

#StopThisMovie and the Pitfalls of Mass Atrocity Prevention: Framing of Violence and Anticipation of Escalation in Burundi's Crisis (2015-2017)

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Abstract.

The ongoing Burundi crisis offers a unique opportunity to scrutinize the changing political economy of preventive framing of violence, and particularly genocide as a representational resource in prevention. The paper shows that labels and labeling practices are not disconnected from the local dynamics of conflict, and might have counterintuitive effects in this respect. The portrayal of Burundi's crisis—the frequent intimations that the recent crisis can lead to genocide, the invocations of the ethnic frame, and the repeated comparisons with Rwanda and Burundi's own past—has proceeded through a problematic analysis-by-analogy and has served to obscure the core drivers of the recent violence and the dynamics of escalation on the ground. Further to this, the portrayal has not only proven ineffective in translating increased attention into action, it also has had three unintended and potentially perverse effects on the conflict itself, together fueling the political standoff rather than helping to resolve the crisis.

Keywords.

Burundi, Rwanda, genocide framing, preventative labeling, escalation

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#StopThisMovie and the Pitfalls of Mass Atrocity Prevention: Framing of Violence and Anticipation of Escalation in Burundi's Crisis (2015-2017)

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Introduction

The unforgotten¹ and oft reminisced² reluctance to name the 1994 violence in Rwanda as genocide has left a mark on public conscience, and Burundi's recent crisis represents the inversion of sorts of this political economy of labeling violence. If in 1994 the label was a scarce resource, in 2015 it became a currency widely spent, and arguably, devalued as a result. And whilst in 1994 the politics revolved around labels triggering international obligations, today we deal with a whole gamut of actors drawing on the label, some to trigger obligation in anticipation, as a preventative mechanism (e.g., IOs and AU), some in search of close-enough comparators and familiar frames (e.g., media), others to score political credit through the delegitimation of opponents (domestic actors, whether opposition or the incumbents). Altogether, these dynamics offer rich insights into the changing political economy of deployment of the 'ultimate crime' label. The deep politicization also forces us to reflect on the status and continued usefulness of genocide as a dominant frame to activate in times of crisis, and today as a distinctly anticipatory device to raise alarm rather than a post-facto designation (such as with UN ICOIs).

The article analyses the vagaries of prevention³ and "preventative framing"⁴ of violence, focusing both on how different actors portrayed points of "critical escalation" and the nature of violence (mass atrocity) predicted in Burundi between 2015-2017.⁵ The #StopThisMovie prevention campaign referenced in the title, aiming to prevent the crisis escalating to a genocide, reflects the broader trend whereby observers have been consumed with anticipation and the framing of "Burundi's great fear."⁶ The veritable genocide reticence-turned-logorrhea witnessed in this crisis is directly tied to the perceived close resemblance of Burundi and Rwanda and hence the pressure not to repeat the mistakes of the past, if not to make up for them. But, there is also the oft cited "given the country's history" clause.⁷ The pervasive analysis-by-analogy, however, is problematic. It will be argued that the portrayal – the intimations that the recent crisis can lead to genocide, the invocations of the ethnic frame, and the repeated comparisons with Rwanda and Burundi's own past – serves to obscure the core drivers of the recent violence and the dynamics of escalation on the ground.

The paper then proceeds to investigate whether such representation might nonetheless be used as currency to garner greater visibility and international involvement. In other words, can costs in terms of accuracy be redeemed by greater attention? The argument that emerges here is that conflict prevention has come at the cost of conflict resolution. Not only has attention failed to translate into

¹ Hayes Brown, "The Inside Story Of How The U.S. Acted To Prevent Another Rwanda," *Think Progress*, December 20, 2013, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/the-inside-story-of-how-the-u-s-acted-to-prevent-another-rwanda-e91beac73aca>.

² The failure to intervene and the silent by-stander status of the international community in 1994 is the cornerstone of political narratives in Rwanda and is often highlighted during commemorative periods by the President and the political class more broadly. The guilt, argues Filip Reyntjens, has been turned into 'genocide credit.' See, Filip Reyntjens, "Rwanda, Ten Years on: From Genocide to Dictatorship," *African Affairs* 103, no. 411 (2004), 200. Beyond Rwanda, the lack of international effort to prevent and later stop the genocide has left a deep imprint on international conscience and has made genocide a cornerstone of the R2P norm and accompanying architecture developed since 1994.

³ Early warning specifically, rather than risk assessment.

⁴ See, David Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1, no. 3 (2006), 229. Scheffer argues that analysts should use the 'G' word freely to "publicly describe precursors of genocide and react rapidly."

⁵ The year 2015 marks the beginning of the crisis and 2017 is when this article was finalized but also when much of the international attention has petered out.

⁶ Fred Bridgland, "Burundi's 'Great Fear,'" *The Sunday Herald*, January 3, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14178785.Burundi_s_great_fear/?ref=rss.

⁷ "Burundi Crisis: from Disputed Polls to 'Genocide' Fears," *JusticeInfo.net*, October 12, 2016, accessed, March 15, 2017, <http://www.justiceinfo.net/en/resources/burundi-crisis-from-disputed-polls-to-genocide-fears.html>.

effective action in Burundi, the labeling practice might have produced some unintended, even perverse effects. The greater international and regional resolve to act has in fact met with radical rebuttals from the government, including the withdrawal from the ICC and pronouncement that any international force would be seen as an invading force and engaged militarily.

But we cannot simply argue that the increased attention has been ineffective. Instead, we must seriously consider the possibility of unintended effects. The article explores three propositions in this regard: First, genocide-label-driven interventionism in Burundi has increased regime isolationism and emboldened the regime to resort to sovereignty as an effective last resort measure to shore up impunity. It has effectively lowered the government's willingness to bow down, cooperate and negotiate with its critics, arguably the opposite of the intended effect. Second, in terms of violence, we must consider whether the genocide frame and campaigning has not merely contributed to decreased *visibility* of violence and repression, which has now moved offstage. Perhaps more seriously, we need to consider whether the campaigning has taken away energy from civil war focus as a more pressing threat. Third, in terms of the genocide label, we must consider that protracted alarm sounding devalues not only the G-word as currency, but strategic labeling as a preventative device in general. Over two years of troughs and peaks of deployment of the most powerful label, Burundi is no closer to an inclusive political dialogue. In the case of Burundi at least, the mislabeling of the crisis has fueled the political standoff rather than helping to resolve it.

