Performing neutrality in 'post'-conflict Burundi: The political dimension of reintegration of ex-combatants

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Abstract

The reintegration of ex-combatants has a number of dimensions: economic, social, and political. This article explores what reintegration, defined as the shedding of the ex-combatant identity, means for the political participation of former combatants in Burundi. Based on 10 months of fieldwork during the tumultuous year of 2015 in Burundi, I argue that in order to be considered reintegrated, ex-combatants need to sacrifice their right to act as active political beings, by what I call performances of neutrality. My interlocutors, however, were both interested in political issues and maintained a connection to their old group. Hence their quest and claim to be politically neutral was a performance which revolved around not being visibly connected to political parties. For those who were working hard to shed their ex-combatant identity, other ways of channelling their political interests needed to be pursued and their participation in the 2015 protests was de-politicized.

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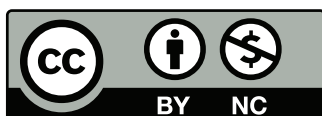
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Introduction

The reintegration of ex-combatants in the aftermath of war remains an important project for post-conflict communities as well as for the ex-combatants themselves. This article focuses on the political dimension of reintegration of ex-combatants, which has gained some attention from researchers in Africa and beyond. There has been a focus on the transition from military elites to political elites (Themnér 2017), from armed groups to political parties (Allison 2010; Nindorera 2012; Sindre and Söderström 2016; Söderberg Kovacs 2007; Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016; Wittig 2016) and, on a more individual basis, on the transition of rank and file combatants to being politically active civilians (Bjarnesen 2018; Christensen and Utas 2008; Sindre 2016; Söderström 2014; 2016; Utas and Christensen 2016).

Most of this research focuses on ex-combatants who have struggled and continue to struggle with reintegration. This article investigates the reintegration strategies of relatively well-reintegrated ex-combatants at a time of political upheaval in Burundi. During 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bujumbura in 2015 I followed popular protests against President Nkurunuziza's third term, announced in April 2015, the violent oppression of these protests, a failed coup d'état attempt, the closing down of nearly all independent media, political assassinations, grenade attacks, and gunshots at night. This unique mix of informants, who had done quite well in their reintegration and now found themselves in a fragile political environment, put the spotlight on what the political dimension of reintegration looks like.

Gaining an insight into the reality of the political dimension of reintegration is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of what reintegration entails – not actual reintegration into society, but as has been described elsewhere (McMullin 2013; Utas 2005), the invisibility of ex-combatants in the post-conflict community. This research goes further, as it portrays that this invisibility is not just something that is expected of ex-combatants, but also something that successfully reintegrated ex-combatants actively pursue through performances of political neutrality. The performance of neutrality was one strategy used by my interlocutors to become reintegrated, but it was not equally available to all, as will be demonstrated below.

In the following section I give an overview of previous research on the political dimensions of reintegration. After a discussion of methodology I then provide the background information on the political turmoil in Burundi in 2015. In the findings section I first discuss how reintegration is a performance of neutrality. In the last two sections prior to the concluding remarks I discuss how this performance of neutrality is not due to lack of loyalty to the groups my interlocutors formerly belonged to, nor to lack of political interest, as there are ways in which certain ex-combatants attempt to tread the narrow line of proving their reintegration whilst still engaging in some way in politics.

Ex-combatant reintegration and post-conflict politics

Reintegration, referring to the process of gaining civilian status and being accepted by fellow community members as a fully-fledged member of the community, has a number of different layers. How ex-combatants engage in post-conflict politics varies between different places and scenarios. Research in Uganda indicates that witnessing violent acts increases the likelihood that ex-combatants become politically active (Blattman 2009). There are examples from Liberia and Sierra Leone where ex-combatants take an active part in electoral processes because of their ex-combatant status networks (Bjarnesen 2018; Christensen and Utas 2008; Utas and Christensen 2016). Some instances of ex-combatants taking an active

part in electoral processes involve acts of violence, but this is not the only reason politicians decide to re-mobilise ex-combatants for political purposes. The assumption that ex-combatants inevitably seek to engage in violence has been questioned (Friðriksdóttir 2018; McMullin 2013; Nussio 2016; Themnér 2013), and ex-combatants have various motives for taking part in politics. Whether through violent or non-violent means, ex-combatants' motivations for engaging in politics include expanding or deepening their connections to powerful people with the hope of being re-paid in some way once they have assisted certain individuals or parties to gain power (Bjarnesen 2018; Christensen and Utas 2008; Utas and Christensen 2016).

