Burundi, where corrupt leaders are rarely held accountable for their actions. Political leaders brazenly manipulate state resources to secure their political future as they divert funds from critical sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education to reward their political supporters. As noted by Collier (2008), this practice leads to economic stagnation, increases social inequality, and worsens poverty levels and perpetuates underdevelopment in the country. Unfortunately, the judicial system, which should serve as a check on political corruption, has also become undermined by the very corrupt political leadership it is supposed to checkmate.

Against this background, the central problem this study addresses are the link between political leadership and the pervasive corruption that stifles development in Burundi. The following questions confront us here: How has corruption in Burundi been sustained by the country's leadership, and how has this hindered the country's development? How has the long-standing political instability in Burundi contributed to the developmental backwardness and prepared the ground for corruption in political leadership? Why are the corruption control initiatives not

successful in the country? And what is the way forward for Burundians? By exploring the above questions, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of how corrupt governance can stifle a nation's progress. Additionally, such discussion can show potential avenues for reform, highlighting the critical importance of accountable leadership, rigorous anti-corruption strategies, and inclusive governance in fostering sustainable development. Addressing these intertwined challenges of political leadership and corruption is imperative to unlocking Burundi's potential and securing a prosperous future for its citizens.

Methodologically, the study predominantly relies on secondary sources and secondary analysis of the existing materials due to the evolving nature of the subject. Key sources used include scholarly literature, documentary evidence, official reports, news articles from print and electronic media, and verified social media accounts. Internet search engines played a significant role in gathering relevant information for the study. The study progresses with a conceptual clarification of the key terms in the discourse – political leadership, corruption and development. This is followed by a historical overview corrupt political leadership and how it has delayed development in Burundi. Then the paper examines the contemporary cases of corruption and how it has stifled development and scared away development partners and then the study also looks at various anti-corruption initiatives and evaluates why such measures have failed to produce significant reduction in corruption among political leaders.

Conceptual Clarification

Political Leadership: Leadership, in its simplest form, can be defined as “the ability to effectively guide a team, organization, or country” (Ologbenla, 2007:100). Seteolu (2004) identifies several leadership theories, including trait theory, behavioural theory, attribution theory, and transformational and visionary leadership. He further argues that effective leadership is a combination of strategy and character. Within the political realm, political leadership involves decision-making on social policy and resource allocation by elected representatives. As such, political leadership is critical to guiding a nation toward the realization of its developmental vision (Eneh, 2007).

In the context of Burundi, political leadership refers to the individuals or groups that hold positions of authority and influence

within the country's governmental structures. Effective political leadership is crucial for steering the country towards development, as it involves setting national agendas, managing public institutions, and ensuring accountability (Northouse, 2018).

Corruption: Corruption can be understood as actions that contravene legal norms, societal expectations of integrity, or the public interest. It undermines the democratic principles of accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equality, and fairness, and violates the fundamental principle of impartiality (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In doing so, corruption damages the fabric of governance, obstructs development, and impairs the functioning of institutions essential to the welfare of society.

Development: Development refers to the socio-economic progress that improves living standards, infrastructure, education, and healthcare, contributing to the overall well-being of its citizens. It encompasses efforts toward reducing poverty, increasing economic productivity, and fostering political stability. Development is hindered by corruption, which diverts resources away from public services and stifles growth (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). According to Todaro and Smith (2020), genuine development includes institutional reforms, sound governance, and equitable distribution of resources, which are critical for Burundi's sustainable progress. In fragile states like Burundi, development is often hampered by ineffective political leadership and corruption, patronage, and ethnic divisions, which undermine state capacity and democratic governance (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). What follows is the historical background of corrupt political leadership in Burundi and how it has navigated the country backward.

Historical background of Corrupt Political Leadership in Burundi since Independence

In the early post-independence period, Burundi's political landscape was shaped by the ethnic rivalry between the Tutsi minority and the Hutu majority, which manifested in recurrent violence and coups. The first President, Michel Micombero, who came to power in 1966 through a coup, centralized power in the hands of the Tutsi elite and began a trend of authoritarian rule that would mark Burundi's politics for decades. During this period, corruption became rampant as political power was used as a means of personal enrichment. Key positions in the military

and government were often allocated based on ethnic loyalty rather than merit, resulting in inefficiency and the mismanagement of resources (Lemarchand, 1994).