The analysis serves as an opening to broader reflections on labeling of conflict in Africa. The paper foregrounds the contested nature of labeling on the ground whereby labeling and representation act as resources feeding political and conflict dynamics themselves, rather than being analytical devices separate from the ongoing crisis. The recent (mis)characterization of conflict in Burundi in fact enters a long-standing historical process of local contestation over conflict labels— including over the term of genocide— that feed the cycles of metaconflict and conflict on the ground.⁸ The paper concludes with reflections on whether/how the labels of “genocide” and “ethnic conflict” are still useful to our understanding of conflict in a region where they have been typically intensely deployed. The paper also cautions against the unbridled use of the label of genocide for prevention and makes a call for a more self-reflective and politically conscious preventive framing.

Labeling Conflict: The Uses, Manipulations and Impacts of Crisis Portrayal

The present paper unpicks the tensions between two frameworks that see labeling as a representational resource. The first focuses on labeling as a potentially positive resource garnering preventive action. As such, this conception of labeling is embedded within the problem-solving framework of conflict management. The second offers a more politicized reading of labeling as a “symbolic technology”⁹ opening the space for contested forms of potentially self-defeating interventionism. As such, it presents a more critical frame of conflict transformation. The difference is important. While the former framework implicitly treats labeling as separate from the unfolding conflict, the latter sees it as part and parcel of the conflict (struggle over dominance) and metaconflict (conflict over the meaning of the confrontation). Adopting but expanding the latter framework, the current paper looks not merely at the intended effects of intervention, but rather the unstated and unintended effects of increased attention unmatched by effective preventative action.

It is now a well-established dictum that the way we talk about violence affects the way we respond to it, affectively and collectively. “Recognised severity of political problems – including government-organized or sanctioned mass killings is a function of the socio-linguistic processing

⁸ For a discussion of a 1995 COI on Burundi and the impacts of its designation of ‘acts of genocide’ on the broader metaconflict, see Andrea Purdeková, “Fact-Finding as a Conflict Resource? The Political Anatomy of International Investigative Missions on Burundi (1993, 1995, 2015),” Unpublished Manuscript, 2017.

⁹ Roland Marchal, “Warlordism and Terrorism: How to Obscure an Already Confusing Crisis? The Case of Somalia,” *International Affairs* 83, no. 4 (2007), 1091-1106.

and naming of them.”¹⁰ The “power to define”¹¹ revolves around labels’ potential to catalyze outrage and mobilize action, but also their propensity to structure “hierarchies of concern.”¹² In this respect, the label of genocide trumps other characterizations, in general, and especially in Africa and the Great Lakes Region. While “there is no hierarchy of crimes in international law... popular understanding of genocide as the “ultimate crime” generate obvious incentives for victims and their advocates to invoke the “G word” to rally support for intervention, even when the objective criteria for genocide are not met.”¹³ The existence of a purpose-made genocide convention also “reinforces the public acknowledgment of genocide’s special status, not only as a matter of criminal law, but as a moral outrage to humanity.”¹⁴ After the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the label has indeed been widely invoked by political actors and civil society alike across a broad range of conflict and countries in Africa, ranging from Sudan/Darfur to Kenya, Zimbabwe, and beyond.

But the recent, and much more intense and sustained, deployment of the label in Burundi cannot be seen outside of the country’s physical and perceived social proximity to Rwanda. It is the status of Burundi as the “false twin”¹⁵ of its neighbor that gives the G word particular traction in this case.¹⁶ The recent case of Burundi then wedges open the pressing query of what impacts ensue when the G word is applied intensely and aggressively, rather than cautiously or half-heartedly as in the past, and in anticipation rather than after the fact.

In its study of impacts, the current paper opens up beyond the two dominant analytical tendencies, in line with its more critical take on labels’ role in an unfolding conflict. First, the paper does not paint a simple story of “reductionist media,” a mislabeling borne of benevolent outsiders looking from the outside in. Instead, the paper foregrounds the constellation of different actors that co-produce the narrative on Burundi, foreign and local, and the ways in which the G label permeates political dynamics on the ground. The participants in the commentary on the Burundi crisis include academics attempting to be relevant by blogging and contributing quotes for news coverage, news correspondents attempting more in-depth political analysis, and experts and government officials “cybertimately” exchanging fire on twitter. To understand the political economy of the genocide label and its impacts, we first must acknowledge and understand this complex configuration of actors and interests.

Second, understanding impacts means moving beyond the study of intended effects to unintended, even potentially counter-intuitive ones. The difficulty of translating increased attention and resolve triggered by the G label into effective action has been highlighted before,¹⁷ and seems painfully to be the case in Burundi again, where international attempts at intervention and criminal investigation have not borne their desired results. But a frame focused on effectiveness is limiting. It obscures other effects borne of action and inaction.

¹⁰ William F.S. Miles, “Labeling ‘Genocide’ in Sudan: A Constructionist Analysis of Darfur,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1, no. 3 (2006), 251-263.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Kate Cronin-Furman and Michael Broache, “Should We be Using the G-word in Burundi?,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 2015, accessed March 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/15/should-we-be-using-the-g-word-in-burundi/?utm_term=.d684c4a4cd67.

¹⁴ Miles, *Labeling Genocide in Sudan*, 261.

¹⁵ René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹⁶ “The events in Burundi [after all] are unfolding in the long shadow of Rwanda [its neighbor]. Observers – whether political figures, UN representatives, journalists, or non-governmental organizations – have the vocabulary of modern genocide prevention at their disposal because of the lessons their respective organizations endeavored to absorb over the past two decades following the genocide in Rwanda.” In Conor Gaffey, “Burundi Must Learn the Lessons of Rwanda to Avoid Genocide,” *Newsweek*, December 11, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://europe.newsweek.com/burundi-must-learn-lessons-rwanda-avoid-genocide-336428>. It is not only vocabulary, however, that Rwanda bequeathed onto the international community, but a new moral impulse to act, translated into the R2P doctrine and a new policy and institutional architecture such as the Atrocity Prevention Board (APB) in the US or the United Nations Special Adviser on Prevention of Genocide.

¹⁷ The examples are Darfur in Sudan or the Central African Republic (CAR). In the latter case, ‘while [the APB] has certainly helped formulate policy, it hasn’t been a silver bullet to end the crisis in the CAR,’ see, Haynes, *the Inside Story*.