In other scenarios, where ex-combatants are viewed with some level of respect, often as former independence fighters for example, they have also used their ex-combatant status to affect politics and to lobby for their rights and benefits as veterans (Clark 2013; Kriger 2003; Metsola 2015; Sindre 2016).

How the political situation unfolds in the aftermath of war thus impacts the political reintegration of ex-combatants. Whether or not the armed group turns into a political party, as they frequently do, does not predict the political involvement of ex-combatants (Söderström 2014, 9). But it does affect the political position of ex-combatants and what political opportunities are available to them.

These insights from armed conflicts across Africa resonate with the reintegration and political mobilisation of ex-combatants in Burundi. As I will demonstrate, the conclusion of Burundi's civil war and the post-conflict elections provide a good example of the continuity of violence from war to peace. This does not, however, mean that violent remobilisation was the case for all ex-combatants; it can also mean an even clearer emphasis on the performance of neutrality for those ex-combatants seeking to prove their reintegration.

The trajectories of the two biggest rebel groups during the Burundian civil war provide examples of the fluid boundaries between activist or political groups and armed rebel groups, with a combination of political and violent battle (Wittig 2016, 145–6). Paliphehutu was the predecessor of the Forces Nationales de Liberation (FNL), one of the rebel groups during the civil war. Paliphehutu was originally founded in 1980 in a refugee camp in Tanzania as a peaceful protest movement (Lemarchand 1996, 144). The original idea was for the Paliphehutu to become a political party in order to highlight the issue of ethnicity. When peaceful avenues to achieve this aim failed, an armed wing, the FNL, was established in 1983 (Alfieri 2014, 66–67).

The Conceil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD), the biggest rebel group during the civil war, came about following the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye. After his assassination in 1993, a part of Ndadaye's political party responded through military resistance (Wittig 2016, 146). The CNDD-FDD was not a signatory to the Arusha Peace Agreement of 2000. According to Nindorera, it was the prospect of participating in the 2005 elections that convinced leaders of the CNDD-FDD to become a political party (Nindorera 2012, 9), thus taking their fight to the ballot box rather than the battlefield.

The CNDD-FDD had not only engaged in fighting on the battlefield during the civil war. The organisation had also set up "shadow administrations" in many regions. These existed in parallel to the official administrations. CNDD-FDD was thus, in reality, in control of a large part of the countryside and the elections of 2005 were merely a way to legitimise that rule (Uvin and Bayer 2013, 270). The legacy of the rebel groups also seems to linger within the current political party. Although civilians did join the CNDD-FDD at the end of the war, the real power always seems to have been with the ex-combatants in the party (Alfieri 2016, 249; Rufyikiri 2017; Wittig 2016, 150).

The situation in Burundi in 2015 was not

unique. Political parties in post-conflict societies frequently use electoral violence, a phenomenon that demonstrates the fluidity of the boundary between violent rebel groups and peaceful political parties (Sindre and Söderström 2016, 110). Rather than being a starkly different situation, post-conflict politics have a tendency to be dominated along conflict lines – with elections being the new battleground (Bøås and Utas 2014).

When power and resources are concentrated at the government level, as is the case in many African countries, elections become a zero-sum game where the winner takes it all (Söderberg Kovacs 2018; Bjarnesen 2018), thus making violence an even more likely tool for securing victory. Warlords turned politicians are thus navigating the system when they use violence to achieve their political goals (Themnér 2017). Post-conflict elections therefore tend to be a difficult time for everyone, and a time when politics is thrown into the lives of all, ex-combatants and the wider population. It is a time when the political can become personal, and to make the choice to stay away from politics is not always a viable option.

Methodology

This research is based on nearly 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Burundi during the tumultuous year of 2015. My interlocutors had fought with the two biggest rebel groups during the civil war (1993–2005), the Conceil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD) and Forces Nationales de Libération (FNL), as well as Forces Armées Burundaises (FAB), the state military at the time of the civil war.

