

The role of the local media in Burundi's 2015 coup attempt



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Objective of the study

- To examine the role, motives and actions of the independent Burundian media* during the attempted coup d'etat** of May 2015

* Focus on private radio stations based in the capital, Bujumbura (RPA, Renaissance, Isanganiro, Bonesha), and a private newspaper (Iwacu)

** Coup attempt led by former intelligence chief (Maj. Gen. Godefroid Niyombare) against President Pierre Nkurunziza (who was attempting to stand for a third term)

Timeline (medium-term)

June 2014	Pres. Nkurunziza hints he might seek third term
26 April 2015	Nkurunziza announced as ruling CNDD-FDD candidate
	Mass demonstration begin in protest
5 May 2015	Constitutional court rules in favour of third term
6 May 2015	Possibility of coup raised by opposition
13 May 2015	Coup attempt (while Nkurunziza in Tanzania)
14 May 2015	Coup fails
21 July 2015	Presidential elections held (opp. boycott, ruling party win)

The media situation before the coup

- RTNB: National broadcaster
- 4 major private radio stations
 - RPA, Renaissance, Isanginaro, Bonesha
- Demonstrations start:
 - RPA taken off air
 - Others radio stations cut off outside capital
 - Iwacu newspaper stays online
- SNS sites blocked

Timeline (short-term: media perspective)

13 May 2015 Coup d'etat

09:00 Coup rumoured

11:00 Key private radio representatives called to Musaka military camp, briefed by Niyombare on coup plot, asked to report

14:30 Coup plotters arrive in city, reopen RPA, announce on radio

Jubilation on streets, but loyalist military fights back. Battle for the national broadcaster

18:00 Situation unclear, but coup appears to be faltering

14 May 2015 Fighting continues between coup plotters and loyalists

11:30 All private radio off air (all stations destroyed)

12:30-14:30 State broadcaster (RTNB) under attack and off-air

Day's end Coup fails (failure official on morning of 15 May)

JNDI | Les voix du Burundi - Mozilla Firefox
 IWACU-BURUNDI | L... x +
 www.iwacu-burundi.org

Pour des raisons de sécurité, le Groupe de Presse Iwacu n'est pas en mesure de travailler librement.
 Iwacu est donc contraint d'arrêter provisoirement ses publications.

Merci pour votre compréhension.

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→ [radios coupées](#)

radios coupées

Par: Isanganiro , jeudi 14 mai 2015 à 12 : 43 : 33

Danger : Toutes les radios privées les plus écoutées au Burundi : Isangani Bonesha, RPA et Renaissance sont maintenant fermées. Seule la radio nation pro-gouvernementale continue d'émettre.

ances et
or des

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · 16h
 Le Président @PierreNkurunziz appelle le peuple burundais à rester serein. #Burundi2015 [twitter.com/PierreNkurunzi...](#)

This Tweet is unavailable.

23 5

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · May 13
 Communiqué de Presse : Coup d'Etat fantaisiste

C'est avec regret que nous avons appris qu'un groupe de... [fb.me/21L4izLOj](#)

101 16

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · May 13
 @PierreNkurunziz and his high level delegation in Dar-Es-Salaam are discussing on how to handle the attempted coup in #Burundi

226 34

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · May 13
 Tentative de coup d'Etat échouée au #Burundi @soniarolley @bbcafrique @RFI @abakunzi

159 15

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · May 13
 La situation est maîtrisée, il n'y a pas de coup d'Etat au #Burundi

138 19

Burundi | Présidence @BdiPresidence · May 12
 @PierreNkurunziz just arrived in Dar Es Salam for #EACSUMMIT on #Burundi

What should we expect of the media?

- In times of mass demonstrations and questionable government legitimacy?
 - Objectively reporting reality (mirror)?
 - Neutrality?
 - Calm approach (vs activist/sensationalist)?
 - Opposing government abuse (watchdog)?
- In a coup?
 - Objectively reporting reality (mirror)?
 - Neutrality?
 - Actively seek out story for scoop value?
 - Law-abiding entity: oppose and inform gov.?

Theories and realities

- Theories
 - Libertarian model
 - Social responsibility theory
 - Revolutionary theory of the press
 - Development media theory
- Realities
 - Government accused media of collusion with coup plotters
 - But, current government were formerly rebels, and were also covered

Perspectives of the independent media

(Interviews with 11 exiled Burundian media personnel (Sep 2015) in Rwanda)

- Role in reporting demonstrations?
 - Support free expression
 - Oppose violence/repression
- Role in reporting coup?
 - Job of the media to report all sides of stories
 - Breaking/valuable news (scoop)
 - “giving a platform to Osama bin Laden”
(understanding why people rebel against government?)

Perspectives of the independent media

- How neutral were they?
 - Emphasized support for journalistic principles
 - Many (privately?) supported demonstrations, but not coup (detachment not possible)
 - Asked for protection from coup leaders
- What were expected consequences?
 - Not convinced of success of coup
 - Expected some arrested journalists, some persecution, but not total destruction/exile

Conclusions: Making difficult choices

- Media (state and private) played a key role in the coup attempt (more so than in a 'typical' coup)
- Principled journalism in the face of great physical/institutional/financial risk
- Ultimately unsuccessful: Complete destruction of independent media in Burundi