There is now a budding literature exploring the unintended effects of conflict portrayal in the African context. Perhaps most prominently, Séverine Autesserre¹⁸ has traced the effects of “dangerous tales” – dominant conflict narratives— on the actual dynamics of violence in the DRC. She shows how the portrayal of causes, impacts and solutions of the crisis has been reduced to three powerful but reductive frames focused on natural resources, sexual violence and state-building, respectively. The “danger” inherent in the tales is not simply them obscuring the key causes of violence and its complexity, the variety of impacts beyond rape, and the problems of the unquestioned embrace of central state-building. The danger also lies with the perverse effects – the tales’ tendency to increase the very violence they were meant merely to depict. Autesserre shows how the intense focus on rape has elevated sexual violence’ saliency among armed actors, some of whom have deployed it to gain attention and a seat at the negotiating table.¹⁹

Last but not least, a broader conception of actors and impacts needs to be matched by a closer reading of the historical record. The little-observed fact in the ongoing coverage of the crisis is that this is not the first time that controversy arises over the labeling of violence in Burundi and the label of genocide in particular. Neither is this the only chapter in Burundi’s story of an interaction between conflict portrayal and the actual conflict on the ground.²⁰ We need to understand that Burundi has made a transition from decades of imposed silence on state-perpetrated violence and the manipulations of portrayal of the conflict by successive governments, and largely international oblivion, to selective application of the genocide label through the 1995 Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Burundi,²¹ to an intense discourse surrounding the label and the international spotlight of today. We also see a move from post-facto designation or management of conflict labels to the anticipatory framing of today. This longer history and politics surrounding the G word are not merely ‘context’ but again help shape the label’s deployment and impact today.

Portraying the Crisis in Burundi: Analogy, Intimation, and Imminence

The present section outlines the anatomy of portrayal of the crisis in Burundi, from its inception in early 2015 to early 2017, exactly two years later, paying particular attention to the ways in which violence and its escalation is described and/or intimated to a wider audience, often in order to influence it, create impact and garner action. The paper analyzes available commentary on the crisis produced by a variety of actors and a range of published sources, including news outlets, UN and other international and regional organizations’ releases, academic blogs and news interventions, social media commentary, speeches by foreign and domestic dignitaries and organizations, and beyond. Study of primary and secondary sources is matched by original fieldwork carried out in Burundi in both 2013 and at the inception of the current crisis in 2015.

The study grew out of an observed systematic pattern in the style of reporting on the crisis. Importantly, I did not choose ‘genocide’ as a search filter as this could introduce two forms of bias.

¹⁸ Séverine Autesserre, “Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences,” *African Affairs* 111, no. 443 (2012), 202-222.

¹⁹ A number of other authors have explored the strategic nature of labelling and its potential to obscure the drivers of conflict and hence to potentially undermine prospects of resolution. Scorgie-Porter in her study of the Allied Democratic Forces (a Uganda-born but DRC-based rebel group) demonstrates how the globally potent label of terrorism and Islamic extremism came to take dominance in describing this militant group, thus obscuring important aspects of the group’s constitution and the drivers underpinning mobilization into the group and its persistence. Scorgie-Porter shows that the Ugandan government has been actively framing the group in line with the global discourse on terrorism “in order to draw resources, military, diplomatic and otherwise that stem from participation in the war on terror.” See, Lindsay Scorgie-Porter, “Militant Islamists or Borderland Dissidents? An Exploration into the Allied Democratic Forces’ Recruitment and Constitution,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 1 (2015), 1-25. Similarly, in their study of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) framing, Titeca and Costeur try to understand and explain the divergent portrayals of the same armed actor by different governments (Ugandan, Congolese and US) through the lens of their strategic objectives. See, Kristof Titeca and Theophile Costeur, “An LRA for Everyone: How Different Actors Frame the Lord’s Resistance Army,” *African Affairs* 114, no. 454 (2015), 92-114.

²⁰ See, Purdeková, *Fact-Finding*.

²¹ The 1995 International Commission of Inquiry on Burundi concluded the 1993 killings of Tutsi civilians amount to ‘acts of genocide.’ No comparable commission has been launched to investigate and qualify the genocide of 1972. See, United Nations, *Letter Dated 25 July 1996 from secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, August 22, 1996 (UN Doc. S/1996/682), 74, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://undocs.org/S/1996/682>.

First, it would run the risk of skewing findings by excluding alternative portrayals, or conversely other dominant labels.²² Second, it would obscure a dynamic whereby the notion of ‘genocide’ is very effectively implied without being directly mentioned. The latter aspect is much more than a methodological consideration and in fact turns out to be a key finding of the paper. The research presented here shows the power of insinuation, and how ambiguity can still communicate specificity. “Every instance of language and action,” writes Edelman, “resonates with the memory, the fear or the anticipation of other signifiers, so that there are radiating networks of meaning.”²³ The paper will show that intimation and anticipation can be powerful techniques of building affect and, indeed, forms of very specific labeling. This is what can be called “silent labeling” or “implicit labeling.”

A close reading of a wide array of text reveals systematic comparison of Burundi to Rwanda and a repeated insinuation that the current crisis is an ethnic conflict that can result in genocide. This is the case even in articles that clearly mention that political cleavage is key. Three discursive strategies arise and will be demonstrated below: i) analysis by analogy (proof by indirect parallel); ii) intimation without mention (implicit labeling); and iii) insinuation of imminence of escalation (momentum building). In terms of the analysis-by-analogy, this is two-fold: parallels are rendered with events in neighboring Rwanda, and with events in Burundi’s own past. These rhetorical strategies are pervasive. But analysis-by-analogy is not only logically problematic. It generalizes and lumps countries into the same basket (Burundi is largely like Rwanda and hence faces the same fate of genocide) and builds a distinctly primordial and unchanging notion of African societies centered around ethnicity as the main cleavage (i.e., Burundi’s conflict in the past and hence today is about ethnicity). The ethnic frame is so powerful that it is inconceivable that, should mass violence occur, it could fall across other-than-ethnic (i.e., political) lines. Genocide in press is squarely “ethnic genocide.” Interestingly, even in reporting that highlights the changing nature of conflict centered today around political loyalties, the analysis inevitably leads to claiming there are risks of ethnic polarization and/or that the ethnic aspect remains important.

Already very early on in the crisis, on April 28, 2015, just after President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his intention to run for a controversial third term and vast protests were met with (and in fact preceded by) sustained intimidation by the *Imbonerakure* youth wing of the ruling party, the New York Times reproduced the dominant discourse rather faithfully: “

As Burundi edges towards a precipice, parallels with 1994 Rwanda are not unfounded. Like in Rwanda’s genocide, the *Imbonerakure*— or at least the more radical elements— appear ready to target civilians en masse. Although Burundi’s crisis is primarily one of politics, with antagonisms crossing ethnic boundaries, there is also an ethnic dimension.

Drawing on analogies is met with ambiguity of the target group, portrayal of imminence, and the underlining of an “ethnic dimension,” opening the possibility of “ethnic genocide.”²⁴

A year later, on April 10, 2016, another major news outlet reproduced a strikingly similar discourse, this time though putting the dominant discursive frame on ever clearer display: “Burundi neighbors Rwanda and has a similar ethnic make-up to the country whose genocide in 1994 still casts long shadows of shame and fear. Like Rwanda, Burundi has also seen bitter, genocidal wars between Hutu and Tutsi.”²⁵ Both strands of analysis-by-analogy are present here (invocation of neighboring Rwanda and Burundi’s own past), as well as intimation without mention (the current crisis is never explicitly labeled as genocide but this is very effectively implied), the dominance of the ethnic frame in understanding Burundi’s conflict and ethnic essentialism.