The civil wars in Burundi, particularly the genocides of 1972 and the 1993-2005 conflict, further entrenched corruption. Political leaders diverted public funds to finance military campaigns or to consolidate personal wealth. According to Uvin (2009), the elite exploited the ethnic tensions to maintain power, leading to a breakdown in governance institutions. This created an environment where public funds meant for development projects were siphoned off, deepening poverty and underdevelopment.

Following the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement in 2000, there was hope for political reform and economic recovery. However, corruption among the political elite continued to plague Burundi. Pierre Nkurunziza, who became president in 2005 after the end of the civil war, established an administration marked by increasing authoritarianism and corruption. A 2012 report by Transparency International identified Burundi as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, with bribes and misappropriation of funds becoming entrenched in everyday governance. For instance, the "Cibitoke Scandal" of 2007 involved high-level government officials diverting funds from an international aid program, an incident that highlighted the systemic nature of corruption (Nindorera, 2008).

In more recent years, Burundi's political elite have continued to exploit their positions for personal gain, despite ongoing poverty and underdevelopment. President Nkurunziza's controversial decision to run for a third term in 2015, despite constitutional limits, sparked widespread protests and violence. International donors, including the European Union, cut aid to Burundi in response to political repression and corruption. These cuts severely impacted the government's capacity to provide basic services, yet the elite continued to enrich themselves through opaque public procurement deals and the misappropriation of donor funds (HRW, 2017).

Corruption has had a devastating impact on Burundi's development. According to a World Bank report (2019), nearly 65% of the population live in poverty, and the country's infrastructure, education, and healthcare sectors remain underdeveloped. Corruption has eroded public trust in institutions, hindered investment, and stymied economic growth. For instance, funds allocated for public infrastructure projects often

disappear before any tangible progress is made, leaving roads, schools, and hospitals in disrepair (Nkurunziza, 2017). The persistence of corruption also deters foreign investors, further limiting economic opportunities.

It is no surprise then as earlier alluded to, that Burundi has consistently been ranked among the world's most corrupt countries by several international rating systems. The assessment of the World Bank and Transparency International reveals a troubling trend of increasing corruption since the onset of the CNDD-FDD era (World Bank, 2019; Transparency International, 2018). Transparency International first included Burundi in its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2006, where it ranked 130th out of 159, 130th out of 163 in 2007 and 131st out of 179 in 2008. However, by 2011, Burundi's rank plummeted to 172nd out of 182 countries (Rapport de la Commission, 2008). Notably, Burundi was recognized as the most corrupt country among the East African Community (EAC) nations for two consecutive years, with this designation being reaffirmed in 2011 (Diplomat, 2011). From 2012 to 2024, the levels of corruption in Burundi, as indicated by the CPI from Transparency International, have remained alarmingly high. During this period, Burundi frequently ranked among the most corrupt countries in both East Africa and the broader African continent. In the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, Burundi received a score of 20 out of 100, placing it 162nd out of 180 countries, reflecting a significant perception of public sector corruption. Furthermore, the World Bank categorized Burundi as having mediocre institutional performance, noting a lack of improvement in its annual evaluations from 2006 to 2010. The assessments of transparency, accountability, and corruption in the public sector indicated a notable deterioration during this period (Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, 2009). In July 2014, the Observatory for the Fight against Corruption and Economic Embezzlement (OLUCOME) launched a campaign titled "Where Did You Get Your Wealth?" aimed at exposing how certain Burundian officials illicitly enrich themselves at the expense of the public. This initiative significantly exposed many Burundian politicians, ultimately tarnishing the country's international reputation.

Cases of Corruption in Contemporary Burundi and its Damaging Effects on Development

The seeds sown by long standing ineffective political leadership, lack of transparency and near lack of democracy in Burundi bore the culture of corruption in the Burundi of today. Contemporary Burundi has been marred by corruption that have not only hampered efforts to foster sustainable development but scared away donor agencies and development partners. Not too long ago, one of the first major corruption scandals to elicit a strong response from international donors was the controversial sale of the presidential aircraft in 2006. This scandal would prompt the World Bank to call for an audit (Decision Analysis Partners, 2007). The following year, the Inter-petrol scandal came to light, resulting in a loss of over \$10 million to the public treasury (Rapport Sur, 2007). These two incidents had a profound impact on donor confidence, leading to the suspension of budgetary aid in the 2007 financial year. While other instances of corruption and economic malpractice involving government officials under the CNDD-FDD regime have surfaced, none have had the same far-reaching consequences as these cases.

