



# AN UNEASY ALLIANCE

Who holds the power in Burundi?

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative

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February 2023



## **WHAT IS THE BURUNDI HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE?**

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) is an independent project that aims to document the evolving human rights situation in Burundi. It intends to expose the drivers of human rights violations with a view to establishing an accurate record that will help bring justice to Burundians and contribute to restoring respect for human rights.

BHRI's publications also analyse the political and social context in which these violations occur to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of human rights trends in Burundi.

BHRI has no political affiliation. Its investigations cover human rights violations by the Burundian government as well as abuses by armed opposition groups.

BHRI welcomes feedback on its publications as well as further information about the human rights situation in Burundi. Please write to [contact@burundihri.org](mailto:contact@burundihri.org) or +1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp). Additional information is available at [burundihri.org](http://burundihri.org) or on Twitter at [twitter.com/@BHRI\\_IDHB](https://twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB).

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Cover photo: Révérien Ndikuriyo, Secretary General of the CNDD-FDD (left), and President Évariste Ndayishimiye (right) talk at the ruling party congress in Gitega, 22 January 2023. ©2023 Private

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## 1. An unsettled calm

As 2022 drew to a close, the outlook for Burundi was unpredictable, once again.

On the political front, many Burundians were still waiting for the fallout from President Évariste Ndayishimiye's decision to oust his once powerful prime minister, Alain Guillaume Bunyoni. Rumours swirled about the future of the secretary general of the ruling party, Révérien Ndikuriyo, with some speculating that he too might be shown the door. Meanwhile, the new prime minister, Gervais Ndirakobuca, was busy consolidating his position, strategically aligning himself with the president.

With a precarious accommodation between different factions and individuals in the ruling party, it is difficult to predict which way the balance will tip. Will the president have the resolve and the ability to stand up to other influential ruling party members, challenge the party's unwritten rules and push through long-awaited reforms? Will he make concessions to some of his opponents in the party? What might be the price of those concessions?

On the human rights front, 2022 saw a welcome decrease in political killings and enforced disappearances of real or perceived government opponents. The number of torture cases by intelligence agents and the police reported in 2022 was also lower than in previous years, although it is difficult to establish the real scale of these hidden practices.

In many provinces, members of the ruling party youth league, the *Imbonerakure*, were more restrained in their behaviour towards their rivals from the main opposition party, the National Freedom Congress (*Congrès national pour la liberté*, CNL) than in previous years. However, the Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) documented cases in which *Imbonerakure* seriously injured CNL members. *Imbonerakure* and other members of the ruling party, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (*Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie*, CNDD-FDD), frequently threatened and intimidated opposition party members and tried to force them to join the ruling party; some opposition party members ended up joining the CNDD-FDD to protect themselves and their livelihoods. In several provinces, local government officials prevented the CNL from holding meetings.

Several factors could explain the relative calm. One is the uncertain political outlook for 2023. Many CNDD-FDD members and government officials are hedging their bets as they watch how far Ndayishimiye can go and whether he will prevail against the old guard. A similar calm was observed after the presidential elections in 2020, as people waited to see what kind of leader Ndayishimiye would turn out to be. In addition, the CNL, while still active across the country, appears to have lost some of its momentum. Its leader, Agathon Rwasa, has adopted a lower profile than in previous years and has only voiced occasional, moderate criticism of the government's handling of the economic crisis or its internal turmoil.

As for the government's armed opponents, the clandestine Burundian military operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) dislodged the armed group RED-Tabara from its bases in eastern DRC in 2022 and pushed it further from the border.<sup>1</sup> More recently, since August 2022, Burundian troops have been deployed officially in the DRC, where they operate alongside the Congolese armed forces. They have clashed with RED-Tabara and the other remaining Burundian armed opposition group in the DRC, a faction of the former National Liberation Forces (*Forces nationales de libération*, FNL) headed by Aloys Nzabampema.<sup>2</sup>

The superficial calm observed in many parts of the country may provide temporary respite, but Burundians know that it wouldn't take much for serious human rights violations to resume. President Ndayishimiye's apparent ability to strengthen his position in recent months provides reassurance only in the short term and may be more fragile than it appears. Some Burundians are already voicing their fears in relation to the pre-election period (legislative elections will take place in 2025 and presidential elections in 2027), especially after Révérien Ndikuriyo's large-scale mobilisation and training of *Imbonerakure* in 2022.

Ndayishimiye has urged *Imbonerakure* to focus on development instead of political and security duties, although he hasn't stopped them from participating in a clandestine way in military operations in the DRC. But if Ndikuriyo gains the upper hand, the human rights situation in Burundi could deteriorate, and Ndayishimiye may be unable to control the *Imbonerakure* if they are unleashed again. Ndayishimiye has not consistently enforced his directives to prevent abuses by *Imbonerakure* since he was elected president in June 2020, and did even less as secretary general of the CNDD-FDD in the previous four years.

President Ndayishimiye's determination to build on the recent momentum and to see through genuine reforms will be the key to preserving the fragile gains of the last few months. To further bolster his position, it will be crucial for him to start implementing the policies he has promised over the past two years; to date, many of his announced reforms have not gone beyond rhetorical commitments. To sway senior members of his party, he will need to show that they and the CNDD-FDD will benefit from these reforms. Otherwise, his strategy could quickly unravel, and some members of his party could turn against him.

President Ndayishimiye has repeatedly paid lip service to holding state officials accountable. Some action has been taken against provincial and local government officials accused of embezzlement or corruption, but when it comes to violations of civil and political rights, the president doesn't seem prepared to put his words into action. His future depends on the support of the "generals" who surround him, many of whom have a long record of committing or ordering political killings,

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<sup>1</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "An operation of deceit: Burundi's secret mission in Congo", [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> In 2011, Nzabampema broke away from the main branch of the FNL, which had turned from an armed group into a political party in 2009 and changed its name to CNL in 2019.

enforced disappearances, torture and other serious crimes.<sup>3</sup> By firing Bunyoni, the president went further than expected, but he stopped short of ordering his arrest. Arresting Bunyoni could mean that other “generals” would be also subject to criminal investigations, which would almost certainly provoke a dangerous backlash. The result is that even when they fall out of favour, human rights violators are still protected.

International actors should not let the temporary calm and the removal of a few hardliners obscure the fact that deeper political problems have been left unaddressed – in particular, the CNDD-FDD’s longstanding intolerance of political diversity and criticism, the lack of independence of the justice system, and widespread impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations. They should press the Burundian government to take action to prevent a resumption of political violence, particularly as the 2025 elections approach.

Justice will be the key to effective change. The president should fulfil his promises to enforce accountability and end the impunity protecting senior officials responsible for serious human rights violations, particularly in the security forces and the intelligence service. To date, the typical strategy for dealing with officials who have become a liability has been simply to move them out of the spotlight, in the hope that they will be forgotten. International actors should call for these officials, as well as *Imbonerakure* responsible for serious abuses, to be brought to justice. They should also call on the president and the secretary general of the CNDD-FDD to remove the *Imbonerakure* from security and policing duties and stop them from threatening and obstructing members of other political parties.

BHRI wrote to President Évariste Ndayishimiye, Révérien Ndikuriyo and minister of interior, community development and public security Martin Niteretse before publishing this report, summarised its findings and asked them for an interview so that it could reflect their points of view. None of them replied.

## **2. Purging the hardliners?**

### **The president flexes his muscles**

In a dramatic move on 7 September 2022, President Ndayishimiye ousted Prime Minister Alain Guillaume Bunyoni, until then one of the most powerful figures in the hardline wing of the ruling party. This was followed by the dismissal of the president’s chief-of-staff, Gabriel Nizigama, once among the influential “generals” in the inner circle, and a reshuffle of other officials. Several provincial government officials and members of the security forces were also replaced, in most cases with relatively unknown individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “generals” is used in Burundi to refer to the clique of senior CNDD-FDD military officials who fought as combatants in the civil war, many of whom are still influential today.

The speed with which Ndayishimiye pushed Bunyoni out and replaced him with Gervais Ndirakobuca – until then, the minister of interior, community development and public security – took many by surprise. In a matter of hours, the parliament had approved Ndirakobuca’s appointment unanimously and without debate; even CNL parliamentarians rubberstamped it, hoping to obtain ministerial positions for their party, in vain.<sup>4</sup> Suddenly, Bunyoni, once viewed as a permanent fixture in the Burundian government, was out of the picture.