This last excerpt faithfully reflects the narrative techniques witnessed elsewhere whereby numerous articles on the crisis would incorporate (usually end with) precisely this clause,

²² As a strategic resource, ‘genocide’ enters a list of other high profile and strategic labels such as ‘terrorism’ or ‘insurgency’ used by the government to delegitimize the opposition forces and garner attention and resources. Even if notable and offering opening to interesting analyses, these labels are limited to the domestic political level, and have not seen the exposure and intensity of deployment that ‘genocide’ did.

²³ Miles, *Labeling Genocide in Sudan*, 254.

highlighting parallels with Rwanda and the ethnic make-up of the country. To give a sense of the systematic nature of the portrayal, I include additional excerpts from a range of news outlets, with the proviso that this is far from exhaustive. On February 3, 2016, Reuters reported that “Nkurunziza’s re-election for a third term last year sparked the country’s crisis and raised concerns that there could be a bloody ethnic conflict in a region where memories of Rwanda’s 1994 genocide are still fresh.”²⁶ The clause combines analogy, intimation, and ethnic framing. Another article from the Star on November 11, 2015, suggests “the moral failure to boldly challenge [the Rwandan] genocide haunts us still. This time we should name it for what it is, and confront it.”²⁷ Here we again see both analysis-by-analogy and intimation. Telegraph’s piece from November 10, 2015, entitled “We are powerless to stop Rwandan-style genocide in Burundi, admits UN” again draws on analogy and intimation: “Burundi ended a 12-year civil war in 2005, when Hutu rebels fought the army led by Tutsis, the same ethnic divide that led to Rwanda’s 1994 genocide in which 800,000 people were massacred.” This excerpt is interesting because it proceeds through a two-step analogy. It suggests that past conflict in Burundi is defined by ethnicity (implicitly assuming it still is, suggesting analogy with the past), and that this very same ethnic cleavage has led to genocide in a neighboring country (intimating fear of genocide).

But as mentioned at the outset, this is not simply a story of reductionist media as this sort of portrayal is reproduced by other actors and for a number of motives, demonstrating the different facets of the broader political economy of crisis labeling. Nonetheless, media often pick up and quote from these other sources and actors. One of the prominent voices has been the UN, acting through its office of the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng. The office is geared towards mobilizing early action and the rhetoric reflects this. On November 9, 2015, Dieng urged the Security Council to intervene in Burundi “to prevent a replay of past horrors,”²⁸ warning inaction risks Burundi “slid[ing] back into an all too familiar chaos... No one should underestimate what is at stake, he said, recalling that the country’s own history and that of its neighbor, Rwanda, has shown the tragic consequences of failing to act when leaders incite violence.”²⁹ The 2016 UN report of the Independent Investigation on Burundi suggests “given the country’s history, the danger of the crime of genocide also looms large.”³⁰ Analogies and intimation re-appear.

The genocide label has been applied quite explicitly by national and international NGOs. The International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and the Burundian Ligue ITEKA have perhaps been the most vocal, co-authoring a 200 page report at the end of 2016 entitled “Repression and Genocidal Dynamics in Burundi.”³¹ The report concludes that “all criteria and conditions for the perpetration of genocide are in place: ideology, intent, security institutions, mobilization via militias, identifying populations to be eliminated and using historical justifications.” The report concludes that there is evidence of intent to destroy, in whole or in part an ethnic group, that of the Tutsi.³² The lengthy and detailed reasoning might seem to contrast starkly with the snippets of

²⁶ Michelle, Nichols, “U.N. Expert Find Bid to Smuggle Congo Arms via Rwanda to Burundi Rebels,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-burundi-rwanda-congodemocratic-idUKKCN0VD2HM>.

²⁷ “Burundi Crisis Resembles Run-up to Rwanda Genocide: Editorial,” *The Star*, November 11, 2015, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2015/11/11/burundi-crisis-resembles-run-up-to-rwanda-genocide-editorial.html>.

²⁸ “Burundi Experiencing ‘Deep Political Crisis’ with Hundreds Dead Since April, Security Council told,” *United Nations News Centre*, November 9, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52503#.WQT8yKWRpuY3>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-24/1, September 20, 2016 (UN Doc. A/HRC/33/37), 19, accessed March 12, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/report-united-nations-independent-investigation-burundi-uniib-established-pursuant>.

³¹ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) & Ligue ITEKA, “Repression and Genocidal Dynamics in Burundi,” *Report No. 685a*, November 2016, accessed March 12, 2017, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/burundi_report_english-2.pdf.

³² *Ibid.*

text incorporated into news reports, but close scrutiny suggests that the analytical process is in fact similar and revolves around the notion of “mirroring.”

“Voices from within the AU and elsewhere are warning that Burundi today mirrors the pre-April 1994 situation in Rwanda,”³³ suggests the Scotland Herald. The FIDH-ITEKA report proceeds through a similar analysis-by-analogy but in a far greater detail. The projection through mirroring carries with it its own logical problems as one might read into divergent phenomena a convergent purpose such as when distribution of machetes, distribution of mobile phones to *chefs de colline* or construction of latrines in the countryside are cited as evidence of a genocidal plan.³⁴ The mirroring logic has it that such implements were used in 1994 in a neighboring country to facilitate genocidal killing, *ipso facto* these events spell a preparation for a possible genocide in Burundi. The text on latrine construction demonstrates the mirroring analytics well:

On 1 May 2016, President Nkurunziza announced that community work, which takes place every Saturday, would henceforth focus on installing latrines [...] alongside all roads, in all local communities (collines), at marketplaces and in all other public spaces. Our organizations are concerned that these latrines may be used as mass graves, as has been the case during the current crisis and in 1994 at the time of the genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda. Some months before the genocide there, the Rwandan authorities had ordered the construction of latrines throughout the country and these were transformed into pits for bodies between April and July 1994.³⁵

Importantly, labeling here (calling the crisis “repression with genocidal dynamics”³⁶) has the potential to create anxiety and a resurgence of traumatic memory. Fear thrives on analogies. It is Burundians themselves who start seeing familiar patterns in the happenings around them. The worried observations of surging numbers of phones in hands of local authorities and machete distributions after all come from “sources on the ground.”³⁷ Others such as refugees might use genocide as a ready-made frame they know has impact. A young arrival at the refugee Mahama camp, claiming he was assaulted by the Imbonerakure militias, explained that “we fled because they said they were going to do a genocide of Tutsis that don’t accept the views of Nkurunziza.”³⁸ The genocide frame must be seen as mutually constituted and its impacts as reaching beyond problematic analysis.

