Fox in the Henhouse

Burundi's Conflicted African Union Presidency

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On 14 February 2026, the African Union (AU) passed its rotating presidency to Burundi for one year. The timing could hardly be more delicate. In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), violence continues to escalate, and Burundi is not a distant observer but a directly involved actor. The country that has just assumed the chair of the Union is itself entangled in the very crisis that demands continental attention.

The presidency carries political weight. The AU Chairperson speaks on behalf of the Union and shapes its diplomatic priorities. Yet in this case, the role fuses two positions that rarely sit comfortably together: regional representative and interested party. Burundi will be expected to advance peace and security in the Great Lakes region while safeguarding its own strategic and military interests.

Because the AU's legal framework neither anticipates nor regulates situations in which the Chairperson's state is a party to the conflict under discussion, the overlap is not merely political but embedded in the Union's institutional design. Burundi's presidency will therefore begin with a built-in credibility gap. Instead of resetting regional dynamics, it is likely to reinforce national security priorities under the banner of continental leadership.

The powers of the chair

The weight of Burundi's recently assumed presidency follows from the institutional design of the African Union itself. Since 2002, the AU has replaced the Organisation of African Unity as the continent's central political forum. Its Constitutive Act (CA) sets out an ambitious mandate: the Union shall "promote peace, security, and stability" across Africa (article 3(f) of the CA). With 55 member states, the AU rests on a dense institutional structure, but authority ultimately concentrates in one body, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government.

The Assembly of Heads of State and Government anchors the Union's authority. From within this circle of presidents and prime ministers, it selects one of its own to chair the AU for a year. In practice, the position carries considerable influence. The Chairperson represents the Union externally, guides its diplomatic tone and plays a central role in its response to conflicts. In moments of crisis, the presiding head of state works alongside the Chairperson of the AU Commission to guide the Executive Council and steer the Union's approach to war and peace while the Peace and Security Council of the Union acts as a "standing decision-making organ for prevention, management and resolution of conflicts". The role combines visibility with influence. Whoever holds it can shape not only the Union's language but also its political direction.

In practice, however, it has been argued that the significance of the Chairperson's duties depends on the level of commitment of the incumbent to the function. Therefore, the incumbent's personality dictates their ability to carry out the functions stipulated in the texts and to shape their performance as a Chairperson. The position, the argument goes on, wields more influence where the Chairperson is the president of a rich country (Kaddafi of Libya and Obasanjo of Nigeria serving as examples). This implies, first, that each AU presidency varies according to the individual head of state or government occupying the position. Second, the AU chairperson's personality is supplemented by their country's wealth. Put together, the two factors determine the real influence of the AU Chairperson.

Since the early 2000s, the Union has followed a strict principle of regional rotation among Central,

Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern Africa. In 2017, the Assembly reinforced continuity through a "troika" system that links the outgoing, current and incoming Chairpersons. The next Chair is elected one year in advance and works closely with the incumbent. Within this framework, the President of Burundi, H.E Evariste Ndayishimiye, served as First Vice-President of the AU and assumed the Chair on 14 February 2026 for a period of one year.

The institutional design – shaped in practice by the incumbent – thus equips the Chair with visibility, authority, and leverage in precisely those areas – conflict management and regional stability – that now dominate the Great Lakes' agenda. It also ensures that the state holding the office can shape the Union's diplomatic tone at the decisive moment.

Regional rivalries and mutual accusations

The Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has long stood at the centre of overlapping regional conflicts. Since the 1990s in particular, armed groups, neighbouring states and shifting alliances have turned the mineral-rich region into a persistent theatre of violence, with civilians bearing the brunt.

Regional rivalries shape the conflict as much as internal fragmentation. The government of the DRC accuses Rwanda of backing the March 23 Movement (M23), a predominantly Tutsi rebel group that broke away from the Congolese army in 2012. At the time, M23 justified its rebellion by pointing to the failed implementation of a 2009 peace agreement that had promised the integration of its predecessor movement into the national armed forces. A 2024 United Nations (UN) report concluded that the armed group had received "training, material, intelligence, and operational support from the Rwanda Defence Forces". Rwanda denies this and, in turn, accuses the DRC of tolerating and assisting the Rwanda Democratic Liberation Forces (FDLR), a militia rooted in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide.