Many breathed a sigh of relief as Bunyoni exited the stage. One of the least popular figures in government, but viewed as untouchable, Bunyoni had ordered or overseen serious human rights violations behind the scenes over several years, particularly during his two stints as minister of public security, from 2007 to 2011 and from 2015 to 2020. His reputation for greed and corruption and his ostentatious wealth increasingly rankled as the economic situation worsened and Burundians struggled to cope with the rising cost of living. “Bunyoni did a lot of harm. He displays his wealth in an indecent way. People who are poor now can’t forgive him for that,” said a former senior military officer.<sup>5</sup>

The past of the new prime minister, Ndirakobuca, however, is at least as bloody as Bunyoni’s; like many prominent Burundian politicians, he is also allegedly involved in several lucrative business sectors. Known by his nickname Ndakugarika (“I will kill you” in Kirundi), Ndirakobuca was, until recently, under European Union and US sanctions in connection with his role in the government repression in 2015.<sup>6</sup> Bunyoni was also under targeted US sanctions until November 2021. The US State Department then lifted its sanctions against Burundian officials, but on 9 December 2022, it re-imposed travel restrictions against Bunyoni “for his involvement in a gross violation of human rights”.<sup>7</sup>

By replacing Bunyoni with Ndakugarika, President Ndayishimiye had substituted one serial human rights violator for another. But the outgoing and incoming prime ministers had adopted very different strategies during the two years of his presidency. While Bunyoni opposed the president from within, reportedly blocking some of his decisions, failing to carry out others and objecting to not being consulted, Ndirakobuca played his cards more carefully and carved out a comfortable niche for himself. He has chosen to align himself with Ndayishimiye, at least on the surface, and to support some of his reforms, particularly the much-publicised crackdown on corruption. His superficial transformation from a brutal killer to a champion of good governance has not fooled the Burundian public; few can forget his past behaviour. But his political calculations and his decision to throw his weight behind Ndayishimiye mean that for the time being, he is in the president’s favours.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with CNL member of parliament, 17 November 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with former senior military officer, 30 August 2022.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed information on Bunyoni and Ndirakobuca, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A stranglehold on Burundi’s future”, [https://burundihri.org/english/december\\_2020.php](https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php), December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, “Termination of Burundi Sanctions Program”, <https://www.state.gov/termination-of-burundi-sanctions-program/>, 18 November 2021, and “Combating global corruption and human rights abuses”, <https://www.state.gov/combating-global-corruption-and-human-rights-abuses/>, 9 December 2022.

One CNDD-FDD member didn't believe much would change as a result of Bunyoni's removal. "Neva (President Ndayishimiye) has only got rid of one obstacle, maybe the most dangerous one. (But) in conversations with CNDD-FDD members, people often say that Bunyoni wasn't the only one involved in preparing a coup d'état."<sup>8</sup> Referring to Ndirakobuca, he said that Ndayishimiye couldn't get rid of everyone and that he had to tame some of them and get close to them, even if he knew they were not his real friends.<sup>9</sup>

There were also changes in the National Intelligence Service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR) in 2022, the most significant of which was the removal of Alfred Innocent Museremu from the post of head of internal intelligence in July. Museremu had been at the forefront of the government repression of political opponents since 2015, first in the police force, then at the SNR, where numerous detainees were tortured under his watch.<sup>10</sup> Aloys Sindayihebura, the former head of external intelligence, was initially appointed to replace him, while Museremu took over Sindayihebura's post. This switch was interpreted as a demotion for Museremu, although some worried that as head of external intelligence, he could pose a threat to Burundians outside the country. On 7 September, Sindayihebura was moved again, this time to replace Nizigama as the president's chief-of-staff. Police colonel Domitien Niyonkuru was appointed as the new head of internal intelligence at the SNR.

These moves, particularly the decision to fire Bunyoni, have temporarily bolstered President Ndayishimiye's image and made him appear stronger than at any time since he took office in 2020. Some observers hope that these steps are part of a longer-term vision by the president to remove or weaken hardliners who could block his outwardly reformist agenda. However, Ndayishimiye's position is far from secure. If he alienates a majority of the "generals", they may retaliate. Historically, the CNDD-FDD has not hesitated to depose leaders seen as either too weak or too strong. Alliances have proved fickle and short-lived, and the CNDD-FDD strongmen have been ruthless in satisfying their own interests even above those of the party, and certainly above those of the country. "Neva has to have a hard heart if he wants to serve his full term in office," said a longstanding CNDD-FDD member and supporter of the president. "Otherwise, he won't be able to govern in the face of this party-state."<sup>11</sup>

Some rank-and-file CNDD-FDD members complained that Ndayishimiye had taken decisions, including about senior appointments, without consulting the party. A former CNDD-FDD combatant was unhappy about the president "parachuting in" and deciding various measures: "The country is the party", he said, echoing Ndikuriyo's words from a speech three months earlier.<sup>12</sup> "We

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<sup>8</sup> In a speech on 2 September 2022, Ndayishimiye accused unnamed opponents of preparing a coup d'état and dared them to confront him; he said that a coup d'état was no longer possible in Burundi. These comments led to speculation that Bunyoni was fired because he may have been plotting a coup against Ndayishimiye.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 7 October 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "A stranglehold on Burundi's future", [https://burundihri.org/english/december\\_2020.php](https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php), December 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 26 August 2022.

<sup>12</sup> In a speech to CNDD-FDD members in Nyabiraba, Bujumbura province, on 7 May 2022, Ndikuriyo had referred to the CNDD-FDD as a country: "This party, we can't even call it a party. We can consider it a country. The CNDD-FDD is

can't accept that someone denigrates the party... In meetings of former combatants which include Neva (Ndayishimiye), taking action without consulting the party is strictly prohibited. He's not the only one who fought (in the war). He's forgetting that we also spilled our blood to get to where we are today.”<sup>13</sup>

Some Burundians believe that one of Ndayishimiye's hidden strengths is his close relationship with the chief-of-staff of the armed forces, Prime Niyongabo. One of the few senior officials to have held onto his post for more than 10 years, Niyongabo rarely speaks publicly, but is thought to play a key role in maintaining the fragile political balance. For as long as he and the president remain close, the prospect of a military coup appears less likely, and the president may feel he can rely on the army should anyone try to unseat him.<sup>14</sup> A former senior military officer, speaking just before Bunyoni was ousted, described Niyongabo as a shield for Ndayishimiye against Bunyoni,<sup>15</sup> while a former CNDD-FDD provincial official believed that Niyongabo's protection acted as a buffer against possible moves by Ndikuriyo, who could use the *Imbonerakure* to destabilise the situation in the country.<sup>16</sup>

Ndayishimiye's close relationship with Niyongabo may also explain why Ndayishimiye granted an increasingly important role in 2022 to the military intelligence service, known as G2, as the SNR's power appeared to be gradually curtailed.

The CNDD-FDD also has its own intelligence network that collaborates with the police and military intelligence services to collect information on political opponents and CNDD-FDD members, including those suspected of secretly collaborating with the opposition. The network is coordinated by the provincial vice presidents of the CNDD-FDD; reports are sent to Lazare Mvuyekure, a member of parliament who was appointed national secretary of the *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD-affiliated leagues on 2 November 2022. According to one CNDD-FDD official, after party leaders analyse the reports, the Council of Elders (*Conseil des Sages*, the highest body in the CNDD-FDD, chaired by President Ndayishimiye) may propose punitive measures against party members for alleged wrongdoing.<sup>17</sup>

There has been much speculation about the future of Ndikuriyo, who is believed to have been in Bunyoni's camp. “Look at the silence of Révérien (Ndikuriyo) when Bunyoni was revoked,” said a CNDD-FDD member.<sup>18</sup> The extent to which Ndikuriyo was involved in an alleged plan by Bunyoni and others to topple Ndayishimiye is not confirmed. In August, in the days leading up to Bunyoni's removal, Ndikuriyo held frantic meetings with several senior officials, including Nizigama – the

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Burundi.” See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An operation of deceit: Burundi's secret mission in Congo”, [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with former CNDD-FDD member, 19 August 2022. His comment refers to the origins of the CNDD-FDD as a rebel movement.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with justice official, 21 September 2022; information from confidential source, 18 November 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with former senior military officer, 30 August 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with former CNDD-FDD provincial official, 15 August 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with CNDD-FDD provincial official and *Imbonerakure*, 12 and 18 December 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 7 October 2022.

president's chief-of-staff, who was later fired – and Emmanuel Sinzohagera, the president of the Senate; the contents of their discussions are not known.<sup>19</sup>

Ndikuriyo's personal style and the manner in which he has shored up his power base among the *Imbonerakure* show his desire to promote himself on the political scene and he appeared to be in the ascendancy during most of 2022. Some observers expected important decisions about the party leadership to be taken at the CNDD-FDD congress on 22 January 2023, but the only major change was the appointment of a new deputy secretary general, Cyriaque Nshimirimana, to replace Joseph Ntakirutimana after he was elected president of the East African Legislative Assembly. The CNDD-FDD also announced that it had unanimously adopted amendments to the party's statutes. BHRI was unable to obtain details of these amendments at the time of writing. It's not known whether they alter or limit Ndayishimiye's or Ndikuriyo's roles in the party in any way. If they don't, Ndikuriyo's position appears to be secure, at least in the short term.