On the level of domestic politics, the opposition has used the term to garner action against the government, while the government has used different outlets to counter these claims. “Indeed, members of the political opposition in Burundi began invoking the risk of genocide as early as February 2014.”³⁹ More recently in April 2017, the Spokesman of the opposition umbrella CNARED has suggested with reference to the *Imbonerakure* chants inciting members to sexual violence that “what is going on is a copy-paste of what happened in Rwanda before the Genocide of 1994.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, “Government officials in Burundi bristle at the comparison [with Rwandan genocide]. Presidential spokesman Willy Nyamitwe said ‘There will be no war or genocide,’ while maintaining the government was trying to suppress ‘acts of terrorism (...)’”⁴¹ Interestingly, the

³³ See, Bridgland, *Burundi’s ‘Great Fear.’*

³⁴ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) & Ligue ITEKA, *Repression and Genocidal Dynamics in Burundi*, 41.

³⁵ Ibid. An important caveat is due here: The report’s claim that latrines were being built en masse prior to the Rwandan genocide has not been corroborated in the literature. It does not feature in one of the most detailed accounts, and namely Alison Des Forges, *‘Leave None to Tell the Story:’ Genocide in Rwanda*, Human Rights Watch and International Federation of Human Rights, 3169, no. 189 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Ibid., 40. The sources here (in reference to phone distribution) are not actually detailed. The sources on machete distribution are mostly national and international human rights organisations.

³⁸ Philip Kleinfeld, “Burundi: Time is Running Out,” *New Internationalist*, January 24, 2017, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2017/01/24/burundi-time-is-running-out/>.

³⁹ Cronin-Furman and Broache, *the G-word in Burundi*.

⁴⁰ “Video of CNDD-FDD Youth Causes a Scandal in Burundi,” *The Citizen*, April 10, 2017, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://citizen.co.za/news/africa/1483356/video-of-cndd-fdd-youth-causes-a-scandal-in-burundi/>.

⁴¹ Gaffey, *Burundi Must Learn*.

government has resorted to the label when it proved profitable. The government accused its neighbor Rwanda of arming refugees in camps, thus fomenting genocide in Burundi. Pascal Nyabenda, the President of the ruling CNDD-FDD party has accused Paul Kagame of “recruiting and training young Burundians in refugee camps in Rwanda, so that they can return home to commit acts of genocide.”⁴² This was a clear provocation to a government that styles itself as a liberator and one that ends genocide rather than exports it, pointing at the strained bilateral relations between these two countries. Indeed, Kagame did not abstain from further bolstering this symbolic capital by announcing that Burundi “should have learned from our history.” He called on Burundi “not to repeat the ethnic violence that ended in genocide in his country in 1994.”⁴³

Overall then, we cannot see the prominence of the label simply through the lens of the press, but rather the constellation of actors that have together embraced its renewed value in order to influence action by external actors and the course of the conflict on the ground. But as shown, the label’s power seeps beyond politics of intervention and legitimization, being appropriated as a ready-made and useful frame, and with the all-too-real potential to affect the sense of security and contribute to anxiety by resuscitating memories of a violent past.

But some caveats are due to the story of the label’s prominence as drawn up thus far. First, it is questionable whether ordinary Burundians resort to the label of genocide at all. In my research between 2013 and 2015, this term seemed to pertain mostly to international and national civil society and organizations, with ordinary people choosing ambiguous and general ways of describing past events of violence in the country, including the “selective genocide” of 1972. With the crisis and intense deployment of the term its salience has surely increased and people interfacing with the humanitarian architecture might choose it as a way to render their situation intelligible to them. Second, we must acknowledge a level of heterodoxy and the dissenting voices. A number of blogs, reports and most academics have been disputing the ethnic portrayal of the crisis and the rush to label the crisis as genocide.⁴⁴ Despite these important caveats, it remains the case that genocide as a label has gained traction and has been intensely deployed in reference to Burundi, in ways that alternative framings of the crisis have not. The effects of this are explored in the next section.

Last but not least, the way in which the dominant portrayal works with time and across time is interesting. The temporal dimension here refers both to how the genocide discourse builds expectation and utilizes anticipations of escalation, and to its own endurance across time. In terms of anticipation, the portrayal works with the notion of imminence. FIDH’s #StopThisMovie campaign is a good example. The organization has been promoting a fake movie trailer “Genocide in Burundi, by Pierre Nkurunziza” with the tagline “the only movie you don’t want to see.” The short clip shows screaming Burundian children running for their lives through windings red paths crisscrossing verdant valley floors. The camera chases after them, closing up on them like a predator, while rhythmic, ominous music plays in the background. Fake media clips flash across the screen: “Huge Bloodshed,” “Climate of Fear,” “Deadly Violence,” “Mass Atrocities.” The last screen entirely bathed in red announces: “As you are reading this, the risk of genocide in Burundi is imminent. Act together and prevent this fiction from becoming reality #StopThisMovie.”

The language of imminence is a systematic feature of the discourse hoping to garner preventive action. In April 2015, NYT speaks of Burundi “on the brink,” “edg[ing] towards a precipice.”⁴⁵ In November 2015, Adama Dieng speaks of a “tipping point”⁴⁶ and so does France’s deputy ambassador to the UN, Alexis Lamek:⁴⁷ “The escalating violence in Burundi has reached a very

⁴² “Burundi Accuses Rwanda of Trying to Export Genocide,” *The Telegraph*, March 27, 2016, accessed, March 12, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/27/burundi-accuses-rwanda-of-trying-to-export-genocide/>.

⁴³ “Rwandan President Urges Burundi not to Repeat Genocide,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2015, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/08/rwandan-president-urges-burundi-not-to-repeat-genocide>.

⁴⁴ See for example, Cronin-Furman and Broache, *the G-word in Burundi*.

⁴⁵ Jean Claude Nkundwa and Jonathan W. Rosen, “Burundi on the Brink,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015, accessed April, 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/opinion/burundi-on-the-brink.html?_r=0.

⁴⁶ Un News, *Burundi experienced ‘Deep political crisis.’*

worrying stage, maybe a tipping point,” he suggested, “If we let the tensions escalate without doing anything, the whole country could explode.” In January 2016, Minority Rights International warns of “a tipping point.”⁴⁸ Most recently, in an article from January 2017 entitled “Burundi: Time is Running Out,” the author describes an “escalating crisis.”⁴⁹ The situation in Burundi is indeed dire, both in terms of repression, human rights violations and unmet basic needs. But the repeated referral to tipping points clashes with what is instead a gradual yet pervasive entrenchment of a new and worrying status quo. The repeated evocations of imminent and irreversible escalation are nonetheless interesting, and the next section will ask what sort of effects are borne when repeated alarm isn’t met with the desired response.