Another is the Carburant Japanese case where there was a stark lack of transparency concerning the management of gasoline donations from Japan, the proceeds of which were meant to support development initiatives (Agence France Presse, 2012). State resources from the deal were diverted for private interests, making it difficult to fund key development sectors like education, healthcare and infrastructure. These cases have not only weakened Burundi's capacity to drive its development agenda but also eroded its credibility and ability to attract international support for its socio-economic growth.

Furthermore, corruption has been perceived in the government's unjustified frequent increases in the prices of essential goods and services without proper assessment of the costs involved. The Observatory for the Fight against Corruption and Economic Embezzlement (OLUCOME), who has been at the forefront of these criticisms, questioned the motives and interests behind these price hikes (OLUCOME, 2014). They also question corrupt practices perpetrated through deliberate irregularities in public procurement, tax evasion by manipulating the value of taxable goods, the use of falsified invoices and certificates of origin for imported goods, and the abuse of tax

exemptions. These acts are typically orchestrated by policymakers and senior officials, who either solicit or accept bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to these irregularities. They also bring to light the fact that business owners offer bribes to secure preferential, often unlawful, treatment, which is symptomatic of the monetized patronage system that characterizes the political marketplace in Burundi, as highlighted by de Waal (2014). Public procurement processes are often manipulated, destabilizing private companies through unfair practices, while some businesses enjoy preferential treatment due to their ties with government officials. Such an environment perpetuates corruption, stifles competition, and undermines economic development. Such entrenched practices have strained relations with donor agencies and further exacerbated the frequency of corrupt activities.

Understandably the intricate relationship between clientelism and corruption in Burundi sheds light on the structural factors that enable these practices to persist. It also underscores the broader implications for public governance, economic development, and the country's overall stability. This was clear in the tense and contentious relationship that has emerged between telecommunications companies and the Burundian government, fuelled by accusations that the state failed to safeguard the interests of existing operators. This tension was exacerbated when a new entrant, Vietel Burundi, operating under the brand name Lumitel, was granted significant fiscal advantages, including a 15-year tax exemption, in an already small and saturated market (African Business Journal, 2018). With the introduction of Lumitel, the number of mobile operators rose to six, while several long-standing operators were forced to renew their licenses at a staggering cost of US\$10 million—fifty times the original amount paid 15 years prior. To survive, Econet Wireless acquired U-Com Leo and operated under its license, while Africell was compelled to cease its operations altogether.

The Lumitel case is clear example of the clientelistic nature of corruption in Burundi. As in many similar contexts, corruption in Burundi is often entrenched in clientelistic networks, which reinforce vertical interpersonal relationships of exchange and mutual support. This dynamic, far from being novel in Burundian society, has long shaped political and economic relations (Lemarchand, 2006). In such a context, the practice of clientelistic politics prioritizes private interest over the provision of public goods or the pursuit of projects that serve the national interest. When the electorate casts vote in favour of broad-based

policy accountability, it signifies a level of trust in governance structures rather than a mere pursuit of personal gain.

From both democratic and developmental perspectives, clientelism is a critical issue. It functions as a deeply embedded social norm for a substantial portion of Burundians, many of whom resign themselves to the reality that these relationships continue to dominate societal structures. Success and socio-economic mobility within this clientelistic framework are contingent upon one's ability to cultivate and maintain personal networks. Social capital in the form of familial and friendly connections is channelled to secure mutual benefits, a practice that perpetuates corruption and clientelistic tendencies (Isaksson et al., 2017). Such dynamics have contributed to the financial instability of state-owned enterprises, which have often been treated as sources of illicit financial gain by entrenched corruption networks.

