

Opposition candidate takes unexpected lead in presidential poll

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AFP, June 2, 1993

BUJUMBURA, June 2 (AFP) - Opposition candidate Melchior Ndadaye emerged Wednesday as front-runner on partial returns from the first multi-party presidential election in Burundi, ahead of the incumbent president Pierre Buyoya.

Ndadaye, 40, the leader of the Burundi Democracy Front and a member of the Hutu majority in a country traditionally ruled by the Tutsis, had almost 60 percent of the votes in returns corresponding to 70 percent of the polling stations.

Major Buyoya, the latest military leader of the central African highland nation sporadically wracked by ethnic clashes, had been widely tipped by political observers to win outright in Tuesday's first round of the election.

Ndadaye had campaigned on the need for change in Burundi, which has been marked by a series of military coups and a succession of massacres among the Hutu majority and

the traditionally ruling Tutsi elite.

Ethnic considerations must have worked against Buyoya, analysts said, adding that the ruling Unity for National Progress party may have been too complacent in its campaign, focussed on provincial and local administration.

In 1972, Ndadaye had been forced to flee to neighbouring Rwanda following a massacre of some 200,000 Hutus after an uprising in tiny Burundi.

After a spell as advisor to the rural development ministry in 1989, Ndadaye began working for the Meridian BIAO bank, where he is still in charge of a credit facility service.

Also in the race was outsider Pierre-Claver Sendegeya, who is backed by the monarchist People's Reconciliation Party.

The final results are to be released on Thursday.

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