### **Cautious reactions in the provinces**

In the weeks following Bunyoni's removal, many CNDD-FDD members across the country felt uneasy. A provincial CNDD-FDD representative said that senior officials were holding frequent meetings at their party headquarters and described the party's silence as worrying.<sup>20</sup> Another provincial CNDD-FDD representative said that these events at the national level had spread fear among party officials who expected further purges, including at the provincial level. A local government official and CNDD-FDD member referred to an "investigation" by the president to identify and weed out those who had supported Bunyoni.<sup>21</sup>

CNDD-FDD members in some locations were instructed by their hierarchy not to inflame internal divisions, to stay calm and not get carried away by developments in the party.<sup>22</sup> In at least one province, the provincial head of the CNDD-FDD organised meetings in which he told *Imbonerakure* not to harass CNL members.<sup>23</sup> An influential provincial *Imbonerakure* leader involved in serious human rights abuses in the recent past indicated that he would no longer be prepared to defend *Imbonerakure*, probably referring to those who were arrested for common crimes.<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to protect their jobs, some provincial government and CNDD-FDD officials openly threw their lot behind Ndayishimiye. "Administrative (local government) officials are being very careful; everyone believes that times are changing, and no one knows if they will keep their

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with source knowledgeable about these events, 2 August 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with provincial CNDD-FDD representative, 12 September 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with CNDD-FDD provincial representative, 12 September 2022, and local government official and CNDD-FDD member, 18 September 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with CNDD-FDD *commune* secretary, 7 October 2022, and CNDD-FDD provincial representative, 16 September 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Information from confidential source, 16 November 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Information from confidential source, 14 November 2022.

position,” said a local justice official.<sup>25</sup> A provincial CNDD-FDD official said that before, no one believed that Ndayishimiye could stand up to Bunyoni, but now, they were afraid as the president had shown he was capable of anything. Some quickly realigned themselves in a display of short-term opportunism. In late September, CNDD-FDD members in several parts of the country organised public rallies to show their support for the president.<sup>26</sup> “We’re trying to redeem ourselves and show him that this time, we’re behind him,” explained a provincial party official.<sup>27</sup>

Dynamics in the CNDD-FDD vary from province to province, and even from *commune* to *commune*, and don’t always reflect national-level developments. It is not yet clear if and how recent political events will trickle down across the country. Some CNDD-FDD members were worried about the turmoil in their party, but others, particularly in more remote provinces, felt somewhat removed from events in the capital, Gitega, and were more preoccupied with internal local divisions. One local government official said that most officials in his province were indifferent to divisions at the national level and that there had not been any public demonstrations of support for the president in his area.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Révérien Ndikuriyo: the new godfather of the *Imbonerakure*

Révérien Ndikuriyo’s long career in the CNDD-FDD and in the country’s political institutions, as well as his prominent public profile, positioned him well to head the party. After earning his credentials as a rebel combatant with the CNDD-FDD in the 1990s – he still limps from a wound to his leg sustained during the war – he climbed the ladder when the CNDD-FDD became a political party, serving as governor of his home province of Makamba from 2004 to 2007, then as member of parliament from 2007, and finally gravitating to president of the Senate in 2015.<sup>29</sup> As Senate president, he regularly provoked controversy with open incitements to violence, calling on *Imbonerakure* to “get to work” – “kora” in Kirundi (sometimes used as his nickname), a term that was used to incite killings of Tutsis during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. He also put a bounty on the head of an alleged armed opponent known as Kaburimbo, who was later killed.<sup>30</sup> He was appointed secretary general of the CNDD-FDD in January 2021, replacing Ndayishimiye.

Like former president Pierre Nkurunziza, who died in 2020, Ndikuriyo is a prominent figure in the national and local football scene. He is the honorary president of Burundi’s national football federation and owner of the Makamba team, *Aigle Noir* (Black Eagle, the symbol of the CNDD-FDD), which is chaired by his wife, Christine Ndayishimiye.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with local justice official, 21 September 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Iwacu, “Le parti de l’aigle rend hommage au chef de l’Etat”, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/le-parti-de-laigle-rend-hommage-au-chef-de-letat/>, 26 September 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with provincial CNDD-FDD official, 26 September 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with local government official, 27 September 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Télé Renaissance, “Qui est Révérien Ndikuriyo ?”, <https://telerenaissance.org/qui-est-reverien-ndikuriyo/>, 25 January 2021.

<sup>30</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A façade of peace in a land of fear: behind Burundi’s human rights crisis”, [https://burundihri.org/english/january\\_2020.php](https://burundihri.org/english/january_2020.php), January 2020.

Ndikuriyo is part of the CNDD-FDD faction that has remained loyal to Nkurunziza's legacy and seeks to preserve it. Indeed, some of the starkest divisions in the CNDD-FDD today are between those who are in the pro-Nkurunziza camp, who are "trying to reclaim their place, as they see it",<sup>31</sup> and those who would like to move the country forward in a different direction.

### **Training the *Imbonerakure***

After he was appointed secretary general, Ndikuriyo initially echoed Ndayishimiye's warnings to *Imbonerakure* not to ill-treat opponents or take over the role of law enforcement agencies.<sup>32</sup> But in 2022, he backtracked and began inciting *Imbonerakure* to patrol the streets again.<sup>33</sup> In early 2022, he started rolling out a plan to train thousands of *Imbonerakure* in "patriotism". Orders were transmitted through the party hierarchy, from the top down, and *Imbonerakure* leaders were told to select the most trustworthy and dedicated members. The aims of the training, according to a local *Imbonerakure* leader, were to enable *Imbonerakure* and demobilised CNDD-FDD combatants to get work abroad, prepare them to thwart attacks from outside the country, and crush the CNL in the run-up to the 2025 legislative elections.<sup>34</sup> An *Imbonerakure* who participated in a five-day training programme at the national CNDD-FDD headquarters in Bujumbura in March said that Ndikuriyo told the participants that he wanted them to love their party and be ready to defend it to the death.<sup>35</sup>

To promote the programme, Ndikuriyo embarked on a highly publicised tour of the country, speaking at the closing ceremonies of the training programmes and handing out certificates to the *Imbonerakure* who had been trained. He claimed that in total, around 7,200 *Imbonerakure* participated in the programme.<sup>36</sup> Training sessions took place at the national level (in Bujumbura) and in several provinces.<sup>37</sup>

The training covered a range of topics, including security duties, party propaganda and economic activities. It included lectures on the history of Burundi and the trajectory of the CNDD-FDD, and guidance on defending the country and the party against perceived enemies. *Imbonerakure* who participated said that they did physical exercises and took part in military-style parades. Video footage received by BHRI showed *Imbonerakure* parading on the streets in the vicinity of training sites, chanting intimidating party songs and brandishing sticks.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with former government official, 18 August 2022.

<sup>32</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "Ndayishimiye one year on: has he kept his word on human rights?", [https://burundihri.org/english/june\\_2021.php](https://burundihri.org/english/june_2021.php), June 2021.

<sup>33</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "The road ahead: will Burundi bring its torturers to justice?", [https://burundihri.org/english/march\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/march_2022.php), March 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 14 May 2022. For additional information on training of *Imbonerakure*, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "An operation of deceit: Burundi's secret mission in Congo", [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 26 November 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Speeches by Révérien Ndikuriyo on *Imbonerakure* Day, 27 August 2022, and during a prayer meeting, 27 October 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 6 December 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Footage from Makamba and Kirundo provinces, 11 June 2022, on file.