Bearing Effects: How Genocide Alarm Interacts with the Ongoing Conflict

In the present section, I want to make three key arguments about the unintended effects of sounding the genocide alarm on Burundi for over two years in the context of failing international action. First, the ‘ethnic genocide’ frame obscures the political drivers of the crisis and the anatomy of likely escalation – that of civil war – which is no less serious. But the intensity of focus makes this more than a story of misrepresentation as the framing takes away energy from an alternative approach (i.e., missed representation). Second, genocide prevention driven interventionism has in fact emboldened and radicalized regime isolationism, and by extension, narrowed the leeway of the regional and international community in fostering government cooperation and dialogue. Genocide is a radical accusation leveled at the government and due to its known impact, has been eagerly taken up as resource by actors ranging from the opposition to international media and civil society. But radical accusations have tended to radicalize the government’s own stance. Third and last, protracted crying wolf has devalued the G word as currency in Burundi, raising questions about its usefulness as a preventive frame over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that i) genocide framing cannot be disconnected from the conflict dynamics on the ground; and that ii) rather than preventing escalation, the genocide framing has potentially further entrenched the political standoff in Burundi. It has not averted the entrenchment of repression in the country and has failed to open up key channels of political solution to the crisis, raising the risk of return to civil war.

The ethnic genocide frame obfuscates the nature of the conflict in Burundi today and how conflict dynamics have changed over time. More broadly, it maintains African conflict in the representational straightjacket of ethnic conflict, a familiar but flawed paradigm. This paradigm has a tendency to i) conflate cause and description (people might be targeted based on ethnicity, which is different from ethnic fear or hate causing the violence), ii) to conflate cause and effect (cleavages and polarization often result from conflict rather than being caused by it), and iii) to obscure change over time (underlying causes and even descriptives change).

The misrepresentation in the case of Burundi results from the failure to draw these important distinctions and from the ease of reading the past into the present. Burundi has indeed seen genocides of both Hutu and Tutsi in the past (1972 and 1993, respectively). Its neighbor Rwanda is indeed deceptively similar in its ethnic make-up and has seen a genocide as well – that of the Tutsi in 1994. But even Rene Lemarchand’s seminal book entitled “Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide” does not argue ethnicity is a cause of protracted violence across Burundi’s post-independence history. While the conflict certainly fell across ethnic lines (with other important lines of cleavage, including intra-ethnic/regional also playing their part), at heart it tied to systematic political exclusion of the Hutu from power and the ruling ethnocracy’s escalating repressive measures against any political and military challenge mounted by the majority.

⁴⁷ Colin Freeman, “We are Powerless to Stop Rwandan-style Genocide in Burundi,” admits UN,” *The Telegraph*, November 10, 2015, accessed, March 21, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/burundi/11987055/We-are-powerless-to-stop-Rwandan-style-genocide-in-Burundi-admits-UN.html>.

⁴⁸ “Burundi at tipping point, government and international community must do more to prevent escalation of conflict, warns MRG,” (Press Release, January 22, 2016), Minority Rights International, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://minorityrights.org/2016/01/22/burundi-at-tipping-point-government-and-international-community-must-do-more-to-prevent-escalation-of-conflict-warns-mrg/>.

⁴⁹ Kleinfeld, *Burundi: Time is Running Out*.

But today, we cannot read the crisis in these same terms, the Hutu are no longer excluded from power. The protest movement and opposition that emerged in reaction to the President's decision to hold on to power and the regime's increasing authoritarianism are decidedly cross ethnic, as are the refugees, and the casualties. This is not to deny that ethnic animosities linger on or that some people on the ground do in fact read the past through an ethnic lens. Violence has a tendency to harden inter-group boundaries and that violent past has not been ever dealt with through a functional transitional justice mechanism. But this simply cannot explain the onset of the current crisis, its more structural drivers, the nature of the escalation, or even the descriptives – who is targeted, who is intimidated, who flees. Both the causatives and the descriptives are distinctly political today. The conflict in Burundi has transformed.

In fact, we need to highlight two rather counter-intuitive dynamics. First, we can argue that what stubbornly remains a form of “success” amidst crisis is Burundi's power-sharing architecture set up under the 2000 Arusha peace accord, a complex consociational arrangement carefully distributing power among the two dominant ethnic groups. As Reyntjens has argued, this has effectively resulted in “ethnic pacification” in Burundi.⁵⁰ Second, the increased attention to and alarmism regarding “ethnic genocide” might, in a self-fulfilling prophecy fashion, perversely contribute to the very dynamics the discourse is trying to avert. In a tense political environment, hyperbole has the potential to fan fear and suspicion, and to contribute to ethnic polarization.

But if the ethnic frame is ill fitting, and if what is at stake is political partisanship – with perceived opposition being the target of violence and repression – could we still argue that genocide could result? Strictly speaking, the UN definition does not allow for political opinion (stated or imputed) as a basis of genocide, a limitation critiqued by the likes of Leo Kuper and Helen Fein who propose alternative concepts such as politicicide. Interestingly, this option – targeting based on political opinion aiming for categorical extermination – is extremely difficult for many observers of the current crisis to fathom. Even as they highlight the political nature of the conflict, the risk of genocide is read almost invariably on an ethnic basis.

But is Burundi at risk of politicicide being committed? Arguably, neither ethnicity nor collective targeting for annihilation is correct as an analytical lens. The government has indeed targeted its opponents *en masse* and systematically. By and large, the method has not been physical violence but effective intimidation. The casualty counts remain relatively low, even as human rights abuses in detention have ballooned. The *Imbonerakure* militias together with the memories of a violent past have performed most of the labor, producing widespread anxiety, fear and lending believability to the threats. The result is mass outflows of people, and though not all leave because (or solely because) of political intimidation, a large portion of the opposition, including civil society and human rights watchdogs have fled abroad. Almost 400,000 Burundians have fled their country, which matches the peaks of displacement during its civil war and after the 1972 genocide. But we also know that opposition abroad means opportunities for mobilization and potentially armed struggle if political platforms for resolution do not work. Based on the available evidence then, the threat of escalation in Burundi is not to genocide, but an insurgency (or insurgencies) and/or a full-scale civil war.

Certainly, it can be argued that different forms of violence can and do co-occur. But it is important to look at the relationship between them. As Scott Straus has shown, civil war involving a collectively framed opponent – typically ethnically framed but could be otherwise- is what really heightens the risk of genocide.⁵¹ This has been the case in Rwanda in 1994, and in Burundi in 1972 and 1993. This causality chain suggests that, properly speaking, what needs attention and needs to be prevented is escalation to civil war, which under some circumstances can lead to genocide. This means that what needs to be promoted is a political solution and dialogue, rather than military interventionism and policing of the regime, the effects of which can range from ineffective to counter-productive.

