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# Burundi and COVID-19: Africa's representation in the international media

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## Abstract

The East African nation of Burundi has been on a knife-edge since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Political tensions – which have always loomed large in the divided country – deepened in the lead-up to the May 2020 elections. Concern grew about a rise in COVID-19 infections as scores of people turned up at rallies and public gatherings ahead of the polls. The World Health Organization (WHO) advised the government to implement preventive measures, including a lockdown and social distancing. This went unheeded. Instead, there was initial denialism about COVID-19 from the highest

levels of government. Burundians were encouraged to go on with life and economic activities as normal. To make matters worse, the government expelled WHO officials from the country just a few days before the election. Healthcare workers feared that the infection was much higher than what was being reported. The international media's response to these developments in Burundi was swift and critical. Broadly speaking, two issues became apparent: Firstly, the government of Burundi was prioritising politics over the lives of its people. Secondly, long-held assumptions about poor governance and mismanagement in Africa were further entrenched through coverage of Burundi's inadequate response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This essay therefore discusses the country's initial handling of COVID-19 as an example of why Africa's image in the international media is predominantly negative.

## Introduction

The Burundian government had tough choices to make during the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the pandemic, authorities went ahead with a controversial election, facing international condemnation for disregarding the risk of an outbreak. Unwilling to allow the pandemic to interfere with the political process, then President Pierre Nkurunziza seemed to ignore the health crisis, focusing instead on the election (Allison 2020). Political rallies attracted thousands of supporters ahead of the May 2020 polls, even though mass gatherings had been banned in other countries. This fuelled concerns that the full extent of the outbreak was unknown. The president urged citizens to continue as normal, ascribing the country's ostensibly low infection rate to divine protection. He was quoted as saying, 'Do not be afraid. God loves Burundi and if there are people who have tested positive, it is so that God may manifest His power in Burundi' (*The Guardian* 2020).

Concern over Burundi's response to the virus grew when the government expelled the WHO representatives days before the poll. No reasons were given for the expulsion, but apparently there were similar attempts to expel the same officials a month earlier, amid accusations of unacceptable interference in the country's management of COVID-19 (*The Guardian* 2020). Burundi's initial passive approach to the pandemic was quickly mirrored in neighbouring Tanzania and other African countries also planning to hold elections. In Benin, for example, local council elections were held despite warnings of the risks. A similar situation unfolded in Guinea. In Côte d'Ivoire, authorities were also planning to hold elections later in 2020, in spite of a rising number of infections.

Across Africa, politics has interfered in countries' response to the pandemic. This has reinforced long-held narratives on the continent's being ridden with disease, poverty, corruption, poor governance and conflict. For Bunce et al (2008), who tells Africa's story matters and has always been a matter of contestation. 'Research from the 1970s through to the 1990s demonstrated that international representations of Africa were narrow, laden with stereotypes, and highly dependent on Cold War frames and portrayals of an impoverished, often savage, "other"' (Bunce et al 2008, p. 20). By the same token, Wainaina's (2005) description of the problematic language and images that authors and reporters use

in portraying Africa in the global North clearly strikes a chord. During this pandemic, for instance, we have seen how Burundi was initially held up as a micro-reflection of everything that is wrong with the continent. This essay looks at the reasons for Burundi being an exemplar of Africa's image problem in the international media.

## Theoretical perspective

There has been extensive global media coverage of Burundi throughout the pandemic. Not only has the international media set the agenda for the global discourse on Burundi, but it has also influenced key national decisions. In the current era, national and international policy formulations are increasingly affected by the media's influence. On the African continent, the case of Burundi is worth noting. It brings to the fore the theoretical framework of media representation and its resultant effects on a country's reputation and image.

In the field of communication and media studies, the term 'representation' contains a wealth of nuances and complexities (Fourie 2008, p. 198). As Summers (1996) puts it, 'representation is often explained as a performance of resemblance (as an act of image-making) or even imitation' (Summers 1996, p. 3). From this perspective, representation can mean the existence of or presentation of an idea or situation that mimics reality. However, from a cultural studies perspective, Hall (1997) points out that considerable attention has been paid to the centrality of representation:

*The word has a kind of double meaning, even in its common-sense understanding. It does mean 'to present', 'to image', 'to depict' – to offer a depiction of something else. And the word representation or representation does ... carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been represented. So the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which stands in for something else, both of those ideas are ... brought together in the notion of representation.*

Even without referencing data, one can posit that a sizeable amount of information on the COVID-19 pandemic in Burundi has been flowing from the international media. In the initial stages of the pandemic, it was almost a generally accepted narrative that the country was not serious about tackling the crisis. At a time when most world leaders were turning to the WHO for advice on how to respond, Burundian authorities were expelling its officials from the country. It was not surprising, therefore, to find headlines such as 'Burundi's president put politics before the pandemic' (Allison 2020) in the international media. Given the poor state of media freedom in Burundi and attempts by government to control the narrative on political and health crises – the country ranks 158<sup>th</sup> of out 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index Report (Reporters without Borders 2020) – local media coverage of COVID-19 was constrained. The international media was the only source of information at the time that was not suppressed by the Burundian government. These international reports were mostly framed along the lines of a lack of political willingness to adequately address

the health crisis in the country. This type of representation has had a negative impact on the country's image and reputation, and it remains to be seen how the current leadership of Burundi will rewrite this script.