*Imbonerakure* described how the trainers reminded them about crimes committed under the harsh authoritarian regime of the Union for National Progress (*Union pour le progrès national*, UPRONA) – which ruled Burundi from 1966 to 1993 – and called on them to defend the CNDD-FDD’s hard-fought gains and its hold on power. The speakers vilified the CNL and its leader, Agathon Rwasa. One participant said that a trainer called on *Imbonerakure* to crush every member of the CNL who remained loyal to Rwasa.<sup>39</sup> An important component of the training consisted of instructions on intelligence gathering by *Imbonerakure*, who would be taught how to arrest suspects, take their phones and report them to the SNR.<sup>40</sup>

*Imbonerakure* were told that they could be given tasks inside and outside the country’s borders. Ndikuriyo had first planted this seed in January 2022, when he said that *Imbonerakure* could be sent to other countries for unspecified security duties.<sup>41</sup> Initially, it was assumed that this might mean deployment to the DRC, where hundreds of *Imbonerakure* have been sent to fight Burundian armed opposition groups, alongside members of the Burundian military, since December 2021. The deployment of *Imbonerakure* continued after the Burundian government formalised its presence in the DRC in August 2022.<sup>42</sup>

However, the link between the training and possible deployment to the DRC was not made explicit. According to one of the trainers, this was to avoid discouraging the *Imbonerakure*: “They know what happened to other people there (in the DRC),” he said. “They might not have wanted to do it.”<sup>43</sup> A local CNDD-FDD leader in southern Burundi told a family member of an *Imbonerakure* that he regretted recruiting them to participate in the training, as he feared they would be sent to the DRC.<sup>44</sup> Many *Imbonerakure* have been killed and wounded during the military operations in the DRC.<sup>45</sup>

## Preparing the ground for 2025

Ndikuriyo used the closing ceremonies of the training sessions in “patriotism” as a platform to ridicule the CNL and praise the bravery and sacrifice of the CNDD-FDD during the war. In a speech in Nyabiraba, Bujumbura province, on 7 May 2022, he told *Imbonerakure*: “Let’s go and organise ourselves in the field so that those who sacrificed their lives can feel satisfied because they

<sup>39</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 24 July 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 24 July 2022.

<sup>41</sup> The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “The road ahead: will Burundi bring its torturers to justice?”, [https://burundihri.org/english/march\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/march_2022.php), March 2022

<sup>42</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “Burundi steps up its private war in Congo”, [https://burundihri.org/english/september\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/september_2022.php), 9 September 2022, and “An operation of deceit: Burundi’s secret mission in Congo”, [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure* trainer, 27 August 2022. Many *Imbonerakure* were lured with false promises into fighting in the DRC. Some returned to Burundi frustrated, traumatised after seeing their comrades killed or wounded, and let down by broken promises of financial remuneration. Ndikuriyo was involved in the recruitment phase of the DRC operation and met some of the recruits before they were deployed. For details, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An operation of deceit: Burundi’s secret mission in Congo”, [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with family member of *Imbonerakure*, 2 August 2022.

<sup>45</sup> The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An operation of deceit: Burundi’s secret mission in Congo”, [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

will not have shed their blood in vain.”<sup>46</sup> But the more striking message was his call to *Imbonerakure* to start preparing for the 2025 elections, to ensure the CNDD-FDD’s dominance and longevity. 2025 will be an important milestone as it will mark the CNDD-FDD’s 20th anniversary in power.

During the three previous elections (2010, 2015 and 2020), the CNDD-FDD used the *Imbonerakure* as one of its main tools for eliminating, intimidating or silencing the opposition. *Imbonerakure* violently attacked their political opponents and committed numerous serious abuses.<sup>47</sup> Despite these tactics, the CNL gathered significant support during the last elections in 2020, threatening to overturn the CNDD-FDD majority in some areas. Ndikuriyo’s speeches indicate that the CNDD-FDD is taking no such risk this time.

Ndikuriyo laid out some of the strategies to secure the party’s victory. In a meeting in Bururi province on 26 May 2022, he complained about the low percentage of CNDD-FDD votes in some *communes* and directed *Imbonerakure* to work across the whole province to achieve 100% support for the CNDD-FDD. He told them not to be afraid of Rwasa because he didn’t have an army and exhorted them to “surround” the CNL until all its members joined the CNDD-FDD.<sup>48</sup> An *Imbonerakure* said that during a training session he attended, one of the speakers told the trainees: “We analysed the votes for the CNL and we asked ourselves... where are the *Imbonerakure*? Where are you? Prepare yourselves accordingly.” He said that the CNDD-FDD had given some *Imbonerakure* military-style boots and kept a list of those *Imbonerakure* so that they could be called upon to intimidate opponents in the next elections.<sup>49</sup>

Ndikuriyo’s closing remarks in Nyabiraba in May were superficially more conciliatory. “Someone who isn’t a member of your party isn’t an enemy,” he said, contradicting some of his previous comments. He joked that local CNDD-FDD members should visit one of the areas where the ruling party had a low percentage of members, gather everyone around a drink and invite them to join the party: “You’ll see that it will change things.”<sup>50</sup>

These kinds of comments did little to soften the overall impact of his speeches. Ndikuriyo went even further in private meetings. In April 2022, for example, referring to accusations of hate speech

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<sup>46</sup> Extract from Révérien Ndikuriyo’s speech in Nyabiraba, Bujumbura province, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZCsY\\_hk28M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZCsY_hk28M), 7 May 2022.

<sup>47</sup> For information on violence against CNDD-FDD opponents in the lead-up to the 2020 elections, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “The deadly price of opposition”, June 2020-February 2022, <https://burundihri.org/english/opposition.php>, and “A façade of peace in a land of fear: behind Burundi’s human rights crisis”, [https://burundihri.org/english/january\\_2020.php](https://burundihri.org/english/january_2020.php), January 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 29 May 2022. CNL leader Agathon Rwasa is a former rebel commander who led the FNL during many years of armed conflict in Burundi. After the war, FNL combatants went through a process of demobilisation and some were given positions in Burundi’s national security forces.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 26 November 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Extracts from Ndikuriyo’s speech to CNDD-FDD members in Nyabiraba, Bujumbura province, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZCsY\\_hk28M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZCsY_hk28M), 7 May 2022.

against him, he called on *Imbonerakure* to cut the throats of their opponents.<sup>51</sup> In a meeting in Nyanza-Lac in January 2023, he again mentioned accusations that he had been involved in the killing of an alleged armed opponent known as Kaburimbo, and said he didn't see how that was a bad thing. Referring to the Bible, he said that eliminating a criminal to protect others was not a sin.<sup>52</sup>

Some *Imbonerakure* were shocked by the way he condoned and incited violence. An *Imbonerakure* who attended the closing event of a training programme said: "Frankly, I am an *Imbonerakure*, but what our secretary general of the CNDD-FDD says is horrifying. I can see that there is peace, but when you hear his words, you would think that there is a war coming."<sup>53</sup> Another *Imbonerakure* who attended the training said: "They taught us how to hate *bakeba* (a term used to refer to opponents)... At the end, I talked privately to the others about what they thought and everyone was afraid."<sup>54</sup>

### Ndikuriyo's private security company

In parallel with the "patriotic trainings", in May 2022 Ndikuriyo organised training for *Imbonerakure* to work in the private security sector, primarily abroad.<sup>55</sup> In October 2021, the Burundian government had signed two agreements with Saudi Arabia on "the recruitment of migrant workers in general and domestic workers in particular". A statement by the Burundian ministry of foreign affairs also refers to future agreements with other Gulf countries.<sup>56</sup> It is not known whether the training organised by Ndikuriyo is linked to any of these agreements.

