

# Tribalism Sidetracks Africa's Hopeful March To Democracy.

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By Sam Kiley, Africa Correspondent, in Bujumbura.

HOPES for progress towards democracy in much of Africa lie shattered in the dust of the Burundian capital and in the terrifying statistics reinforcing the importance of tribalism.

When Melchior Ndadaye, three months after being elected President, was dragged from his palace by disgruntled soldiers and murdered, along with five other members of his government, dreams of democracy in Burundi turned into a nightmare of murder, rape and destruction.

The killings sparked another round in Burundi's tribal war between Hutus, the President's ethnic group, and Tutsis, who dominate the army. In seven weeks 800,000 Burundi have fled the country, and another 208,000, their farms looted and burnt, are living in squalid refugee camps within Burundi's borders. Burundi faces the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Gulf War, UN officials said. Launching an appeal for funds, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said 112 people were dying every day in crowded camps in Rwanda. Last night the State Department announced in Washington that America would resume aid to Burundi, suspended after the coup attempt.

The failure of the democratic experiment in Burundi has been accompanied in the past three months by the postponement of elections in Togo, farcical polls in Equatorial Guinea, a military coup in Nigeria, the refusal of the "conservative alliance" to take part in South Africa's elections and ethnic clashes in Kenya.

Amid these disasters and many more over the past year, including a resurgence of civil war in Angola after stalled elections 15 months ago, there seems to be little hope that democracy will take root on the continent. Yet there appears to be no lack of enthusiasm among ordinary Africans for elections. Turnouts at polls have averaged 70%, often topping 90%. Angolans walked for days to mark their ballot papers.

So why is democracy not working in Africa? Many politicians, notably President Moi of Kenya, have insisted that political pluralism (as opposed to the one-party state) has done nothing for Africa but undermine central government and boost ethnic conflict.

Kenneth Ingham, emeritus professor of history at Bristol University and author of *Politics in Africa: the Uneven Tribal Dimension*, rejects federalism as the key to a Pandora's box

which, if opened, would lead to endless ethnic strife.

“It is clear Africans do understand democracy and have always practised it at a local level. Local government with real power backed by a strong central administration might accommodate the natural desires of people to have a say over their destiny.”

A more powerful theme is emerging : the failure of Africa’s leaders to put state interests of the state above

those of their ethnic constituents and their own desire for power, as well as their inability to see democracy as consultative rather than combative.

Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the United Nations special envoy sent to Burundi two weeks ago, said : “What is lacking is education ; that democracy is not only voting, but also being tolerant of others.” He blames Africa’s educated urban elite for deliberately fomenting tribal hatred.