During fieldwork, my first point of contact was a local civil society organisation (CSO) that had conducted work with ex-combatants, and whose staff members included many ex-combatants. This organisation quickly became my main "field-site" and many of my closest informants were staff members, or otherwise affiliated with the organisation. I was present at the office of this CSO on a nearly daily basis and joined them for their fieldwork on several occasions. As I and my informants got to know each other better I was also invited to their private events, such as weddings, the funeral of a parent, the graduation of a sibling, and the celebration of newborns, as well as meeting up informally outside of work hours, typically for week-end afternoon drinks. On these occasions I was sometimes introduced to wives, parents, siblings and friends of my interlocutors.

As fieldwork progressed I made other connections through my personal network with ex-combatants who were not affiliated with the CSO. In particular, when protests against President Nkurunziza broke out in April 2015, I used my social network and contacts to search for ex-combatants who were participating in the protests, as none of my interlocutors at the time took active part. Some of these new interlocutors became close informants as well, resulting in regular meetings for the remainder of the year. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have given them pseudonyms, and the CSO is also unnamed.

The main data from the research comes from fieldnotes based on participant observation. The bulk of the data was collected in individual conversations with the informants. In addition, 18 complementary individual interviews and four focus group discussions were conducted. I conducted individual interviews with three women; apart from that, all of my interlocutors were men. Of the four focus groups, two groups were of CNDD-FDD members and two of FNL members. Of the recorded interviews, seven were with former CNDD-FDD members, six with former FNL members, and five with former state military members. Seven of these interviews were with staff members or direct affiliates of the CSO, six were with people whom I found completely independently from the CSO, and five were

with people that contacts at the CSO put me in touch with through their personal networks.

As time passed I felt that fieldnotes and "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) was a more suitable methodology than one-off interviews. This provided better and more in-depth information to answer my question on what reintegration actually looked like from the perspective of the ex-combatants themselves. As the focus moved to longer engagements with fewer interlocutors this meant that my closest informants, who number around 10 individuals, all spoke French, or even English. This means that the research focuses on a group that is perhaps not representative of all Burundian ex-combatants, and that those who are doing relatively better from a socio-economic perspective are over-represented. The majority of my informants were relatively recently married, and having one or two young children was pretty common. All my close informants were men, none of whom were high up in their rebel group or army during the war, but many of them had managed to build their way up to situations of relative success today. This includes pursuing University degrees, and for those who were the best off, having paid temporary employment, although for all of them this was fragile (the CSO where I spent my time, for example, lost most of the limited donor funding it had, soon after I left the country). Despite their socio-economic situation being fragile, it was, for most of my interlocutors, without a doubt better than for many Burundians, and nearly all my close interlocutors had been successful in convincing others of their reintegration.

However, this is a group that, both within and beyond Burundi, tends to be ignored in ex-combatant and reintegration research, as the focus is generally on unsuccessful reintegration and the various challenges to reintegration. Looking at a group that has been somewhat successful in the reintegration process is a critical part of understanding what reintegration means and looks like.

'Post'-conflict political turmoil in Burundi in 2015

On April 25, 2015, the CNDD-FDD announced that their candidate for the upcoming presidential elections would be the sitting president, Pierre Nkurunziza. This decision by the party had been expected, and dreaded, by many politicians and citizens in Burundi. For Nkurunziza to serve a third term was considered by most people to be contrary to both the constitution and the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement from 2000, popularly held to have put an end to Burundi's civil war. Equally predictable were the popular protests that erupted the following day. With excessive force, the police managed to ensure that protests could only take place in certain pockets of Bujumbura. These pockets of protests were neighbourhoods in which the majority of inhabitants did not support the government, and which contained a high number of young people who were under- or unemployed (Nindorera and Bjarnesen 2018).

For the next two and a half weeks, protests continued in these areas of the capital, and were met with violent repression from the police. There was an odd atmosphere in Bujumbura during this time. Barricades were set up in the areas where the protests were taking place and the inhabitants of these areas were essentially stuck there. The protests stopped at weekends, giving people the opportunity to bury those who had died during the protests as well as to stock up on necessities for the next week. On Monday mornings the violence between protesters and police would start again.

