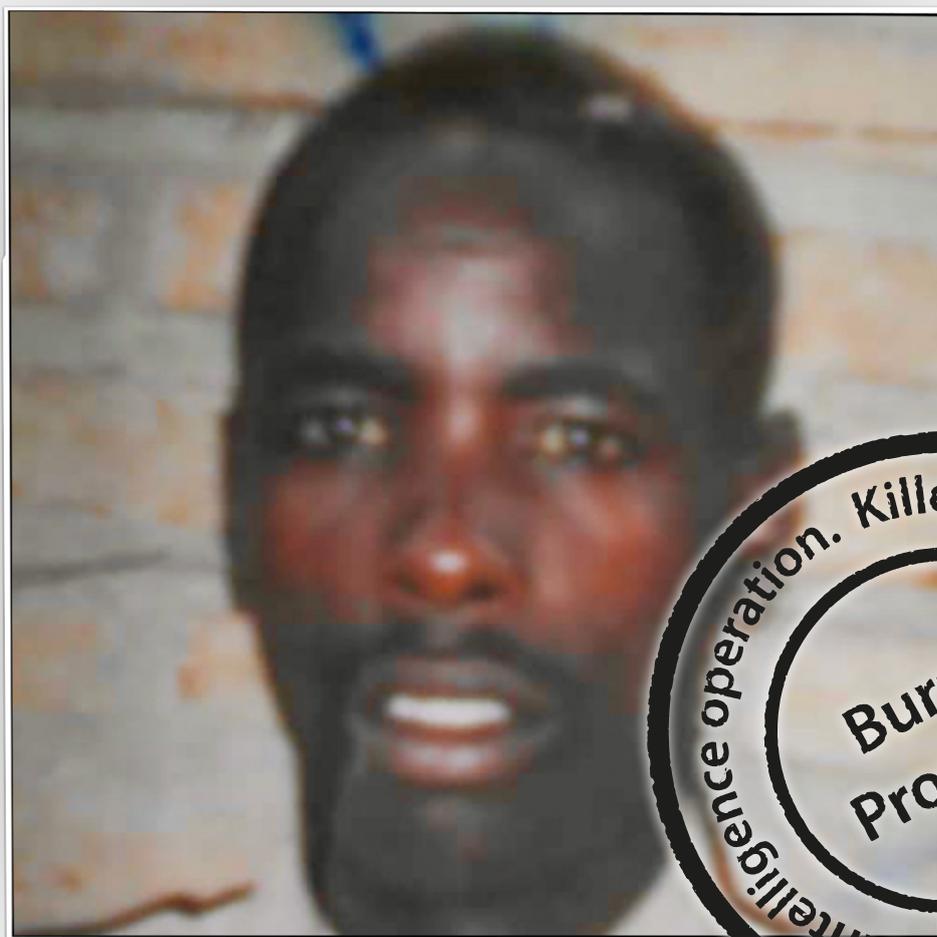


THE DEADLY PRICE OF OPPOSITION



Albert Niyondiko

Wanted for years, shot dead in front of a shack

In the early hours of 9 March 2020, Albert Niyondiko was shot dead on the doorstep of a shack on Gakaranka hill, Mugamba *commune* (Bururi province), where he had spent the night.

It's unclear by whom and how exactly Niyondiko was killed, but multiple witnesses said police and intelligence officials were involved in the operation. They had surrounded the compound for several hours, waiting for Niyondiko to come out.

Neighbours hid in fear when they heard the gunshots. When some of them approached the scene to find out what had happened, police kept them at a distance and ordered a quick burial of Niyondiko's body, in the absence of his family. A police officer warned the family against giving him a proper burial, because "a criminal cannot be buried with dignity."

Members of the police and intelligence services had been looking for Niyondiko for several years. Government officials suspected him of being a member of an armed opposition group and of owning a gun. Rather than arresting and prosecuting him, however, when they eventually tracked him down, they

killed him on the spot. Even a senior police officer who rushed to the scene expressed his dismay: “Why did you kill him when he was unarmed? You should have arrested him!”, a witness heard him say to other security officers.

Several local residents confirmed they had recently seen the victim with a gun and said the police had found a gun in the shack, but doubted that Niyondiko had used it to defend himself. There were rumours that he had wounded a security officer or had been hit with a machete, but neighbours were too afraid to ask for an inquiry into the circumstances that led to his death. The presence of many intelligence and police officers, some of whom had travelled from neighbouring Makamba province or from Bujumbura before and after the operation, and the arrests of several acquaintances of Niyondiko, were sufficient to keep them silent.

Niyondiko wasn't the first person suspected of possessing weapons or belonging to an armed group killed by members of the security services in recent months in southwestern Burundi. The area, in particular Mugamba *commune*, has experienced several waves of violence since Burundi's current political crisis erupted. In 2015, in contrast with many other rural areas, hundreds took to the streets in Mugamba to protest President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to stand for a third term.