⁵⁰ See, Filip Reyntjens, “Burundi: Institutionalizing Ethnicity to Bridge the Ethnic Divide,” in *Constitutions and Conflict Management in Africa*, ed. Alan Kuperman (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 49.

⁵¹ Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Looking at the inside of the country, our analysis does not render too dissimilar a set of conclusions. Between years 2015-2017 (the latter year marking the finalization of this draft), we have seen a significant democratic rollback: systematic repression and human rights abuse, the dismantling of freedoms and liberties, attack on the free press and civil society. The economic and humanitarian situation is dire. As the country implodes, the government chooses to repress grievances rather than to open up inclusive dialogue and search for a political solution. This directly contributes to escalation of the conflict as sections of the opposing forces might consider military solutions as the only viable ones. We have seen precisely these dynamics unfold in real time, first with an unsuccessful military coup, increasingly violent protests, and formation of militant groups abroad.⁵² The discourse of tipping points and a precipice also largely missed what were more gradual but steady and hard-to-reverse escalations. Overall then, what is at stake with genocide labeling is not simply misrepresentation, but missed representation— the focus on genocide prevents another, more appropriate frame from being applied and driving action.

The logic of violence in the crisis has itself evolved, with genocide labeling playing its own part. After an acute phase of protest and repression in the streets, the government has managed to crush domestic public enough to assure a level of submission. The government calls this “peace” and “stability” when what we witness is a cementing of a new status quo based on effective intimidation and repression that has now moved offstage to detention, policing, intimidation and selective assassination. Though evidence for genocidal violence was not present at any point during the crisis, the intense alarm sounding and salience of genocide has certainly assured that the government would not try any of the sort. Again, labeling produces endogeneity effects – it is not an “independent” variable in the crisis. This effect and government’s carefulness should not be read as a form of “paradoxical success,” however. The type of violence that might actually come about and that the genocidal framing overlooks might be as deadly, if not more widespread.

Why has a misfitting frame been so vigorously embraced? One reason is certainly the weight carried by the G word and hoped-for ability to garner action. But this is not the full story; the nature of analysis is key as well. The anatomy of the Burundi crisis portrayal reveals the distinct logics of analysis-through-analogy, mirroring, and correlation. One could attribute this solely to the ease with which an untrained eye sees parallels in a region whose past has seen a number of genocides unfold. But there is also the broader issue of enduring and reductive metanarratives on Africa’s conflict and identity, their nexus, and their unchanging character. Finally, and importantly, prevention diagnostics can themselves mislead. Early warning is based on identifying a set of indicators that typically precede genocide, working essentially on a correlative basis rather than an in-depth study of causalities.

Verdejo reviewed multiple frameworks and compiled a rather exhaustive list of the indicators that feature on them.⁵³ The list approach does not give guides as to causal combinatorics, it does not identify what aspects are essential, in what combinations and under what conditions. It might also inflate threat because a number of indicators might have divergent possible outcomes or causes (i.e., repression or transfer of weapons to security forces). But most importantly, a lot of the indicators, when assessed closely, simply do not apply to Burundi. They all revolve around the notion of targeting of a specific group, and the stepping up of that targeting such as rallies against the group; stripping of rights and citizenship, hate rhetoric, or physical segregation. The genocide frame implies that such targeting of Tutsi in Burundi exists, but the targeting that does exist is of opposition, of which Tutsi are a part, rather than of the group per se. It does not revolve around denaturalization and dehumanization in its varied forms, rather around repression and its tactics. If we were to follow the mirroring/parallels frame, we would also see key ingredients missing that were present in the three regional genocides—a context of an armed insurgency or violent coup (both in Rwanda 1994 and Burundi 1972 and 1993) and the killing of political leaders (in Rwanda 1994 and Burundi 1993).

⁵² Two armed opposition forces have already emerged: Republican Forces of Burundi (FOREBU) and Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi (RED Tabara).

⁵³ Ernesto Verdeja, “Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016), 13-32.

To conclude, if the genocide frame is limiting, could the recently popularized “mass atrocity” frame be more fitting? It is David Scheffer who has called for the introduction of the new term “atrocity crimes” and a new field of international law (“atrocity law”) to describe serious human rights abuses including genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in “a single term that is easily understood by the public.”⁵⁴ The attempt is then usefully to move beyond the narrow frame of genocide and call attention to a range of serious crimes without elevating one as the ultimate violation. Hence the new phrase “mass atrocity prevention.” The Burundi context certainly fits better with the rubric of crimes against humanity as we have witnessed torture in detention, disappearances and widespread persecution. But there are two important caveats. As a call to action, persecution and even torture remain weak grounds, as evidenced in case after case of such “peace crimes.” In fact, here it is much more effective to argue for the risk of civil war and insurgency, as these bear a high risk of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and in fact heighten the risk of genocide being committed.⁵⁵ Connected to this, while mass atrocity better captures the nature of crimes perpetrated by the Burundian government, it does not get to the core of what drives conflict escalation in the country, and hence what can drive increased incidence of mass atrocity. It is largely a descriptive tool rather than a predictive one.

If “missed representation” is perhaps the most important impact of the genocide framing, others cannot be neglected, including the argument that attempts at genocide-prevention-driven interventionism have radicalized the Burundi’s government’s stance towards international and regional cooperation. Though regional and international bodies allow intervention into third states against their will on R2P grounds (if genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes occur), in Burundi such intervention force has failed to materialize.

In December 2015, at the heels of a mass government crackdown in response to attack on army bases and a surge in the genocide rhetoric and framing, the AU announced that it would create a 5,000-troop strong force (MAPROBU) to protect civilians in Burundi. Almost immediately, the government threatened that any unauthorized force would be engaged militarily. The AU force would be considered, the government stated, “an attack on the country and every Burundian will stand up and fight against them.”⁵⁶ The very aim of the genocide framing then—decisive action—was thwarted. Not only did AU fail to send in a peacekeeping force, the UN failed to send in an unarmed police force of 228 in July 2016.

But the story is not simply one of failed intervention. It is also a story of how radical accusation (of the ultimate crime) and threats of intervention interacted with the government’s willingness to cooperate at all. The government has closed in on itself. There has been a visible effect over time. Two years of close scrutiny and high-level pronouncements on genocide signals, pointing of fingers to hate speech, accusations of ethnic profiling and incitements to ethnic violence have been matched by extreme measures from the side of the government in the form of ever-greater isolationism buttressed by time-proven arguments of sovereignty. The threats emboldened the regime to resort to sovereignty as an effective last resort to shore up impunity, and merely contributed to decreased visibility of violence and repression, which have now moved offstage.