On May 13th there was an attempted coup d'état. People in Bujumbura were quick to celebrate the coup with rejoicing in the streets. I was living in an upper middle class neighbourhood which did not have many government supporters but had remained quiet during the protests. Now people were out however, celebrating. The rejoicing on the streets of Bujumbura, alas, did not last long. Early the following morning, I and other residents of the

capital city were woken up by the sounds of heavy gunfire. Troops loyal to the president and coup leaders were now fighting heavily, in particular over control of the national broadcasting organisation. The fighting lasted the whole day, until it finally became clear that the coup had failed. Protesters were disheartened, knowing that protests could not go on as before because protesters would now be accused of being coup plotters. During the day of fighting, the independent media had also been heavily targeted. Offices and equipment were destroyed, and many journalists fled the country. After the coup attempt, independent media nearly vanished.

In June and July, elections that were deemed neither free nor fair (MENUB 2015) took place. The result was a victory for the CNDD-FDD and a third term for Nkurunziza as president. The violence was far from over though, and the rest of the year was marked by assassinations of political leaders, disappearances of people accused of having taken part in the protests, an exodus of refugees out of the country (333 534 Burundian refugees were still being hosted by neighbouring countries in December 2019 (UNHCR 2020)) and the appearance of mutilated bodies in the streets where the protests had taken place. It was not uncommon to be woken up by gunshots when either nervous armed neighbourhood night patrollers or police fired warning shots into the air, or, sometimes, exchanged fire. Grenade attacks also became commonplace.

In August, Christian, one of my interlocutors who had participated in the protests and had left Burundi in May, came back to the country. He was arrested immediately, according to him, on the charge of "participation in an armed group". Another of my informants, Didier, who had also been active in the protests, was arrested early in the year 2016. Amnesty International (2018, 108) recorded that arbitrary arrests were continuing in the country and that family members of detainees needed to come up with vast sums of money for their release.

For many who were not living in the middle of the violence it was perhaps not the violence itself that caused the most concern but the uncertainty of the future. Given the near erasure of independent media following the coup attempt in May, rumours were constantly circulating about what would happen next. These rumours usually centred on a new civil war erupting and when it would happen, dates when an attack would be made, etc. Armed groups were forming at this time so the focus of these rumours on possible attacks was understandable. Somehow, the people of Bujumbura, and of Burundi in general, went about their daily lives in this atmosphere, hoping for the best whilst fearing the worst.

Reintegration as a performance of political neutrality

How my interlocutors engaged with the tense political situation in 2015 varied. Their responses depended on whom they had fought with, but more importantly on their reintegration trajectories in the aftermath of the civil war. Reintegration, which I define as the shedding of the ex-combatant status, was something that many of my interlocutors had worked hard for, and that had required some sacrifices, one of which was the performance of neutrality.

Although a substantial amount of literature illustrates the widespread engagement of ex-combatants in politics in various ways (Alfieri 2014; Bjarnesen 2018; Christensen and Utas 2008; Metsola 2015; Söderberg Kovacs 2007; Söderström 2016; Themnér 2017; Utas and Christensen 2016), my informants, on the contrary, frequently disavowed any claim to being political.

Prosper, one of my more successful informants working at the CSO, often told me that he was apolitical – in between long, passionate monologues about what the problems of Burundi were and how they should be solved. "Apolitical" thus meant not affiliated

to party politics. This was the most common claim by most my interlocutors, whether they had fought with the CNDD-FDD or against them. Once, when I suggested to Henri that he might want to consider a political career because of his obvious interest in party politics, he said:

> I want to be like I am today. Because I am, I am free to say anything I want. If I am with people from the ruling party …. If I am with opposition members … Not being part of the political system makes me free

Neutrality, or perceived neutrality, was thus sought by many of my interlocutors. It manifested itself both in the narrative that was presented to me, but mainly in avoiding visibility at events connected to party politics. This applied both to those who were part of the opposition but who still chose not to take part in the popular protest, saying that they were "protesting in their hearts", as well as to former CNDD-FDD fighters. When the CNDD-FDD held celebrations on the Day of the Ex-Combatant, I called Prosper to get some more information about the events and to ask whether he would be going. Uncharacteristically, Prosper very quickly and quite agitatedly raised his voice: "No. I am apolitical so I don't go to these celebrations."

