A growing crisis of governance and succession threatens peace and security in the countries of the Great Lakes region of Africa, where an outbreak of “god syndrome” among long-serving rulers threatens to unleash fratricidal conflict across historically violent borders in Central Africa. To preclude this eventuality, what happens in this region must engage the interest and attention of the United States in cooperation with regional leaders.

Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda share borders in an area with a long history of conflict, war, displacement, and episodic mass atrocities. Also in the region is Central African Republic (CAR), the site of one of Africa’s most murderous ongoing conflicts. These countries are ethnically diverse, with difficult histories of inter-ethnic harmony. And their constitutions limit the tenure of their presidents to no more than two terms.

In 2006, 20 years after he assumed power, Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni muscled through an elimination of term limits under the country’s constitution, giving him another five-year term in office as president in elections that were deeply flawed.

The manner in which Museveni procured his tenure extension breached well established regional norms of both the African Union (AU) and of the agreed to establish the AU in 2000, Africa’s leaders, including Museveni, pledged to respect “democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law and good governance.” In keeping with this commitment, they also committed to condemning and rejecting “unconstitutional changes in government” and to instituting “free, fair and regular elections” as the only means for acquiring the right to govern in Africa.

The tearing down of term limits in Uganda in 2006 was far from free and fair. It was achieved by a violent abuse of state security assets in a manner contrary to the commitments that Museveni had made voluntarily and challenged Africa’s institutions to apply their norms scrupulously and to treat Africa’s people seriously. Yet, in its wake, all relevant regional institutions, including the AU, the East African Community (EAC), and the ICGLR were silent.

A hunger to follow Museveni’s example among the Presidents of the ICGLR seems set to consume this very fragile region. In April 2015, President Omar El-Bashir of Sudan who seized power through a military coup in 1989 and had previously vowed not to extend his tenure, secured his re-election with 94% of the votes cast in a ballot from which any meaningful competitors were excluded. With this outcome, Bashir, who is presently an indictee before the International Criminal Court, guaranteed himself more than three decades of rule with no pathway to constitutional succession.

In neighboring Burundi, the armed forces have declined to support President Pierre Nkurunziza’s decision to seek a third term but the Constitutional Court has cleared him to do so. The Arusha
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The Accords [4], which in 2000 ended Burundi’s episodic descent into mass atrocities, prescribed a maximum of two presidential terms with a cumulative duration of ten years (five years each). Nkurunziza’s ambition has unleashed terrifying violence [5] on the country, killing many. It has also displaced over thirty thousand into neighbouring countries, with many more internally displaced. Absent an urgent resolution, many fear a rapid descent into another civil war or mass atrocity.

As if these were not enough problems, Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame and DRC’s President Joseph Kabila, both term limited, are poised to seek the extension of their tenures [6] through lifting constitutionally established term limits. The auguries in both countries are unsettling and such steps seem almost guaranteed to lead to significant violence in two countries where the threat and memories of mass atrocities are ever present.

In the face of an ineffectual regional response to the growing crisis in Burundi, Tanzania’s President Jakaya Kikwete, as Chair of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the EAC, called an extraordinary summit of the Community on May 4 to follow the immediate deployment and report of a joint mission of the Foreign Ministers of the five countries of the Community. The problem here, of course, is that of the five Heads of State in the EAC, one (Museveni) is already a beneficiary of third term, another (Kagame) is about to seek one, and a third (Nkurunziza) will be the subject of the Summit. That said, Tanzania, which hosts three generations of refugees from Burundi’s previous conflicts, has existential reasons to be muscular in its search for a response to Burundi’s unfolding crisis.

In 1993, the Organization of African Unity (OAU, the predecessor of the AU) and the Clinton Administration failed to act to prevent genocide in Rwanda. The world cannot afford to make similar mistake this time. A descent into conflict in one country could create a dangerous atrocity cascade potentially affecting the entire region, with attendant killings, forced displacement, and instability. A region already under threat from the combined extremisms of al-Shabaab, the Lord’s Resistance Army, and sundry murderous militias cannot afford such exposure to atrocity at this time.

To preclude this eventuality, concerted and urgent action is needed from regional leaders and the international community. While diplomacy is always to be preferred, other forms of pressure should not be ruled out. In 1996, for instance, to force a return to legitimate governance, regional leaders imposed a blockade [7] on land-locked Burundi after the overthrow of an elected government. The following year, West African countries intervening in Liberia threatened the country’s warring leaders with trial for atrocities against their people. Both examples are worth considering here. The United States could review security and development cooperation with the affected governments. It can also support both the EAC and the ICGLR to be more forceful.

In the song “God Syndrome,” Madam Macabre reminds characters intent on playing God: “Cowards like you always turn tail and take flight.” She warns: “Don’t play God, you’re no deity” and pleads “Don’t look at me with those eyes, you’ve got no one else to blame for your demise.” Leaders unwilling to listen to their own people could end up suffering Macabre’s predicted fate.

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Article-Summary:
Pierre Nkurunziza is neither the first nor the only head of state in Africa’s Great Lakes region to seek another term of office against provisions of the constitution. Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni orchestrated the removal of term limits from the constitution altogether. DR Congo and Rwanda’s presidents both want an extension of their regimes.

Category: Governance [14]


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