On 4 December 2025, the two neighbours signed a peace agreement under the aegis of the United States of America, in the presence of AU representatives, with Burundi participating as an observer. Yet events on the ground soon overtook diplomatic progress.

The recent capture by M23 of major cities in eastern DRC bordering Burundi and Rwanda has triggered a massive exodus of Congolese refugees and asylum seekers into Burundi, precipitating a severe humanitarian crisis. In response, the Government of Burundi closed its border with the DRC, invoking national security concerns.

Deteriorating Burundi-Rwanda relations

Parallel to the situation in the eastern DRC, relations between Burundi and Rwanda have deteriorated. Burundi accuses Rwanda of harbouring and sponsoring RED-Tabara rebels, who have been fighting the Burundian government since 2015. On 11 January 2024, Burundi closed its borders with Rwanda, again invoking national security concerns.

The Government of Rwanda denies any connection to the rebel group and called the decision "unfortunate" and "unilateral". It has also previously criticised the Burundian President, acting as the Union advocate for youth engagement in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and security across the continent (AU Champion for Youth, Peace and Security), for allegedly using that platform in ways that "jeopardise peace and security in the Great Lakes Region". More recently, Rwanda accused Burundi and the DRC of violating the ceasefire under the Washington agreement.

Burundi as an involved actor

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to portray Burundi as a neutral bystander. The country is directly implicated in the security dynamics in the so-called Great Lakes Region. In March 2023, Burundi signed a military cooperation agreement with the DRC. According to estimates by the Sweden-based African Security Analysis, approximately 10,000 Burundian soldiers are currently deployed in the DRC pursuant to that agreement.

This military presence is not peripheral. It situates Burundi within the operational logic of the conflict. Deployment entails intelligence sharing, coordination

with Congolese forces and exposure to the shifting frontlines around M23-controlled areas. Burundi is therefore not merely responding to instability – it is embedded in the evolving balance of power on the ground.

That embeddedness has diplomatic consequences. Any AU-led initiative on eastern DRC would inevitably touch upon issues in which Burundi is materially invested: ceasefire monitoring, disarmament processes, security sector arrangements and the status of armed groups operating near its borders. Decisions in these areas affect not only regional stability but also the security posture and credibility of Burundian forces deployed abroad.

The result is not an obvious breach of rules, but a structural tension. A Chairperson drawn from a state with troops in the theatre of conflict carries into the continental office a set of prior commitments. Even scrupulous adherence to formal neutrality cannot erase the fact that Burundi's national security interests are directly engaged in the outcome of the crisis.

The multiplicity of actors and competing interests already complicates conflict resolution. For the newly assumed AU presidency, however, another constraint looms just as large: time.

The structural limits of the AU presidency

Each AU presidency enjoys a certain degree of discretion in setting and promoting particular priorities. It is therefore likely that Burundi will seek to foreground peace and security in the Great Lakes Region. Yet the AU presidency is rotational and limited to one year. Structural constraints make sustained policy implementation difficult, especially in protracted and deeply entrenched conflicts. Future presidencies may continue to address the crisis, but it is far from certain that it will remain a priority.

More fundamentally, the question is not merely whether Burundi will prioritise the crisis, but how it will frame it. A presidency exercised by a directly involved actor risks subtly redefining collective security concerns in national terms. Even without overt partiality, agenda-setting, diplomatic language and sequencing of initiatives can shift the Union's posture. The contradiction identified at the outset thus does not depend on demonstrable bias. It lies in the institutional design itself.

Burundi's tenure may therefore become a test case for the AU's claim to act as a continental guardian of peace rather than a forum for competing sovereignties. If the Union manages to contain the inherent conflict of roles, it will strengthen its credibility in the Great Lakes region. If it does not, the episode may reinforce a more sceptical reading: that continental leadership remains ultimately mediated through national security calculations.

The 2026 presidency is less an opportunity for diplomatic symbolism than a stress test for the AU's architecture. Whether the fox merely guards the henhouse – or reshapes the rules of the farm – will reveal much about the limits of continental governance in Africa's most volatile region.

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