The focus on visibility and the difficulty of maintaining neutrality was also referred to by Henri with regard to his neighbourhood, which experienced some unrest during the year. "If you don't show up to the activities of one group they think that you belong to the other," Henri explained. This meant that neutrality could be quite problematic and that perhaps in some cases it was safer to belong to one group in order to at least have the protection of that group. The role of security in aligning yourself with political parties during elections is also documented by Christensen and Utas (2008, 524–525). However, the greatest security and freedom described by my

interlocutors was neutrality.

Yves, a former FNL fighter, was the only person who told me he actually dreamt of a career in politics. He explained the difference between military life and political life as follows:

> When you are a soldier you are not free, you can't do what you want, you can't go where you want when you want. But when you are a politician, you are free and you control those with the guns instead of being controlled by others. That is what I want.

Most of my other interlocutors had taken different routes. They had first of all been more fortunate in making a living, and they had put great efforts into investing in new relationships with people with whom they did not have civil war connections. For those who had invested a lot of effort into "reintegration", creating connections with non-ex-combatants and trying to shed the ex-combatant status, too much was at stake to be visibly taking part in party politics. Both the ex-combatant status and party politics, particularly during election time, are linked to violence. For ex-combatants trying to shed the aura of violence, taking part in party politics was not an option.

Making use of the social relations and connections already established during the civil war, and thus taking advantage of their ex-combatant status rather than trying to shed it, is certainly another option that many ex-combatants seem to take, something which has been documented in Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example (Bjarnesen 2018; Christensen and Utas 2008; Utas and Christensen 2016). My claim is not that Burundi is uniquely different from these cases but that my informants represent a group that usually attracts little attention, either in policy or in academia. Those who are working hard on shedding their ex-combatant status are of course also more difficult to find as interlocutors. For this particular

group, invisibility becomes the aim and is how their success in reintegration is measured. For those few of my interlocutors for whom the shedding of the ex-combatant status was not important, participation in party politics was a much more viable option.

It is important to note that the option to perform neutrality as a reintegration strategy was not equally available to all, and here socio-economic status played a part. Evariste, who was struggling more economically than most of my other informants, was a former CNDD-FDD combatant who remained very loyal despite having been treated harshly. When I asked Evariste what would happen should another civil war erupt, he replied:

> If that happens, it is like I said before. We joined the old war not because we wanted to but because we had to, if you stay, your family could die … We are on the list so they will call us.

"What list?" I asked, slightly puzzled.

"The list of demobilised ex-combatants they know of," he said. I had previously heard about these kinds of lists that the CNDD-FDD apparently had, and also that they paid some of their former fighters small sums of money to show up at events. But I had not before heard anyone talk about being on that list – probably because most of my other interlocutors were doing quite a bit better economically than Evariste and did not need meagre handouts at an unpredictable rate. Evariste, however, took whatever he could get, knowing that this also meant that his services could be called upon whenever deemed necessary. A low socio-economic status could thus be a major obstacle should ex-combatants want neutrality to be their official political stand. However, the quest to perform neutrality was not due to lack of loyalty to the old groups, now political parties, nor due to lack of interest in political issues, as will be discussed in the sections below.

Loyalty and the illusion of neutrality

Despite the supposed demobilisation of combatants, my interlocutors were still tightly linked to their old group, and thus to political parties. The ex-FAB, the former state military fighters, did not have an obvious political party to link themselves to on the basis of their participation in the civil war. They were, however, part of "the opposition", given that the ruling party was composed of a former rebel group they had fought during the civil war. In a conversation with Olivier, a former FAB soldier, about his lack of employment opportunities, I mentioned that it seemed as if an affiliation with the CNDD-FDD was helpful, or even necessary, for employment. Olivier was quick to exclaim loudly, "over my dead body," obviously interpreting my comment as a suggestion that he should join his former enemies. The affiliations of former CNDD-FDD and FNL fighters were even clearer. Their groups still existed, only in slightly different forms.