The rejection of international monitors, a civilian protection force and police observers has been extended to investigative missions as well. “Angered by the scrutiny, the Nkurunziza government on October 11, 2016, stopped cooperating with UN agencies, including the UN Human Rights Council and the International Commission of Inquiry on Burundi.”⁵⁷ This quote is one demonstration of the fact that the counterargument “the government would have behaved the same regardless of international attention” does not hold. Surely, it has taken a radical stance of no-deals with the opposition (branded as subversives, even terrorists) early on in the crisis and has

⁵⁴ Scheffer, *Genocide and Atrocity Crimes*, abstract.

⁵⁵ See, Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations*, 11, 17-88.

⁵⁶ “Burundi crisis: Pierre Nkurunziza Threatens to Fight AU Peacekeepers,” *BBC*, December 30, 2015, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35198897>.

⁵⁷ “Dismantling the Arusha Accords as the Burundi Crisis Rages On,” *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies*, March 13, 2017, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://africacenter.org/spotlight/dismantling-the-arusha-accords-as-the-burundi-crisis-rages-on/>.

hardly budged since. But dramatic foreign coverage spilling into local crossfire did play its part in a broader pattern of 'closing off,' even if this cannot be quantified.

The government works the international accent on "genocide" into a broader international conspiracy to undermine the current government. In an informal discussion with a Burundian civil servant in the summer of 2017, the paranoia of the government was palpable and a major change from the past. Aside from new scrutiny and even intimidation of researchers (and application of the friend/enemy labels on them in line with the broader political sphere), it became clear through the discussion that the international society inclusive of diplomats, NGOs and academics is seen with suspicion for its potential role in subversion and "covert operations" with the aim to undermine the government. The government was demonstrating siege mentality.

The increased isolationism and rejection of outside scrutiny has had the opposite effect to what effective prevention requires, accurate and timely access to vital information. Perhaps paradoxically, the threats of intervention have also eroded regional and international community's leverage in creating the grounds for a workable political dialogue. Genocide is a strong indictment, and accordingly, such sharp accusations have tended to radicalize the government's own stance. The case of Burundi teaches us that genocide framing, when turned into a powerful accusation married to empty threats, is not simply ineffective but can be counterproductive to the de-escalation and resolution of the crisis.

Last but not least, we need to return to temporal dynamics once again and consider the proposition that protracted sounding of alarm devalues the G word as currency in prevention. If the genocide label is seen as a representational resource, then the case of Burundi opens important questions about its changing value over time, and the possible impacts of this. The case is unique as we can observe the genocide label being "spent" intensely for over two years, with the result of increased attention but failed intervention. In the case of Darfur, Miles has argued that "avoidance of the signifying label of 'genocide' in the media leads to a downgrading of attention to, and salience of Darfur among the public at large, their elected representatives, and policy makers."⁵⁸ But could the reverse—protracted embrace instead of avoidance—equally downgrade attention and the broader traction of the label? Since the price of a "false negative" is so high, denying or withdrawing the label is risky and thus unlikely. But only a more systematic and longer-term study can provide satisfactory insights and validation.

Conclusion

The recent Burundi crisis has offered us a unique laboratory to observe and better understand the changing political economy of preventative labeling, and the effects that ensue when the genocide label is embraced actively in attempts to avert escalation of a conflict in a region "known" and "branded" by its past of genocide. But dominant frames and "lessons of the past" do not always bode well for prevention, even if these frames carry much weight in terms of alarm. The reading of genocide into the Burundi crisis, as shown in the paper, has mischaracterized both the causatives and the descriptives of the unfolding conflict, as well as the nature of actual and likely escalation. More broadly, the labeling demonstrates the continued traction of certain problematic characterizations of African conflict as ethnic at its core, and as unchanging over time. The Burundi case carefully challenges these enduring conceptions and suggests that prevention must be anchored in a closer reading of conflict and its transformation over time, embracing historicity, change and complexity and discarding easy analogies and parallels.

Preventive analysis and action must also pay careful attention to its own imbrication in the dynamics on the ground from which it is far from isolated. Political actors, the opposition, civil society and sections of the population in Burundi have been attuned to the salience of genocide as a label and have used it to further their own positions and interests. But the alarmism caused by the framing has equally the potential to raise anxiety and evoke the traumas of a violent past. By speaking of and repeatedly highlighting "signals" of imminent genocide, it can also certainly serve to harden precisely those cleavages that it wants to prevent. Preventative action needs to take into account such unintended effects.

⁵⁸ Miles, *Labeling Genocide in Sudan*, 260.

But as shown, the effects of labeling Burundi crisis as genocide are wider reaching yet. The portrayal wasn't accurate and wasn't productive of preventive action, but more than this— it has proven counter-productive. The mislabeling of the crisis as genocide has contributed to the political standoff. First, the genocide frame and campaigning has over time seen (not necessarily caused) decreased visibility of violence and repression in Burundi, which has now moved offstage and been more systematized. This is not an uncommon pattern as open violence is costly in multiple ways, including political, and economic. The relative “quiet” on the streets merely demonstrates that repressive control has been successfully exercised. Rather than diffusing grievances, a solidifying status quo might sharpen them. The mass atrocity campaign misses these dynamics wholly as it is continually on the search for “signs” of impending mass atrocity, and specifically genocide. Connected to this then, the genocide labeling has diverted initiative from a civil war focus as a more pressing threat in terms of escalation.

Second, accusations of genocide have contributed to a broader trend whereby the government feels besieged by foreign and domestic parties intent to subvert it and responds with closing off and turning away from cooperation and disposition to engage international pressure. The verve with which the international community in particular applies what the government sees as an exaggerated and misfitting label merely confirms its suspicion of a “grand subversion.” In this manner, the labeling plays its part in the increased retreat of the government from meaningful dialogue and its intent to entrench the status quo. Reversal in this attitude might come soon; but rather than being a function of genocide campaigning, it is primarily a function of the dire economic situation and the regime's vulnerability vis-à-vis foreign aid and funds.

Last but not least, protracted alarm sounding devalues not only the G-word as currency but, arguably, strategic labeling as a preventative device in general. Over time, “demonstration effects” bear their fruit as actors on the ground learn that even intense campaigning is followed by inaction, repeatedly. The effects of long-term labeling are thus an interesting new chapter in the study of the political economy of preventative frames and genocide more specifically, and a promising area of future research. More generally, further research is certainly needed to understand preventative (as opposed to post-facto) genocide labeling. Nonetheless what is clear already is that all actors in the enterprise need to think more carefully about their strategies and the full gamut of their impacts. The sense of uncertainty in an unfolding crisis is real, but a quick deployment of powerful frames might not prove useful in bringing the crisis to a quicker and less violent close, as Burundi shows.

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