Another notable example is the Sugar Company of Moso (SOSUMO), which suffered significant production decline due to the embezzlement of funds earmarked for both operational and capital investments. By 2010, the company was on the brink of bankruptcy, with annual sugar production plummeting to approximately 14,000 tons. However, following some intervention, SOSUMO's production gradually recovered, reaching nearly 26,000 tons annually by 2013 (African Business Journal, 2018). The financial recovery of SOSUMO was marked by the repayment of its debts and the accumulation of reserves, largely attributed to stricter governance measures introduced by a new management team in late 2010 (Burundi Mega Info, 2013). This reform-minded leadership, committed to eradicating corruption within the company, inevitably faced resistance from entrenched corrupt networks. These networks ultimately succeeded in ousting the leadership, as the government declined to renew the mandate of Director General Audace Bukuru in 2014. This decision was emblematic of broader governmental efforts to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and tighten control over public institutions, including the media. Such measures did little to benefit the state, as they facilitated greater access to public assets for corrupt purposes, raising questions about the reluctance of decision-makers to pursue privatization of state-owned enterprises.

The lack of trust in Burundi's governance system has also deterred Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), with corruption playing a central role in this disillusionment. One prominent example of corruption's impact is the misappropriation of humanitarian aid, which has been siphoned off

to sustain patron-client networks (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2012). The country's economic ambitions, as articulated in its National Development Plan (2018–2027), envision a trajectory towards becoming an "emerging economy by 2040 and a developed nation by 2060" (PND, 2017). However, realizing these aspirations is almost impossible with corruption as a culture.

On February 28, 2011, Manasse Nzobonimpa, a member of the East African Community (EAC) Parliament and former executive of the CNDD-FDD's Council of Wise Men, publicly exposed the corrupt practices within his party. Notably, he revealed that a \$13 million repayment from Uganda in 2007, intended to settle an old debt, had been misappropriated by officials within the ruling party and the executive branch (Pieroni et al., 2013). Nzobonimpa's allegations strained relations between the Burundian government and its development partners, a situation acknowledged by the second vice president in a March 2011 address.

Corruption in Burundi has also had a detrimental impact on revenue mobilization, a key element in the country's fiscal health. The establishment of the Burundi Revenue Authority (BRA) in 2010 represented a significant reform aimed at enhancing revenue collection. However, despite initial successes, domestic revenues as a percentage of GDP decreased from 14.9% in 2011 to 13.7% in 2013 (IDA, 2014). A failure to broaden the tax base, streamline the management of tax exemptions, and control fraud, particularly in the mining sector, became major challenges for the state. These inefficiencies have contributed to Burundi's consistently low Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) scores, which are used by international donors, such as the International Development Association (IDA) and the African Development Bank, to determine aid allocation.

The most damaging consequences of corruption in today's Burundi is not just its disproportionate impact on the poor and vulnerable but its corrosive effect on the country's image and relationship with international donors. For instance, in September 2010, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) announced its decision to close its Burundi office by 2012, citing high levels of corruption and political instability as key factors in the decision-making process. In the same year 2012, the International Crisis Group issued a report highlighting the potential destabilization of the region as a result of escalating corruption in Burundi, despite the country's economic

progress. The report emphasized that the establishment of anti-corruption agencies had failed to prevent the deepening crisis, which threatened both the peace and the development efforts driven by foreign investment and state initiatives (International Crisis Group, 2012).

Donor agencies also expressed concern over how corruption undermined their institutional and administrative capacity to deliver aid effectively. The reluctance of donors to disengage entirely stems from a need to maintain cooperative relationships with local authorities, reflecting a commitment to norms of equal partnership while ensuring continued access to Burundian territory for the implementation of development programs (Campbell et al., 2010). This balancing act also contributed to the deterioration of peaceful co-existence between the Burundian state and its citizens (Tate, 2013: 478).

The corruption crisis in Burundi poses a significant challenge to both the domestic political landscape and its international relations. While it domestically threatens to undermine key components of the peace process, internationally, it jeopardizes the efforts of donors who are invested in promoting national unity and sustainable development. Despite numerous reforms in public administration over the years, entrenched practices of corruption and mismanagement have persisted, underscoring the difficulty of eradicating deeply rooted institutional habits.