Evariste, mentioned briefly above, had a strong allegiance to his old group, the CNDD-FDD. His story is an example of how strong the connection to the old group can be, despite ill treatment. Evariste had joined the CNDD-FDD at the age of twelve. He lived in an area that was badly hit during the civil war and was, and remains, a stronghold of the CNDD-FDD. In 1994 the movement demanded that one person per household should join the war. Evariste joined and fought until the year 2002, when he was caught by government forces and put into prison in Bujumbura. He remained in prison until 2010. Evariste told me that the high level CNDD-FDD prisoners were all released in 2005 but thirty lower ranked former CNDD-FDD combatants were not. Evariste blamed this on the former government, saying that the files of those who had not been released had been hidden. The CNDD-FDD did, however, have Evariste's name on the list of combatants to be demobilised, but someone else went to the cantonment camp in his place and received the demobilisation money in

Evariste's name; the money then ended up in the hands of his commander. I asked Evariste if he received some of his money once he was out of prison, but he said he had tried asking for the money but was told he would be killed if he did not stop asking for it. At this point in the conversation I raised my eyebrows in astonishment, but Evariste simply shrugged his shoulders.

Later on, I asked Evariste if he could imagine himself voting for another party than the CNDD-FDD. "I could vote for the leader of the commune from another party but a president or a senator I have to vote for someone from my party," Evariste replied. When I asked him if there was nothing that would make him change his mind about voting for the CNDD-FDD, Evariste answered, "Given my background, no one else comes to talk to me about what they plan to do. Even though CNDD-FDD people sometimes take advantage of us we know they made us who we are." Evariste's response points both to the distance taken by political parties to other parties' followers and to the strong affiliation Evariste still has with the CNDD-FDD, without denying that he is not always treated well by the party.

As Victor, a former CNDD-FDD fighter, noted, "no one will ever vote for anyone else than those they fought for." Judging from other conversations with my interlocutors this did seem to be the case, with Elise being a notable exception. Elise fought with the FNL during the war but was now a CNDD-FDD supporter. When I remarked that Elise's shift of allegiance was unusual, she simply answered that she "followed progress". Elise seemed uncomfortable discussing her political affiliation. This was probably even more problematic for her given that Henri, the ex-combatant who had introduced us, had himself fought with the FNL, and was hence an old ally, but now a political opponent. Henri could thus be considered to be her *umukeba*.

This term, *umukeba*, did not come up frequently during my fieldwork but Henri had

mentioned it to me earlier in the year in a discussion about politics. He was talking about the distrust there was between people of different political parties and how, according to him, in general they did not even talk to each other.

> In Kirundi we talk about *umukeba* …
> I don't know how to explain it in English, it is not really an enemy but almost, someone that could become your enemy, or someone you should stay away from. People from different political parties are usually treated in this way.

Distrust between different political factions is thus rife. For many ex-combatants, loyalty to one's own faction is paramount. Loyalty in general is important in Burundi and shifts in loyalties are often viewed as possible betrayals (Berckmoes 2013). In Berckmoes's (2013) research with urban youth she documents how youth are seen as not yet having established their political loyalty, and are thus approached by political leaders, whilst older people are considered to have made up their minds politically and to be unlikely to change them. The most common way for the youth to display loyalty was to show up to political public meetings, even though this came with the risk of ruining relationships with friends or classmates who supported different political parties (Berckmoes 2013). Here, again, the importance of visibility is clear, proving one's loyalty by visibly being present at certain political events, as well as being prepared to make the sacrifice that this visibility entails, the potential sabotage of relationships. Loyalty is important and requires sacrifice.

The fluid loyalties of ex-combatants have been documented and discussed elsewhere, such as in Sierra Leone (Christensen and Utas 2008), Chad, Sudan, and the Central African Republic (Debos 2008; Debos 2016; Giroux, Lanz and Sguaitamatti 2009). It does seem, however, that in Burundi, loyalties are more rigid; people are not often approached by oth-

er factions than "their own", and do not seem to seek them out either. Additionally, the creation of social identity by rebel groups/political parties needs to be taken into account when explaining the roles political parties play in the lives of ex-combatants (Söderström 2016, 229).

The performance of neutrality is thus not due to a lack of connection to one's old group or because this connection is not important. Quite on the contrary, downplaying this loyalty and not being visibly involved with the old group is a choice that needs to be made in order to shed one's ex-combatant status.

Political protests and ex-combatants: 'party politics' vs 'active citizenship'

In addition to loyalty to their former factions, many of my interlocutors were genuinely interested in politics, in the broad sense of the term. The performance of neutrality was thus not due to lack of political interest. Idealism was what had compelled many of them to actively participate in the civil war in the first place. And a belief that their participation would lead to a better political climate at the end of the war was an important factor in getting them through the trying time during the war, whatever their motivations for joining were. The end of the war did not necessarily change their hope of having some sort of impact on the state of their country (Friðriksdóttir 2018). Given the clear interest many of my informants had in politics, including party politics, I imagine that deciding to stay away from it completely was quite difficult for them. Their performance of neutrality was not in line with their other views and behaviours that I observed during my fieldwork.