As was the case in Bujumbura, the police cracked down hard on these protests, killing a student, according to the national human rights commission, and arresting many other people. Some of the more radical demonstrators turned to violence. In late 2015 and early 2016, armed men carried out several attacks in Mugamba, targeting local officials and people suspected of collaborating with the security services. The latter responded with violent counter-operations, including in Gakaranka. In June 2016, President Nkurunziza issued an ultimatum for assailants in Mugamba to surrender or face the consequences. Many have since been arrested, killed or gone into exile.

Niyondiko was one of the exceptions. During the 2015 demonstrations, he had been involved in mobilising protesters and was a member of the opposition party *Mouvement pour la solidarité et la démocratie* (MSD). Several sources believe he later joined the armed opposition, but he never left his native area, where he herded his cows and harvested his crops.

Because he knew he was on the radar of the security services, he kept a low profile and rarely slept at home. Police attempted to arrest him multiple times, but he always escaped. In the days preceding his death, he had been staying in a shack owned by a local businessman, where he was eventually killed.

So how did police and intelligence agents track him down? Some sources said local residents had helped intelligence agents identify where Niyondiko was staying. But there may have been other interests at play. A resident of Gakaranka said: “This *commune* (Mugamba) has been the stronghold of opponents of those currently in power. As he (Niyondiko) was a member of an opposition party, the MSD, they wanted to intimidate people in the area to make them switch sides (to join the ruling party).”

In the past, residents of Mugamba and some neighbouring *communes* have been known to support opposition parties popular among the Tutsi ethnic group, especially the MSD that was suspended in 2017. Many also supported the *Union pour le progrès national* (UPRONA), the ruling party from 1966 to 1993.

All three of Burundi's presidents and many Tutsi military leaders during UPRONA's harsh authoritarian rule came from Bururi province. More recently, UPRONA and the MSD have both been significantly weakened and do not currently pose a serious political challenge to the CNDD-FDD, which is dominated by members of the majority Hutu ethnic group. However, they still enjoy support in Bururi and neighbouring Rumonge – the only two provinces in which UPRONA secured parliamentary seats in 2015. According to the 2020 election results, the main opposition party *Congrès national pour la liberté* (CNL) obtained many more votes in Bururi than in other rural areas.

The killing of Niyondiko sent a strong signal that anyone who opposes the ruling party, violently or not, would not be tolerated in the months preceding the May 2020 elections. In neighbouring Makamba province, a local police commissioner used the crackdown in Bururi to intimidate opponents. According to several people who attended a meeting with motorcycle drivers on 31 March, Prosper Kazungu said: "If you don't stop rising up against the authorities, you'll get to know me. Go and ask people in Mugamba. They considered themselves to be from an impenetrable zone. Go and ask them. We have seriously corrected them. All you have to do is kill a few (people), then the others surrender. If you want to suffer the same fate, go ahead."

Kazungu was probably referring not only to the killing of Niyondiko, but also to other incidents in areas near Mugamba. On 15 April 2020, the ministry of public security tweeted that members of the security services had killed three criminals in Matana *commune*, just next to Mugamba. They reportedly included Pascal Ninganza, known as Kaburimbo, the main target of the operation. In September 2019, Senate president Révérien Ndikuriyo said he had offered 5 million Burundian francs (approximately US\$2,590) to bring Kaburimbo to him "alive or dead", accusing him of providing military training to opponents. On the night of 26 March, police officers killed another man accused of illegally possessing a weapon, Onesphore Mukamarakiza, in nearby Burambi *commune* (Rumonge province).

The authorities are not known to have investigated whether the use of lethal force was necessary in these operations. The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) wrote to national government officials and to the prosecutor and police commissioner of Bururi province, requesting information on any inquiry into these cases. They did not respond.

Impunity for members of the security services who commit human rights violations is widespread in Burundi. While no security officers have been arrested in relation to the killing of Niyondiko, several other people have been detained. One of them, a 17-year-old domestic worker who was in the shack where Niyondiko was killed, was seriously beaten after his arrest. Other local residents who were arrested, including the *chef de colline* (local official) of Gakaranka, have since been released. Three remain in detention, including the domestic worker.

On 7 April 2020, the police arrested Boniface Ntaguzwa, the head of a neighbouring hill who had been a member of the former Burundian army, the Burundian Armed Forces (ex-FAB), accusing him of collaborating with armed groups and of failing to inform authorities about the presence of wanted individuals in his locality. However, some local residents believe that the real reason for his arrest and detention may have been linked to personal rivalry over a local administrative position. Despite a court

ordering his provisional release on 17 April, Ntaguzwa remained in detention until 29 June. The police also arrested family members and acquaintances of those killed in Matana and Burambi.

Such arrests have heightened the fear among families of victims to demand justice. When BHRI asked a family member in one of these cases whether they had submitted a formal complaint to the authorities, he replied: “Let me ask you a question. Where would we submit such a complaint? The same people who would receive the complaint are the perpetrators of this violence. We have nowhere to go.”

For further information about the series, read [“The Deadly Price of Opposition”](#).



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