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Alain* is a provincial leader of a youth group affiliated with a large political party in Burundi. He has been an active member of the party for 11 years. Through his involvement, he hopes to climb the political ladder and his dream is to one day be elected to a government institution.

For Alain, a major influence for going into politics was his family background, namely his father's membership of political parties before and after Burundi's transition to a multiparty democracy. But Alain recognizes that his involvement in politics is also, in some ways a practical decision and a response to his country's economic reality. He explains that "Given current employment levels in my country, I realized that if you're lucky and your party wins the elections, being in politics is a sure way to stay in work."

* Names have been changed for privacy reasons

OUR WORK IN BURUNDI

FROM DISTRUST TO RESPECT SOCIAL MEDIA AND LEADERSHIP IN BURUNDI

Young people in Burundian politics

After more than a decade of civil war, Burundi has been on a fitful path towards peace and democracy since the signing of the Peace Accords in 2000. Relations between political parties in Burundi have been tense since the contested decision of the current President Pierre Nkurunziza to seek a third term in the 2015 elections

Since the large-scale protests following the contested elections, politics has been highly polarized and political violence has continued.

Among the worst hit by this violence, are people like Alain: young people affiliated with political parties. On both sides of the political divide, young men and women have become involved in violent politics. Today, there's little trust between parties. As a result, intraparty political meetings are often disrupted and the youth wings rarely engage in constructive political debate with one another.

In 2017, NIMD and our partner the Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP) initiated a training project called Initiative and Leadership in Africa. As part of this project, we train young political party members on the theme of "Leadership and Politics".



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Breaking down preconceptions through dialogue

Alain was one of the young people selected by their party to take part in the “Leadership and Politics” training. Like all his colleagues, he began the training in a fearful atmosphere. He recalls his concerns that the members of his political party would be dominated, since there were fewer of them than usual here. And he noticed that young leaders from some parties were afraid to speak out, intimidated by the presence of representatives from other parties.

But slowly the barriers came down, as it became apparent to the young people that the other participants were not a threat. For the first time, they started to engage in dialogue and find common ground.

Alain reflects: *“the training ended in a friendly atmosphere. It was an experience for me, as it was for all the young leaders, to sit down together, discover each other and talk about political issues we were not used to discussing: leadership and politics.”*

Harnessing the power of social media

The bonds created through the training made it easy for the participants to follow-up on what they had learned. They decided to come together to create a WhatsApp group to share information and keep each other informed about political events as they happen.

Recently, for example, the group circulated the news that the recruitment of national pollsters on the referendum had targeted only members of a single party in many provinces. The youth agreed to write a letter to the survey organizers requesting that this work be granted to those with the relevant skills, regardless of political affiliation.

As a director and active moderator of the WhatsApp group, Alain is proud of this work *“Thanks to this group, we have a link that brings us together and a channel through which we learn about developments in politics. But it also allows us to give our point of view on national and provincial political events after having discussed it with the group. This type of exercise has opened my eyes and I am more aware of the behaviour that I must adopt as a future political leader.”*

Solving conflict

Alain is also proud of the group’s new-found ability to resolve conflict. He remembers a dispute he had with a youth leader from another party before the training. At the time, Alain’s party would stop this party from holding youth meetings, based on the fact that they could not be sure what they would discuss.

Today, they have reconciled. Their new trust, and understanding of what the other party has been doing, means that they can give each other more space to work.

Based on this new trusting atmosphere, the youth also decided to use the WhatsApp group to mediate conflicts quickly and peacefully. As Alain explains: *“Now, if someone does something wrong, all the members are informed and a solution is quickly found. If the case is beyond our competence, we inform the authorities.”*

Respecting the opposition

Reflecting on what he has learned since taking part in the training, Alain feels the most important lesson has been how to act as a democratic leader:

“Among other things, I learned to consider “the other” not as an enemy but as a political opponent. The training not only allowed me to build relationships with young people from other parties; through the gradual construction of mutual trust it also allowed me to create friendships and work with them build our country together.”

It’s a lesson that Alain is eager to share with his colleagues in his party. Little by little, he tries to show them that they owe respect to their opposition. *“Now I feel strengthened and I still want to learn politics. I am convinced that together we can overcome the problems that undermine Burundian political society.”*



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