The danger of party politics came up in conversations, however. Pascal, a former FNL fighter with quite good connections in the FNL, for example, told me that he wanted to advise, to have an input, but he did not want to be a politician. He said he did not like the po-

litical system and how dangerous it was. The danger of party politics was echoed by Didier, who was active within the MSD party, an opposition party, after the war, until the 2010 elections. When the party decided to boycott the election, Didier gave up on political activism. "I gave up on politics and decided to concentrate on my work," he told me. "Political life is hard. You don't sleep, you always expect the worst, you can even get killed." The similarities between war and post-conflict party politics, even with regard to danger, come out clearly in Didier's comment.

Henri, a former FNL combatant, offered a telling distinction between politics and civil society in a conversation I had with him about former civil society members who became exiled politicians in 2015. When I asked him whether he thought they were all preparing for war (based on what he told me about them being behind an attack on arms supplies), Henri replied, "Well, when they joined CNARED[1], it was clear that they wanted to be politicians," thus essentially saying that changing from civil society to party politics meant opening the doors to violent strategies. This distinction is in line with what I gather from my interlocutors: party politics is closely linked to violence. Therefore, ex-combatants working on shedding their ex-combatant status cannot be seen to be taking part in something that has such a close resemblance to the war.

Six of my interlocutors, including Didier, did however engage in the political protests in Burundi in 2015 against President Nkurunziza's third mandate. These individuals thus did not opt to perform neutrality. But how they participated and how they framed their participation varied somewhat and was linked to their reintegration trajectories.

Céléstin, Gloria, and Yves were all former FNL fighters living in Bujumbura Rural, the area around the outskirts of Bujumbura, known to be an FNL stronghold. Everyone

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[1] An umbrella organisation formed in Ethiopia in August 2015 consisting of people opposing Nkurunziza's third term.

who protested gave me the same answers when I asked them why they were protesting. They were against a third term for President Nkurunziza and they wanted him to step down, they said, thus emphasising their active citizenship. Active citizenship is defined by Crick (2004, 79) as "free speech, the election of public officers and the right to combine together to change things, big and small; or prevent undesired changes." It usually did not take very long, however, for other underlying reasons to surface. Céléstin, Gloria, and Yves were all from an area that they described as having been neglected since the end of the war because of the prevalence of opposition there. They felt it was now their turn to have someone in power who cared and provided for them.

Gloria was particularly forthcoming about this. She said, "Since the war ended a decade ago, Nkurunziza hasn't done anything for us just because we didn't vote for him. That is why I want another president to lead us." The involvement of these three former FNL fighters in the protests was very much linked to their identity as FNL supporters. The act of protesting was thus linked to party politics rather than just active citizenship. These three individuals were also more open to the possibility of the protests turning violent: Céléstin told me that "using force is not the first thing to do to resolve this problem but when someone gets angry sometimes he has to use force." And Yves said:

> If he [Nkurunziza] continues using force I would say it will be self-defence. Because we will either all be dead, in prison or have run away from the country, leaving it to Nkurunziza and his Imbonerakure [CNDD-FDD's, allegedly armed, youth wing]. Do you think we will accept this?

Those that chose to perform neutrality to continue on their reintegration trajectories found other ways to channel their politics. They fo-

cused more on lower scale community work through community and church groups. Although they remained loyal to their political parties, they also kept a distance from them.

A few of my interlocutors also tried to tread the line in between these two positions. These men were putting effort into being seen as reintegrated yet at the same time seeking ways to take part in political life. Christian, Didier, and Olivier, all former FAB fighters, took part in the protests. They lived in Bujumbura in one of the areas most affected by the protests. Discussions with them about the protests and their engagement in them revealed a different attitude and motivation than that of the FNL ex-combatants. Both Olivier and Christian were now attending University and emphasised their university student identity in their participation in the protests. Olivier in particular, spoke of explaining Arusha and other governance issues to other protesters, thereby portraying himself as somewhat of an intellectual. He added that most ex-combatants were protesting because of unemployment and poverty – in stark contrast to himself, presumably, as he drew a distinct line between himself and what he referred to as "most ex-combatants".

