



Justice for political killings

An open letter to President Évariste Ndayishimiye

9 July 2020

Dear Mr President,

We write to you following your recent swearing-in as president of Burundi. We express our condolences for the sudden death of your predecessor, Pierre Nkurunziza, and wish you strength and courage at this significant moment for your country.

As you take on your new role, an important responsibility has fallen on your shoulders: ending the political violence and impunity that have devastated the lives of so many Burundians.

Your public condemnations of political violence and commitments to ending impunity have been encouraging. In your inauguration speech on 18 June 2020, you underlined the importance of respect for human rights and justice, and you stated: “We want all offences to be punished. Every person who commits an offence, whether they are a member of the government or not, should be brought to justice. We don’t want any offence to be ignored to avoid this becoming a source of conflict as in the past.” Previously, as secretary-general of the *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD-FDD), you stated in a speech in Rumonge on 14 February 2020 that “the words ‘political intolerance’ will not be heard again... Stop saying ‘this person should be punished and not that person’. Impunity is harmful.”

It is high time to translate these pledges into action and ensure that the hopes they generated are not dashed. If you send a strong signal – through actions, not just words – that perpetrators of serious human rights violations, including those in senior positions, will be held accountable, others will be less likely to use violence or order their subordinates to do so. We believe that progress in delivering justice would also help ease post-election concerns about the trajectory of the country and improve Burundi’s relations with international partners.

We realise that as Burundi’s new president, you will face numerous competing challenges and priorities, and will have to manage the interests of powerful individuals. But many Burundians – those who voted for you as well as those who didn’t – yearn for progress in restoring their fundamental rights.

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative recently published its research findings on the cases of six Burundians who were killed because of their political affiliations between October 2019 and May 2020.

Most were members of the *Congrès national pour la liberté* (CNL), the CNDD-FDD's main competitor during the elections.

According to our investigations, members of the youth league of the party that you headed for the last four years, the *Imbonerakure*, were responsible for most of these crimes. In Ngozi province, they attacked a 22-year-old bar owner, Évariste Nyabenda, when he tried to stop them from beating his fellow CNL members in October 2019; he died in November from his injuries. A month later, in Bujumbura province, Désiré Ntahondabasigiye, a local CNL representative, was shot dead through a window of his house while he was eating dinner with his wife and children; two *Imbonerakure* with guns were seen near his house. More recently, in May, only two weeks before the elections, *Imbonerakure* abducted Richard Havyarimana, a local CNL representative in Mwaro province. He was found dead in a river three days later, with deep gashes on his head. He left behind a young widow and a 3-month old baby.

In some of these cases, *Imbonerakure* acted in collusion with – or with the apparent support of – local government officials or local CNDD-FDD representatives. For example, our investigations revealed that the administrator of a *commune* in Gitega province ordered *Imbonerakure* to kill Jean Bosco Ngabirano, a CNL member, after an argument in a bar in March 2020. His body was found the next day, with markings of what appeared to have been a severe beating. In Muyinga, a *commune* administrator reportedly praised *Imbonerakure* who had been part of a group who beat Fauzia Basesuwabo – a CNL member –, her husband and their three sons; Basesuwabo died from her injuries in March 2020, a few days after the beating.

In other cases, state agents are reported to have carried out killings themselves. In March 2020, Albert Niyondiko, who was suspected of supporting the armed opposition, was shot dead on the doorstep of a shack in Bururi province, in an operation by the police and intelligence services, who ordered his immediate burial.

Only in the Mwaro case are the suspected perpetrators of the killing still in detention. In the other five cases, they were either never arrested or released after a few days. *Imbonerakure*, local government officials or police continued threatening some of the victims' families after the killings to try to stifle the truth.

Évariste, Désiré, Richard, Jean Bosco, Fauzia and Albert are just a few of the victims of political violence that has swept through Burundi in the period leading up to the 2020 elections. Their deaths should not be minimised or forgotten like so many others have been in Burundi. Many more people have been killed, abducted, seriously injured or arbitrarily arrested during the pre-election period, in almost all cases without accountability. CNDD-FDD members have also been subjected to violence and deserve justice too.

You hold one of the keys to Burundi's future: justice. You can end interference in the justice system. Brazen disregard for the rule of law has stained Burundi's image on the world stage. You can rectify this by publicly encouraging prosecutions of state agents, *Imbonerakure* and CNDD-FDD representatives, as well as members of other political parties involved in such crimes.

Delivering justice for the families of these six victims, among others, would be an important demonstration of your commitment to end impunity and could restore faith among the families of other victims of political killings that justice can be done. Visible progress on these six cases would also allow the broader population to regain confidence in the justice system.

Most importantly, it would show that as president, you are willing to turn the page on the past and stand up for all Burundians, as you have promised to do multiple times. To those who still doubt your willingness to enact such reforms, commit yourself to showing them that they are wrong and that your presidency marks the beginning of a new era in Burundi.

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative is ready to discuss these six cases with the relevant authorities and hopes you will be willing to engage in a constructive dialogue on human rights reforms in Burundi as you lead the country forward.

Yours sincerely,

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative

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

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