The main person in charge of the day-to-day training of *Imbonerakure* in this context was Jean-Baptiste Nzigamasabo, known as Gihaha, a former CNDD-FDD combatant and former member of parliament for the CNDD-FDD. Along with two police officers and a soldier, he drilled the *Imbonerakure* in how to march in military formation, while others taught karate, Arabic and other language classes.<sup>57</sup> An *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training said that at the beginning, Nzigamasabo, whom he described as a training commander, explained that the training was organised by Pax Burundi Foundation, through one of its projects called Eagle Security Services; Nzigamasabo claimed that Eagle Security Services had won a contract in an Arab country and

<sup>51</sup> See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "An operation of deceit: Burundi's secret mission in Congo", [https://burundihri.org/english/july\\_2022.php](https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php), July 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with two CNDD-FDD members who participated in the meeting, 15 January 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with *Imbonerakure* leader, 6 December 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with family member of *Imbonerakure*, 6 September 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of foreign affairs and development cooperation, "From now on, a legal framework for managing the mobility of Burundian labor", <https://www.mae.gov.bi/en/from-now-on-a-legal-framework-for-managing-the-mobility-of-burundian-labor/>, and tweet by Albert Shingiro, minister of foreign affairs and development cooperation, <https://twitter.com/AShingiro/status/1444588933011185664>, 3 October 2021. See also Saudi Press Agency, "Two agreements on cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Burundi signed", <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2292033>, 3 October 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022, and another source who confirmed Nzigamasabo's presence, August 2022. See also Pax Burundi Foundation, closing ceremony of Eagle Security Services training, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1052771212086117>, 1 November 2022.

mentioned the United Arab Emirates. Nzigamasabo said that the training was supposed to last two months, but the *Imbonerakure* ended up staying for a total of six months, as confirmed by Ndikuriyo.<sup>58</sup>

The way in which the training was organised illustrates the convergence of personal and party interests, with the additional involvement of state agents. Pax Burundi Foundation is a private foundation set up by Ndikuriyo, who serves as its president, while Domitien Niyonkuru, the current head of the SNR's internal intelligence department, serves as its vice-president.<sup>59</sup> Ndikuriyo instructed provincial and communal heads of the CNDD-FDD to select six *Imbonerakure* per *commune* to participate in the training and to send them to the *Lycée d'excellence*, a state secondary school in Makamba.<sup>60</sup>

Trainees stayed in the school building from May to September, while other *Imbonerakure* came and went as they participated in shorter "patriotic trainings", leading to confusion between the different training initiatives. The arrival of hundreds of *Imbonerakure* and the obstruction of access to the school building spread fear among residents living nearby.<sup>61</sup> Some believed that military training may have been taking place there – a suspicion that even some police officers shared: one of the trainers, a judicial police officer, complained to participants that his colleagues had accused him of training a militia, even though there was no military component to the training.<sup>62</sup>

A participant in the training described how Nzigamasabo threatened trainees who complained about the length of their stay and about the insufficient food (which local government officials had been told to collect, even though the training was a private initiative); some of those who complained were beaten numerous times. Nzigamasabo warned the trainees that they couldn't escape as they had been selected by their party leaders.<sup>63</sup>

After spending five months in the school buildings, the trainees were sent to the Nkurunziza Peace Park Complex Stadium in Makamba, where they stayed until November. Young men and women dressed in the blue and white uniforms of Eagle Security Services had paraded there in front of Ndikuriyo and Ndayishimiye during the stadium's inauguration in June 2022 (see below, "President and party head battle for dominance"). A statement by Pax Burundi Foundation noted that more than 200 youth from all of Burundi's provinces completed the training on 1 November.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022; extracts from Ndikuriyo's speech during the closing ceremony of the training, 1 November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Coverage by Akeza Sports of a press statement by Pax Burundi Foundation's vice president, Domitien Niyonkuru, <https://www.facebook.com/103751029051238/posts/-domitien-niyonkuru-icegera-cuwurongoye-fondation-pax-burundi-yagize-ati-mu-miga/127322196694121/>, 14 August 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022, and information from a police officer who participated in the training.

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with residents, April and July 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Révérien Ndikuriyo's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ndikuriyo.reverien/posts/pfbid031Y9cpcE764DEHxcX8o5fPYsMQa9XkBveLSQiiDXVwEGrrQawNgAV8KisDEDQ9LFI>, 9 June 2022; Pax Burundi Foundation Facebook page,

During a meeting in June in Nyanza-Lac, in Makamba province, Ndikuriyo had already promised he would find international employment for *Imbonerakure* and claimed he had established contacts in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.<sup>65</sup> A person with knowledge of Ndikuriyo's plans said that young men and women trained as part of the Eagle Security Services project would be sent to a country such as Qatar to work as private security guards and that Ndikuriyo would receive a percentage of their salaries.<sup>66</sup> One of the trainees, however, believed that Ndikuriyo had been unable to secure these contracts and was trying to find work for these *Imbonerakure* in Burundi or neighbouring Tanzania instead.<sup>67</sup>

More recently, an organisation called Eagle Agency for Youth Development was listed as one of five agencies authorised by the ministry of foreign affairs to recruit Burundians to work abroad. An official letter from the minister of foreign affairs, dated 14 December 2022, mentions "Hon. Baptiste" as the agency's representative.<sup>68</sup>

International human rights organisations have documented serious human rights violations against migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.<sup>69</sup> The Burundian government said that its agreements with Saudi Arabia would end abuses for migrant workers and protect their rights.<sup>70</sup> BHRI was not able to analyse the content of these agreements or those with other countries, or document their implementation.

### Avoiding scrutiny

Many of the training sessions for *Imbonerakure* took place in public buildings, such as schools, or on sports grounds.<sup>71</sup> Roads leading to the training sites were often blocked and the premises were guarded by police.<sup>72</sup> Residents who saw some of the participants said that some *Imbonerakure* were wearing military-style uniforms and boots.<sup>73</sup>

Most residents, however, kept a safe distance from these sites. The response by *Imbonerakure* to a man who ventured too close illustrated the secrecy and paranoia surrounding the training. In May,

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<https://www.facebook.com/Fondation-PAX-Burundi-359118407878837/photos/1470848763372457>, 25 June 2022, and [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=161293026587165&id=100081194040069](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=161293026587165&id=100081194040069), 1 November 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews with local government official, 11 July and 7 August 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Information from confidential source, 12 November 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with an *Imbonerakure* who participated in the training, 14 December 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Albert Shingiro, minister of foreign affairs and development cooperation, to minister of interior, community development and public security Martin Niteretse,

[https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1603648158864646144?s=20&t=KJoMJ7\\_XvU9avbOn6UIryw](https://twitter.com/MininterInfosBi/status/1603648158864646144?s=20&t=KJoMJ7_XvU9avbOn6UIryw), 14 December 2022.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: labor reforms insufficient",

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/saudi-arabia-labor-reforms-insufficient>, 25 March 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of foreign affairs and development cooperation, "From now on, a legal framework for managing the mobility of Burundian labor", <https://www.mae.gov.bi/en/from-now-on-a-legal-framework-for-managing-the-mobility-of-burundian-labor/>, undated.

<sup>71</sup> Interviews with residents living near a training site, June 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with eyewitnesses, April 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews with residents living near a training site, June 2022.

the man was walking along a road near a site where a training session was taking place. When a group of *Imbonerakure* passed by, one of them noticed the man using his phone and shouted: “He’s taking pictures, that idiot! He wants to send pictures of us to Rwanda!” The *Imbonerakure* grabbed a branch and hit the man on his head; the man started bleeding and fell to the ground. The *Imbonerakure* insulted him, accusing him of being a Tutsi but rallying behind Rwanda, while beating him again on his legs and back.<sup>74</sup>

Other *Imbonerakure* approached and asked their comrades to stop beating the man. One of those who was beating him then directed his ethnic slurs at the *Imbonerakure* who had tried to intervene: “You look like a Tutsi too, so do you want to defend this Tutsi?” He dragged the man he had been beating across the road to a river where a discussion ensued; some *Imbonerakure* suggested killing the man and throwing him in the river, saying he could be eaten by fish in Lake Tanganyika. But another *Imbonerakure* called an official from the site where the training was taking place. The official arrived and told him to get on his motorbike. An *Imbonerakure* tied the man’s hands behind his back and they drove him to the training site, where the ordeal continued. One of the *Imbonerakure* leaders insulted the man about his ethnicity again, beat him and asked him what he was going to do with the photos he accused him of taking. The man denied taking photos and challenged the *Imbonerakure* to show him any photos on his phone. *Imbonerakure* threatened to throw him into a grave. An aide of the provincial governor eventually released the man after another round of questions about the alleged photos.<sup>75</sup>

### ***Imbonerakure* continue to operate with impunity**

This case shows how vague and unsubstantiated suspicions of being an opposition member or of showing an interest in the workings of the *Imbonerakure* can lead to serious harm. Opposition party members have faced these kinds of abuses for years, and the perpetrators have enjoyed almost complete impunity.