Pretentious Anti-corruption Initiatives in Burundi

To tackle corruption, Burundi has enacted several anti-corruption measures. Among these, the Anti-Corruption Law No.1/12 of April 18th, 2006, established three specialized agencies: the Special Anti-Corruption Brigade, the Public Prosecutor's Office at the Anti-Corruption Court, and the Anti-Corruption Court itself. These bodies were intended to work alongside the regular judiciary to adjudicate corruption-related cases, especially those involving mixed crimes, such as corruption intertwined with other offenses. Appeals against the decisions of the Anti-Corruption Court are submitted to the Supreme Court (Tate, 2013). Additionally, the Anti-Corruption Court possessed exclusive jurisdiction over individuals with special legal privileges. To further enhance accountability, two oversight bodies—the General State Inspectorate, established in 2006, and the Audit Court, established in 2005—were charged with providing critical reports on public finance and

service management. The Burundian High Court of Justice was vested with the authority to prosecute the highest-ranking state officials in an effort to uphold the rule of law.

In his second-term inauguration speech on August 26, 2010, President Pierre Nkurunziza spoke strongly against corruption. The appointment of a respected technocrat as the second vice president, tasked with overseeing socio-economic issues, was seen as an important signal of President Nkurunziza's desire to distance his administration from the corruption scandals that had marred his first term. While three officials from public companies were imprisoned for economic malpractice, fresh corruption cases involving senior officials surfaced within months of Nkurunziza's anti-corruption rhetoric, leaving those implicated untouched. His anti-corruption reputation fell flat following the controversial third term bid and subsequent election in 2015.

The assassination of the Vice President of OLUCOME in April 2009 further heightened concerns within the donor community, raising serious questions about the state's commitment to combating corruption. Governance issues have also been a focal point of the joint guidance document on European policy in Burundi, leading to heightened tensions, particularly with the European Union (EU), Burundi's principal donor, over the implementation of specific aid programmes. As an expression of dissatisfaction, Brussels invoked Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement, which mandates political dialogue between the EU and partner states. The first of such meeting between the Burundian government and European ambassadors took place in the first half of 2011, followed by a second, more extensive discussion in February 2012. Donors continue to view improved governance as the most pressing issue facing Burundi, often making it a priority in their aid policies and criterion for continued support (Libre Belgique, 2011). In October 2011, the Council of Ministers adopted a National Strategy for Good Governance and the Fight Against Corruption (SNBG), an initiative largely driven by the World Bank and Burundi's second vice president. Despite these efforts, however, meaningful reforms were never implemented.

Despite his military background, Nkuruziza's successor, President Ndayishimiye although viewed as "open-minded" during his inauguration, untainted by the worst abuses perpetrated by the country's elite in recent years (Al Jazeera, 2020), yet not much anti-corruption success was achieved. Critics argue that the anti-corruption measures

taken under his administration—including the dismissal of select public officials and the easing of restrictions on anti-corruption organizations—fall short of addressing the systemic corruption that permeates state institutions and the entrenched culture of impunity among the ruling elite (RFI, 2021; BTI, 2024). A notable instance occurred in 2021, when Ndayishimiye dismissed the Minister of Commerce, Immaculée Ndadabaneze, following her involvement in an embezzlement scandal tied to the sale of aircraft from the now-defunct Air Burundi (New Vision, 2021). However, despite such actions, there remains widespread scepticism about whether these isolated measures can bring about the structural change required to dismantle the long-standing networks of state capture and corruption. Observers contend that the government must go beyond dismissals, implementing more robust accountability mechanisms to root out the deep-seated corruption plaguing the political and economic landscape.

However, despite the legal frameworks and the mentioned isolated attempts, significant gaps remain in the anti-corruption war. Notably, the laws are said to lack clear provisions for investigating and prosecuting illicit enrichment among individuals. Article 58 of the Anti-Corruption Act stipulates that the illicit origin of enrichment must be established by a judicial decision, rather than adhering strictly to the elements of illicit enrichment as defined by Article 20 of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). This failure to fully align with international standards weakens the legal framework's effectiveness in addressing corruption, particularly concerning high-ranking officials and their unexplained wealth.