## Politics in a pandemic

While the continent may have been the last region to be affected by COVID-19, the WHO has warned that the effects – and spread – of the virus will linger (Golubski 2020). Although resources are scarce, most African leaders have taken difficult, proactive decisions to contain COVID-19 (Allison 2020). However, not all leaders have been praiseworthy. The WHO has been particularly concerned about Burundi and Tanzania. Both countries refused to place major cities under any form of lockdown. Burundi's mostly passive approach to the pandemic can only be explained in the government's decision to hold elections. The WHO was concerned about public safety and people's lives, while the authorities focused on their attempt to consolidate power. The global media views the WHO as a more reliable source of information than governments. At one stage, the organisation expressed concerns that Tanzania and Burundi were taking an unscientific approach to fighting the pandemic and the next day, this opinion was reflected in headlines across the globe. The rights-based group Human Rights Watch was quoted as saying 'Burundi's government is failing to communicate fact-based information on the Covid-19 pandemic and preventing doctors and nurses from responding adequately' (Human Rights Watch 2020). The group feared that the government's response was fuelling rumours about the spread of the pandemic. Additionally, doctors and health experts in neighbouring Tanzania also expressed similar concerns about the 'tepid response to COVID-19 and seeming lack of transparency over coronavirus cases in the East African country' (Houttuin 2020).

Strangely, on the evening of 9 June 2020, Nkurunziza was pronounced dead after a short illness. The government said he had suffered a heart attack, but opposition sources claimed that he had died of COVID-19 amid suspicions that he had contracted it from his wife. If this is true, Nkurunziza may have been the first world leader to have died of COVID-19 (Blomfield 2020). This was a significant moment in the country's fight against the pandemic. The newly elected President Evariste Ndayishimiye declared coronavirus the country's 'biggest enemy' and committed to strict adherence to preventative measures, more testing centres and government subsidies on soap to encourage better hygiene (eNCA 2020). Yet an air of pessimism persisted in the international media's coverage of the country's reaction to the crisis. Thus, headlines like 'Death of Burundian president may not bring change' (Anyadike 2020) continued.

Many believed the country was experiencing the darkest moment in its history (Bizimane and Kane 2020). Even before COVID-19, Burundi's image was a subject of debate in the international media. In 2015 Nkurunziza ran for a third term in office; a move the opposition described as unconstitutional. He won at the polls, which opposition parties boycotted, and the country descended into chaos amid protests that left scores of people dead.

At the same time, press freedom continued to deteriorate (Bizimane and Kane 2020). Journalists are repeatedly harassed and have to work in an atmosphere of tension and repression (Bizimane and Kane 2020). The same media suppression has crept into coverage of the pandemic, making it difficult for local media to be critical of or indeed challenge authorities. In contrast, the opposite has been the case with international media. One can thus argue that the country's image has been dented by its portrayal in the international media. When the WHO raised concerns in April about the threat the virus posed to fragile healthcare systems in Africa, headlines like "A ticking time bomb": Scientists worry about coronavirus spread in Africa' (Nordling 2020) were rife in the international media. Initially, in the face of evidence of a seeming lack of political will to deal with the health crisis, it was difficult to disagree with international pessimism about the continent's ability to deal with the virus. At the same time, the United States (US) has seen its fair share of challenges during this pandemic. Badly hit by COVID-19, the US also had to deal with some of the worst civil protests in its history, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement. If one were to swap contexts and imagine the US situation playing out in Africa, would the international media's response have been different?

## Conclusion

What we have seen in Burundi goes beyond international media representation of African countries. The media is expected to monitor and keep the public informed about developments in political circles. However, with press freedom in Burundi badly constrained, the international media prevented the government from covering up what was happening in the country in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet this came at a high cost as Burundians, at home and abroad, now had to turn to the international media for credible news concerning their country. In neighbouring Tanzania, for example, headlines like 'My Tanzanian family is split over coronavirus' (BBC 2020), showed how ordinary Tanzanians were affected at the outset of the pandemic. It must be said, however, that despite arguments highlighting Burundi as a micro reflection of everything going wrong on the African continent during this crisis, this view cannot be construed to be entirely negative. Despite hopes of an 'Africa Rising' narrative, influenced by a rejuvenation in economic and technological prospects, the continent remains inundated with a fair share of trials and tribulations, disasters, health crisis and other governance challenges. But, the assumption that this state of affairs is the end to Africa's story is ill-informed and ultimately naïve.

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## About the author

Abdul Samba Brima is a Sierra Leonean journalist with background in media training, broadcasting and documentary production of over 10 years. He has worked successfully in different roles for multicultural and multidisciplinary organisations in South Africa, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. He is currently a media fellow with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS Media Africa), studying Masters in Journalism and Media Studies at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. He graduated in 2010 from Fourah Bay College – University of Sierra Leone with a first-class Bachelor’s degree in Mass Communication and currently works in the field of communication for development.

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## African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19

This essay forms part of the *African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19* series. It is an output from a 2020 master's course in international communication at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), where discussions revolved around the coverage of the African dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic by international and African media. After the completion of the course, students submitted assignments in the form of essays, choosing one African country and its media or any international media outlet as the focus of analysis. The students made presentations on their essays in a workshop program and received feedback from a group of 10 African journalism and media scholars under the auspices of the [African Media Salon](#). These essays, therefore, constitute an early contribution of knowledge on the intersection of media and international communication, drawing on concepts such as public diplomacy, soft power and the international political economy of communication.

The series is a partnership of Wits University's Journalism Department, the [African Centre for the Study of the United States \(ACSUS\)](#) and the [Africa Portal](#), a project of the [South African Institute of International Affairs \(SAIIA\)](#).



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Photo credit: Burundi's then incumbent president Pierre Nkurunziza (R) and Evariste Ndayishimiye, then presidential candidate of the ruling party the National Council for the Defense of Democracy - Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), attend a rally on the last day of their campaign in Bujumbura on 16 May 2020 (AFP via Getty Images)

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