Despite President Ndayishimiye’s promises, the *Imbonerakure*’s excessive powers have not been curbed evenly across the country. Residents of certain areas reported that *Imbonerakure* continued to patrol the streets at night, sometimes wearing military-style uniforms and boots, carrying fake guns, machetes, knives or sticks, flaunting the Motorola walkie-talkies that they have been given for “security” duties, and intercepting people who stayed out late. In other areas, night patrols by *Imbonerakure* decreased or stopped altogether.<sup>76</sup>

Some *Imbonerakure* have continued to use violence, including in non-political cases. On several occasions in 2022, *Imbonerakure* beat people severely, for example in the context of private disputes, suspicions of petty crime or arguments about money; some of the victims were other

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<sup>74</sup> The CNL, like the CNDD-FDD, is made up predominantly of Hutus, but also includes Tutsis.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with confidential source, 11 July 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Conversations with residents of two western provinces, 19 November and 7 December 2022, and of two southern provinces, January 2023.

*Imbonerakure*. Most of these acts of violence were committed by low-level *Imbonerakure*, some of whom have been arrested. But in most political cases, judicial authorities do not dare prosecute them, let alone convict them.

Even in some non-political cases, *Imbonerakure* are sometimes shielded from judicial proceedings. For example, in August, a magistrate in a southern province intervened to stop an *Imbonerakure* from hitting a motorbike driver. The *Imbonerakure* turned on the magistrate and started hitting him too, shouting that he was an important *Imbonerakure* and that the Burundian justice system belonged to them. The *Imbonerakure* was arrested after the magistrate got away and reported the incident to the prosecutor. A few hours later, the representative of the *Imbonerakure* in the *commune* called the magistrate, apologised on behalf of the *Imbonerakure* who had hit him, and asked for his release. He explained that the *Imbonerakure* who had been arrested was participating in a training programme and would miss part of the course if he remained in detention. The *Imbonerakure* was soon released. He said he regretted beating the magistrate, but only because his arrest would have meant that he would miss the training.<sup>77</sup>

### President and party head battle for dominance

Ndikuriyo's tour of the country in 2022 strengthened his bonds with the CNDD-FDD rank-and-file, particularly the *Imbonerakure*. This was evident on 25 June when he inaugurated a new stadium built for his football team in Makamba, named after the former president: the Nkurunziza Peace Park Complex Stadium. Before the inauguration, many *Imbonerakure* were seen marching in military style, ending with a military salute in front of Ndikuriyo.<sup>78</sup> "It's a way of telling the boss: 'We're yours'", said a former senior military officer. "They're drilling these reflexes into them so that they become like robots."<sup>79</sup> At the inauguration, Ndikuriyo was the star of the show. President Ndayishimiye was relegated to the background and wasn't wearing the same tailor-made CNDD-FDD clothes as other senior officials. It was Ndikuriyo, rather than Ndayishimiye, who gave the main speech at the event.

Ndikuriyo openly showed his allegiance to Nkurunziza during the inauguration. A former government official said Ndikuriyo had invited the secretary general of the ruling party in Tanzania to the event,<sup>80</sup> as well as Nkurunziza's widow, Denise Bucumi Nkurunziza. "He was surrounded by those two," he said. "It was very striking. Denise was waving at the crowds. The photos (on banners and T-shirts) were of Nkurunziza." He said that an advisor to the president had asked Ndikuriyo why he was promoting the late president when there was a president who was still alive. Ndikuriyo reportedly replied that the celebrations in memory of Nkurunziza that had taken place in Gitega hadn't given Nkurunziza the importance he deserved and that he was trying to rectify the government's failings in this regard.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Interview with source knowledgeable about the case, 8 August 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Video on file, location confirmed.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with former senior military officer, 30 August 2022.

<sup>80</sup> The ruling party in Tanzania, *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM), has been a longstanding ally of the CNDD-FDD.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with former government official, 18 August 2022.

The way Ndikuriyo occupied centre stage in meetings with *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD members led observers to believe that he has grander ambitions than running the ruling party. A CNDD-FDD member said: “Personally, I can see that Révérien Ndikuriyo is preparing for the presidency, sooner or later. When you see his actions, his visits to all the *communes* of the country, his speeches to *Imbonerakure*...”<sup>82</sup> A former government official was convinced that Ndikuriyo harboured ambitions to become president in the next elections. “It’s clear. He’s building himself up... in preparation for 2027.”<sup>83</sup>

The apparent tensions between Ndikuriyo and Ndayishimiye go beyond personal rivalry. Ndikuriyo’s stance is clearly at odds with Ndayishimiye’s, especially in relation to the role of the *Imbonerakure* and Ndikuriyo’s willingness to embrace political violence to secure the CNDD-FDD’s long-term future. Since becoming president, Ndayishimiye has repeatedly called on the *Imbonerakure* to develop the country rather than involve themselves in security. Some *Imbonerakure* have taken up his advice. A former *Imbonerakure* leader said that Ndayishimiye was aware that negative publicity surrounding the actions of *Imbonerakure* had undermined his attempts to improve the image of Burundi and of his government.<sup>84</sup> A CNDD-FDD member of parliament confirmed that Ndayishimiye was frustrated with persistent abuses by *Imbonerakure*. However, rather than advocating for the *Imbonerakure* to be disbanded, the member of parliament said they should be restructured and strengthened, as they are the CNDD-FDD party’s eyes and ears across the country.<sup>85</sup>

The *Imbonerakure* seem to be split between those who are willing to subscribe to the president’s programme and those who follow Ndikuriyo and want to preserve their prominent role in dealing with political opponents and security threats. Some in the second category were unhappy with Bunyoni’s destitution, because Bunyoni is seen as close to Ndikuriyo, and they fear Ndikuriyo could be next in line.<sup>86</sup> Ndikuriyo is popular among some *Imbonerakure* because he flatters them, makes them feel important, and occasionally provides them with financial benefits. An *Imbonerakure* leader from a southern province was full of praise for Ndikuriyo and said he gave the *Imbonerakure* everything they needed: “We should have had a secretary general like Révérien since the beginning of the party... He honours the *Imbonerakure*.” He said that since he had learnt about the CNDD-FDD’s history during a training organised by Ndikuriyo, he was ready to defend the country with armed force.<sup>87</sup>

Several ruling party members pointed to the glaring contradictions between Ndayishimiye’s and Ndikuriyo’s speeches. A provincial CNDD-FDD representative, for example, said that the president

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 7 October 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with former government official, 18 August 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with government official and CNDD-FDD member, 15 August 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member of parliament, 11 August 2022.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* representative, 26 September 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 6 December 2022.

was always bemoaning abuses and theft of public property by state agents, while Ndikuriyo encouraged CNDD-FDD members to use force.<sup>88</sup>

Ndikuriyo also seemed to undermine Ndayishimiye's public campaign against corruption. In meetings with local CNDD-FDD leaders in Nyanza-Lac *commune*, in his native Makamba province, on 13 and 14 January 2023, he defended the *commune*'s administrator, whom local councillors had tried to evict because of corruption allegations against her. He said that those who wanted to remove her would never achieve their objective and that he barred them from attending the meetings. Some participants in the meetings believed that Ndikuriyo wanted to protect the administrator because she had organised food collections for the Eagle Security Services training in Makamba.<sup>89</sup>

A former CNDD-FDD combatant said it was not normal for the two "generals" in charge to contradict each other: "One talks about peace while the other talks about things that disturb us," he said. He was anxious about what would happen if Ndikuriyo got the upper hand.<sup>90</sup> Another former CNDD-FDD provincial representative believed that Ndikuriyo deliberately spent a lot of energy supporting the *Imbonerakure* as a way of openly defying the president.<sup>91</sup>

An *Imbonerakure* who attended the closing ceremony of one of the training sessions said he didn't really understand what Ndikuriyo was planning, but he had given them a clear message: "*Imbonerakure*, I am your boss and I give the orders. You're not allowed to follow anyone else's orders. If we tell you to go somewhere, go there as strong soldiers."<sup>92</sup>

Despite his earlier incitements to violence, in a speech on *Imbonerakure* Day on 27 August – often an occasion for defiant speeches in support of the youth league – Ndikuriyo was more diplomatic than usual. He supported Ndayishimiye's call for *Imbonerakure* to focus on development and mentioned Ndayishimiye's presidency of the CNDD-FDD's *Conseil des Sages*. He stated: "In the past, there were those who wanted to dishonour us in the international community by calling us names and spreading lies... Today, it's time to get back on our feet, *Imbonerakure*, so that the international community, starting with African countries, changes its language about the *Imbonerakure*. Yes, it's possible that people everywhere will say: 'Let the *Imbonerakure* be respected!' But to achieve this honour, the *Imbonerakure* should make an effort. They are called upon to change their way of life." He said that being an *Imbonerakure* means "behaving well and being disciplined, respecting oneself and others, as directed by the ethics of the CNDD-FDD".<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with provincial CNDD-FDD representative, 12 September 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Interviews with two CNDD-FDD members who participated in the meetings, 15 January 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with former CNDD-FDD combatant, 26 August 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with former CNDD-FDD representative, 15 August 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 26 November 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Extracts from Ndikuriyo's speech to CNDD-FDD members on *Imbonerakure* Day, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-AdCDKdsfl&t=11938s>, 27 August 2022.