Also, the efficacy of these anti-corruption measures has been compromised by several systemic failures. Carothers (2003) contends that importing institutional models into developing countries without considering the local political context is often problematic. In Burundi, these institutional frameworks have struggled within a political culture that Rothstein (2011) describes as one where the treatment of citizens by the government is contingent upon their societal status or position. This phenomenon has led to a selective application of justice, where powerful individuals are shielded from legal repercussions while lower-level offenders face sanctions. Although petty corruption has been addressed to some extent, cases involving senior government officials have largely gone unpunished, reinforcing the perception that some individuals are beyond the reach of the law (Tate, 2013). This selective enforcement

underscores the broader limitations of Burundi's anti-corruption reform efforts. As Carothers (2003) asserts, the rule of law is not merely the sum of courts, legislatures, police, prosecutors, and other formal institutions, but rather a normative system rooted in the social fabric of society and the collective consciousness of its citizens.

Despite the legal and institutional tools ostensibly in place to combat corruption, the ability to govern effectively remains weak, leading to the persistence of corruption at all levels of government. International organizations and donor countries have consistently pressured the Burundian government to implement meaningful reforms aimed at curbing corruption. However, progress has been slow and inconsistent, largely due to a lack of political will, inadequate resources, and weak institutional capacity.

Final Notes and the Way Forward

This paper has highlighted the detrimental impact of corruption on Burundi's development trajectory as it siphons scarce resources away from productive use, undermines progress and perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment. The combination of systemic corruption, weak governance, and political instability has entrenched a cycle of underdevelopment, impeding Burundi's aspirations for progress and reform. Corruption acts as a significant obstacle, diverting aid intended for beneficiaries and undermining the effectiveness of foreign assistance. From the perspective of donor agencies, corruption not only hampers the state's ability to effectively manage development efforts, but as noted by Ahitungye et al. (2015), it simultaneously increases the costs of donor initiatives, as additional safeguards must be employed to prevent the mismanagement of funds.

It was clearly demonstrated how the unstable political landscape since independence from Belgium in 1962, largely driven by ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi populations sowed the seed reaped as corruption in today's Burundi. These tensions which precipitated cycles of violence, including two civil wars and genocides profoundly shaped the negative nation's governance and political culture. That is the background of the political leadership in Burundi that has been deeply intertwined with systemic corruption, authoritarianism, the centralization of power, and a lack of genuine democratic accountability with leaders

frequently manipulating and diverting state resources for personal gain thereby making development impossible.

It was also clearly demonstrated that although endowed with considerable natural resources, Burundi today grapples with widespread poverty. Its case exemplifies Pieroni and Agostino (2013) observation that countries with high levels of corruption tend to score poorly on financial freedom indicators. Despite the adoption and implementation of various anti-corruption measures and laws, Burundi remains undermined by gaps in legal provisions and a political culture that fosters impunity among the elite. As a result, corruption continues to be a pervasive challenge that hinders the country's political development and economic progress.

To address the challenges of ineffective political leadership and corruption in Burundi, several key reforms are essential. Firstly, the strengthening of democratic institutions. This involves ensuring transparent, free, and fair elections where political leaders are held accountable to the electorate. a comprehensive overhaul of the electoral process is essential to address these systemic issues. A reformed and transparent electoral system is crucial to ensuring that future leaders are effective, forward-thinking, and genuinely committed to the welfare of the people. An independent judiciary and anti-corruption agencies must be empowered to investigate and prosecute corruption cases without political interference (World Bank, 2020). Secondly, promotion of civic education and political participation. Educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities can foster a culture of accountability, where leaders are pressured to act in the public interest (Gisselquist, 2012). In this regard, civil society organizations can be supported to play an active role in monitoring government activities and promoting transparency. Thirdly, improvement of governance through decentralization. Decentralizing power and resources to local governments allows better oversight and reduces the concentration of power that often leads to corruption (Shah& Thompson, 2004). Finally, international partnerships for economic support and technical assistance. Such approach can help Burundi build capacity in governance and anti-corruption efforts, while implementing strong accountability measures to ensure aid is used effectively for development. Through these transformative reforms, Burundi can break free from the destructive patterns of the past and chart a new course toward sustainable development and democratic integrity. The reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and

good governance, which are essential prerequisites for sustainable development.

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