These ex-FAB soldiers' talk of the protests and their participation in them were very much focused on active citizenship. The narrative produced by these men thus concerned a broader set of issues than just a protest against President Nkurunziza's third term. They had something of a romantic dream of a new Burundi. They also denounced violence to begin with, violence being so connected to party politics. Christian spoke a lot about non-violence early on in the protests.

> I think we won't fight [with weapons], we are trying to use our ideas, and we will ask for help from other countries that see how we are being mistreated. That is the best way to fight, because we don't want to shoot, so many people have been killed and… we want peace and that is

why we want things to be done the right way.

This emphasis on peaceful protests changed drastically, however, as 2015 progressed and it became clear that peaceful protests were not an option. Olivier always downplayed the influence of party politics on the protests – in opposition to what the former FNL fighters had done. When I asked him about the leadership of the protests, Olivier was eager to point out that it was not connected to party politics. "No no no, this is a civil society thing, not political," he told me when I tried to link the protests to certain political parties. He also wanted to distance protesters from the coup plotters of 13th May. He told me that:

> The coup d'état had nothing to do with the protests. We never asked for the government to be overthrown. We all know that overthrowing a government is against the values of democracy. This had nothing to do with us.

Olivier was thus quite clearly arguing that the popular protests were about active citizenship rather than party politics. In this way he, along with Christian and Didier, was attempting to tread the line of performing political neutrality carefully, whilst simultaneously being as politically active as possible.

Political reintegration has been described as the process whereby individual ex-combatants view political channels as being able to handle their societal problems (Söderström 2014). Here I have approached reintegration and politics differently, since the successful reintegration of my interlocutors, that is the shedding of their ex-combatant identity, meant sacrificing their right to be active in party politics, irrespective of their views of political channels. Effective reintegration, for my informants, meant a step away from party politics and a perceived status of neutrality, however superficial this may have been.

Conclusion

Reintegration is a long, tricky, and multidimensional process. One important part of reintegration is ex-combatants' engagement with post-conflict politics. Given the very tumultuous time of my fieldwork, in Burundi in 2015, the engagement or dis-engagement of ex-combatants from politics came up strongly – probably more strongly than it would have done had fieldwork taken place at a different time. It thus provided a unique opportunity to explore how ex-combatants portrayed themselves as political beings during a time of crisis in the post-conflict period. In addition, given that many of the interlocutors represented a group that is often ignored in research – those who have been quite successful in their reintegration trajectories – this provided a rare insight into what the political dimension of successful reintegration actually requires.

The political engagement of these ex-combatants and their presentation of themselves as political beings varied amongst my interlocutors and depended mainly on what their post-war trajectories were.

There were three former FNL fighters who were very much still living with their ex-combatant identity, who took up a fight again, although somewhat differently, in the popular protests that took place in Burundi in 2015.

There was one CNDD-FDD combatant, Evariste, who was still closely linked to the CNDD-FDD throughout this time, who defended their actions and claimed that stories about government sanctioned violence were exaggerated. But most of my other interlocutors, whether they had fought with the CNDD-FDD, the FNL, or the FAB emphasised their lack of engagement in politics and constructed an image of themselves as neutral. This performance of neutrality was not in line with their interest in politics; none of them were apathetic towards political issues. Rather, choosing to construct images of themselves as apolitical or neutral is what was required of them in order to be perceived as successfully reintegrated.

Finally, there was a third group who carefully attempted to have the best of both worlds. These were ex-FAB combatants who took part in the protests but produced a somewhat different narrative from that of the politicised FNL protesters, emphasising how they were different from typical ex-combatants and putting forward the narrative that they were protesting as university students. They were thus trying to tread the thin line available between neutrality, and thus reintegration, and still taking part in politics.

This research points out that political engagement in the aftermath of civil war is not equally available to all ex-combatants. In particular, those ex-combatants who had put much effort into convincing their fellow community members of their own "reintegration" seemed to put a lot of emphasis on not being politically active. Performing neutrality and denouncing their status as political beings was one of the sacrifices that they made to attain the status of being "reintegrated ex-combatants".

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