In a speech in November, two months after ousting Bunyoni, Ndayishimiye seemed to want to reassert his authority by contrasting his presidency with the turmoil in the CNDD-FDD in previous years. He inferred that under his presidency, the secretary general of party would not be as powerful as under some previous administrations. “Do you remember when there was disorder in our governance, when the president had no say in the country and it was the president of the party who had the final word?... When we couldn’t dismiss a minister who could refuse to see us and say: ‘First, go and consult the president of the party’? That is to say that it was the president of the party who was the president of the republic.”<sup>94</sup>

## 4. Attempts to wear down the opposition

### Attacks against CNL members

Violent attacks against CNL members decreased in 2022, but BHRI documented cases resulting in serious injuries.

On 13 August 2022, CNL members were planning to hold a meeting at their office in an eastern province when *Imbonerakure* arrested two CNL members, took them to the local CNDD-FDD office and beat them. Tensions began in a local bar, where an *Imbonerakure* insulted one of the CNL members who was due to go to the meeting and twisted his nose, telling him he was a Tutsi. He taunted him: “Isn’t it you who killed Peter (former President Pierre Nkurunziza)? Isn’t it you who killed (former President) Ndadaye?”<sup>95</sup>

The *Imbonerakure* took him to the CNL office where a group of *Imbonerakure* had surrounded a second CNL member who was on his way to the meeting. An *Imbonerakure* with a Motorola walkie-talkie called others for back-up: “Hurry up, hurry up! We have detained the losers,” he said. CNL leaders arrived and tried to calm the situation, but an *Imbonerakure* leader said that the two CNL members should be “corrected”.<sup>96</sup>

Three *Imbonerakure* then took one of the two CNL members to a CNDD-FDD office nearby. There, the local head of the *Imbonerakure* ordered an *Imbonerakure* to take the CNL member to a pit that had been dug in the ground behind the office. The CNL member was told to undress and lie on his stomach in the pit. An *Imbonerakure* sat on his shoulders, held his hands behind his neck and jabbed his fingers in his eyes, while a third *Imbonerakure* sat on his legs and held his feet together by squeezing his ankles.

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<sup>94</sup> Extracts from President Évariste Ndayishimiye’s speech to religious leaders, 3 November 2022 (video on file).

<sup>95</sup> President Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, was assassinated in October 1993 by members of the then Tutsi-dominated army. His assassination triggered widespread massacres and prolonged armed conflict which lasted 16 years and claimed tens of thousands of lives.

<sup>96</sup> “Correcting” is a term used by *Imbonerakure* and some other CNDD-FDD members to mean beating or ill-treating a person to punish them for an alleged transgression.

While the CNL member was pinned to the ground, another *Imbonerakure* took a stick from the CNDD-FDD office and hit him on his backside, back and hips. The *Imbonerakure* sitting on his shoulders got off him and ripped a branch from a tree, the size of an axe handle, and beat him with it until the bark wore off the branch. As he was beating him, he said: “All of you (CNL members) are deaf. Rwsa tricked you; he doesn’t have a political party.” The last blow broke the CNL’s member arm. One of the *Imbonerakure* said: “If it was night, we would cut you up and bury you in the cemetery immediately.”

Other *Imbonerakure* then arrived with the second CNL member they had arrested. One of them told him to undress, lie on the ground and name all the CNL members on his *colline* (hill). When he refused, an *Imbonerakure* hit him.

The *Imbonerakure* leader who was giving orders called the local head of the CNDD-FDD of the *colline* where the two CNL members lived and ordered the two men to kneel in front of the party head, plead for forgiveness and ask to join the CNDD-FDD. The *Imbonerakure* leader also told them to say that they would no longer be “opponents” and to bring money in the morning, but didn’t say who it was for. Other *Imbonerakure* told the CNL members that if they dared reveal that they had been beaten, they would be “erased”.

The *Imbonerakure* then released the two men but told them that if they were seen walking along the road on their way home, they would be killed. The men walked home through valleys and trails, avoiding the road.

A judicial police officer (*officier de police judiciaire*, OPJ) persuaded the two CNL members to file a complaint about these events and to allow him to interview them, but interrupted his interview with them several times to consult privately with a well-known local *Imbonerakure* who appeared to have been sent to collude with him to keep the case under wraps. The OPJ offered the two CNL members 10,000 Burundian francs (approximately US\$5); it was not clear whether this was a contribution to the cost of medical treatment for their injuries from the beatings or an incentive to drop the case. The CNL members refused. The OPJ became visibly agitated, withdrew the offer of the money and handed the men over to a local government official.

The next day, the two CNL members, dissatisfied with the OPJ who first heard their case, filed a complaint with an OPJ in the provincial capital – who is also a deputy commissioner of the judicial police – and gave him the names of five of the six *Imbonerakure* involved in the incident, including the head of the *Imbonerakure* in the *commune*. The OPJ issued three summonses that didn’t include the *Imbonerakure* leader, despite his prominent role in the incident.

In early October, the OPJ from the provincial capital privately met the three *Imbonerakure* who had been summonsed, together with the communal head of the *Imbonerakure*; he then also called the two CNL members into his office. The *Imbonerakure* denied they had beaten them, claiming that the two men had been injured in clashes with other CNL members. The OPJ, considered close to the

CNDD-FDD, refused to interview witnesses who had seen the *Imbonerakure* arrest the CNL members and said he only wanted to speak to witnesses who were present at the time of the beating; however, only *Imbonerakure* and the two CNL members were present during the beatings.<sup>97</sup>

### **Administrative obstacles, discrimination and pressure to join the ruling party**

Frequent administrative hurdles thrown up by the government and the CNDD-FDD continue to hinder the CNL's activities. The authorities have forced the CNL to cancel meetings, ceremonies or other activities in several provinces, including Kirundo, Ngozi, Rutana, Makamba, Ruyigi, Gitega and Bubanza.

Local government officials gave various reasons for refusing to authorise CNL meetings. In Bwambarangwe *commune* in Kirundo province, for example, the CNL informed the *commune* administrator in May 2022 that the party intended to celebrate its third anniversary. The administrator responded in writing: "You are not authorised to hold this celebration in Bwambarangwe because it's hiding a kind of electoral campaign."<sup>98</sup> In many other locations across the country, however, CNL held its activities without interference.

CNDD-FDD and government officials have also discriminated against CNL members and deprived them of basic public services. In a southern province, for example, in May 2022, a soldier and member of the CNDD-FDD entered the home of a female CNL member and stole phones and money. The woman knew the burglar, who was a former CNDD-FDD combatant. "I filed a complaint with the police," she said, "but the OPJ did nothing. He told me we should resolve the problem amicably. Afterwards, he told me he was going to send the file to the prosecutor's office in Makamba. He then revealed that the CNDD-FDD *commune* secretary told him to not charge the soldier because he was from the (CNDD-FDD)."<sup>99</sup>

CNDD-FDD members have long pressured opposition party members to join their ranks, particularly in the run-up to elections. This pressure continued in 2022, with *Imbonerakure* threatening political opponents with physical harm or even death if they refused to join the CNDD-FDD. Recent pressure to join the CNDD-FDD may have stemmed from directions given by Ndikuriyo. In mid-2022, for example, Ndikuriyo told *Imbonerakure* in Muyinga province that they should figure out how to get opposition party members to join the CNDD-FDD by 2023; after that, the CNDD-FDD would move to the next stage, and it would no longer be possible for them to join.<sup>100</sup> During a training at the CNDD-FDD headquarters in March, which Ndikuriyo also attended, one of the speakers told *Imbonerakure* from different parts of the country that they were being trained to use force to defend the party. He said elections would take place soon and the

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<sup>97</sup> Interviews with CNL members, 5 October 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from the CNL representative in Bwambarangwe to the communal administrator, 10 May 2022, and reply from the administrator, 12 May 2022, <https://twitter.com/BurundiCnl/status/1525500846070542338/photo/1>.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with CNL member, 15 June 2022. Article 250 of the Burundian Constitution prohibits members of the armed forces from joining a political party.

