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





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Objective of the study

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

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

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

Timeline (medium-term)

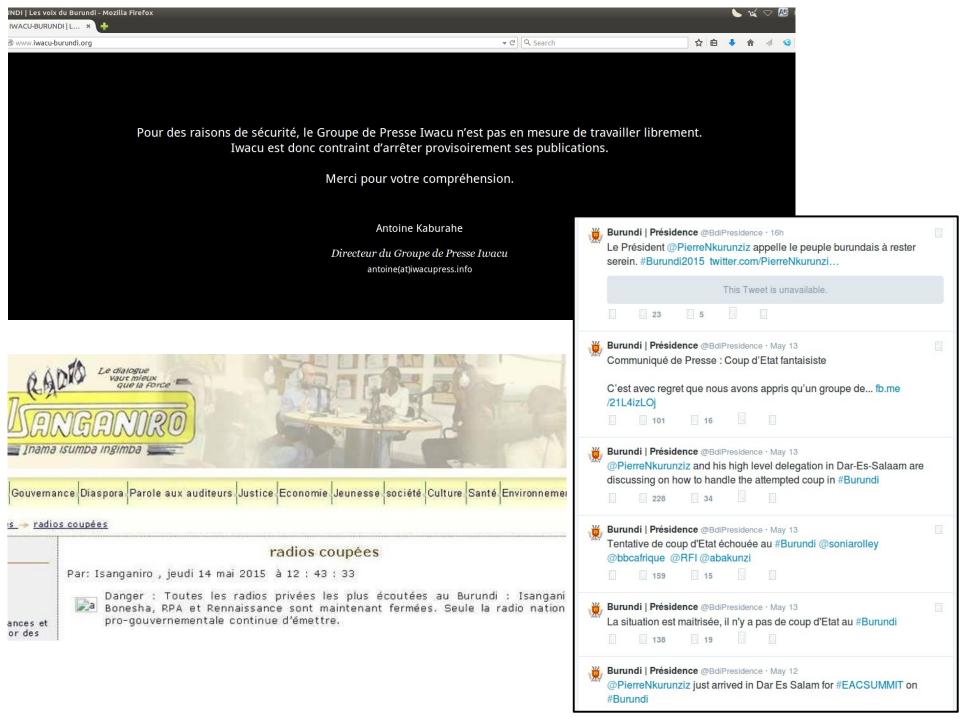
June 2014	Pres. Nkurunziza hints he might seek third term
26 April 2015	Nkurunziza announced as ruling CNDD-FDD candidate
	Mass demonstration begin in protest
5 May 2015	Constitutional court rules in favour of third term
6 May 2015	Possibility of coup raised by opposition
13 May 2015	Coup attempt (while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

The media situation before the coup

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

Timeline (short-term: media perspective)

13 May 2015	Coup d'etat
09:00	Coup rumoured
11:00	Key private radio representatives called to Musaka military camp, briefed by Niyombare on coup plot, asked to report
14:30	Coup plotters arrive in city, reopen RPA, announce on radio
	Jubilation on streets, but loyalist military fights back. Battle for the national broadcaster
18:00	Situation unclear, but coup appears to be faltering
14 May 2015	Fighting continues between coup plotters and loyalists
11:30	All private radio off air (all stations destroyed)
12:30-14:30	State broadcaster (RTNB) under attack and off-air
Day's end	Coup fails (failure official on morning of 15 May)



What should we expect of the media?

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

Theories and realities

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

Perspectives of the independent media (Interviews with 11 exiled Burundian media personnel (Sep 2015) in Rwanda)

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

Perspectives of the independent media

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

Conclusions: Making difficult choices

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