<sup>100</sup> Information from confidential source, 5 May 2022.

*Imbonerakure* should make sure people voted for the CNDD-FDD, whether voluntarily or by force.<sup>101</sup>

This seemed to have been put into practice in several provinces. In Bururi, often perceived as an opposition stronghold, *Imbonerakure* warned CNL members that they should join the CNDD-FDD now and that if they didn't, they could be imprisoned or killed in 2023. A former *Imbonerakure* threatened a CNL leader: "In 2020, we didn't get enough votes in this area because of you. We're going to start incarcerating (CNL members) next year. You should know that it won't be like past years. You'll see."<sup>102</sup> An *Imbonerakure* also warned of difficult times ahead: "If the *bakeba* (opponents) knew what the party was preparing, everyone would join us, without exception. We are trained and protected by our leader," he said, referring to Ndikuriyo.<sup>103</sup>

Even though some of this may have been bluster, CNL members took these threats seriously. One of them told a local CNL representative that he ended up joining the CNDD-FDD "to save my life and the life of my children", but that he was "still a CNL member indirectly".<sup>104</sup>

A CNL member in a different *commune* in Bururi also told a local CNL leader that he joined the CNDD-FDD to protect himself. *Imbonerakure* and the local CNDD-FDD representative told him that if he didn't leave the CNL, there was a plan to imprison him to make him lose his job. An *Imbonerakure* told him that in 2023, it wouldn't only be a question of imprisonment, but that they would cut off his head. "How are my kids going to survive?" he asked. "I realised that it would be wise to leave (the party) to save my life."<sup>105</sup>

In other provinces, *Imbonerakure* used past violence as a threat to intimidate CNL members into joining the CNDD-FDD, taking advantage of the impunity for crimes committed against political opponents in recent years.

In early 2020, a group of *Imbonerakure* had attacked a CNL member and his family. Two *Imbonerakure* beat his wife with clubs so viciously that she later died from her injuries. Even after her death, local *Imbonerakure* continued to pressure her husband to join the CNDD-FDD. "The head of the (CNDD-FDD on the *colline*) is no longer human. He's a ferocious animal. He warned me several times that if I don't join, I will be beaten like I was before (in 2020), I won't be able to go to the market, and all the markets and schools belong to the ruling party," said the CNL member.<sup>106</sup> He said that *Imbonerakure* also threatened to beat other CNL members like they had beaten him and his family if they didn't join the CNDD-FDD.

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 26 November 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with CNL member, 26 June 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with local *Imbonerakure* leader, 6 December 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with CNL member, 23 June 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with CNL member, 25 June 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with CNL member, 22 June 2022.

The threats seemed to work. The CNL representative on his *colline* ended up joining the CNDD-FDD in 2022, as did several others. “The CNL representatives who have joined the CNDD-FDD can’t be replaced,” the man said. “Nobody wants to take that risk. And it’s a useless risk because in hard times, nobody cares about us. When a person is killed and no charges are filed, it makes the *Imbonerakure* look like they’re right when they say they’re in control, and they can do whatever they want without any worry. They say they can kill a person and not worry about it, and that’s what happens. They said that all parties will disappear and (only) the party of the eagle (the CNDD-FDD) will remain. (On our *colline*), there’s only one party.”<sup>107</sup>

Some local CNDD-FDD leaders collaborated with members of the security forces to increase pressure on CNL members. On 29 July, military officials arrested a local CNL leader in a northern province, and police and intelligence officials questioned him about starting a rebellion. After he was taken to a police detention centre, he received a message from the CNDD-FDD provincial leader, telling him that if he agreed to join the party, the provincial leader would do what he could to secure his release. The CNL leader had been asked to join the party by the same official and a local CNDD-FDD secretary several months earlier. He refused to do so on each occasion. A few days after his arrest, he and six other men were tried *en flagrance* (an accelerated procedure for trying people caught in the act) and found guilty of endangering internal state security. All the defendants were acquitted on appeal and released on 11 January.<sup>108</sup>

Pressure to join the CNDD-FDD is not limited to members of the CNL. In 2020, a former member of a different opposition party was arrested and accused of supporting the armed opposition group RED-Tabara. Two CNDD-FDD members persuaded the authorities to release her. For the next two years, a CNDD-FDD member relentlessly pestered her and ultimately gave her a choice: she should either write an official letter saying she would leave her party or join the CNDD-FDD in a public ceremony. She said she didn’t want to join the CNDD-FDD, but was worried about her safety after a neighbour, a CNL member, had been abducted, tortured and killed by members of the security forces and intelligence service in late 2021. She eventually joined the CNDD-FDD, but admitted privately that she was still loyal to her original party.<sup>109</sup>

### **Joining the CNDD-FDD for economic survival**

The decision to join the CNDD-FDD is often dictated by economic as well as security concerns. Some people said they joined the ruling party to protect business interests or to access jobs, even though they felt no loyalty to the CNDD-FDD. Discrimination on political grounds is rife, especially in the public sector, and membership of the CNDD-FDD may be the only way to get a job. This is not a new phenomenon, but it became more pronounced as the economic situation worsened; many Burundians struggle to earn a living and have become more dependent on favours from the CNDD-FDD. A CNL member of parliament confirmed this trend, but felt confident that

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with CNL member, 22 June 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Interviews with source knowledgeable about these events, 10 September and 9 December 2022, and 13 January 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with former member of opposition party, 5 December 2022.

CNL members who had joined the CNDD-FDD would still vote for the CNL in the next elections.<sup>110</sup>

In some state institutions, for example public schools and hospitals, CNDD-FDD members receive preferential treatment and are hired and promoted over members of other parties or people with no political affiliation. In a hospital where most of the personnel are CNDD-FDD members, an employee was demoted in mid-2021 and mocked after a member of her family ran afoul of the CNDD-FDD.

“Everyone (in the hospital) is a member of the ruling party except for me,” she said. “You can find someone who doesn’t hold a position at the hospital but behaves like a zealous boss. It means that the person in question is a ‘boss of his bosses’ in the (CNDD-FDD). These are the people who say out loud what others say under their breath.”<sup>111</sup>

Even administrative transfers and promotions are determined by political allegiances rather than merit. In a western province, for example, *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD members had pressured a primary school teacher to join the CNDD-FDD since 2019. When he refused, he was arrested on trumped-up charges and detained for several days. A few weeks later, as punishment for not joining the party, he was transferred to a school far from his home. Tired of the long commute, in mid-2022 he joined the CNDD-FDD. The provincial CNDD-FDD secretary then secured a position for him as the director of a local school as recompense for joining the party.<sup>112</sup>

A provincial government official said that the CNDD-FDD “tries to win over the youth by showing them that the only people who can be given jobs are (CNDD-FDD) members.”<sup>113</sup> A man in his province said that CNDD-FDD officials send *commune* administrators lists of ruling party members they want hired as temporary workers when short-term jobs financed by non-governmental organisations become available.<sup>114</sup>

## 5. 2023: a window for change before the pre-election period

2022 was a year marked by dramatic political changes and feverish speculation about the future of key senior officials, particularly Ndikuriyo. Despite predictions to the contrary, the CNDD-FDD congress of 22 January 2023 did not result in significant changes. Nevertheless, President Ndayishimiye may still try to clip Ndikuriyo’s wings in the near future if he threatens his reformist agenda. Given Ndikuriyo’s popularity among *Imbonerakure*, the consequences of such a move are unpredictable and could lead to further turmoil in 2023.

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with CNL member of parliament, 17 November 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with hospital employee, 4 December 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with confidential source, 3 December 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with provincial government official, 3 December 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 2 December 2022.

In the meantime, the day-to-day reality for most ordinary Burundians remains unchanged. Ground down by the rising cost of living, unable to make their voices heard and excluded from participation in meaningful debates about the future of the country, many Burundian men and women have become disenfranchised and increasingly disillusioned with the president's unfulfilled promises. Despite some improvements in the human rights situation in 2022, a climate of distrust prevails. Following the display of unity at the CNDD-FDD congress in January 2023, the onus is now on President Ndayishimiye to restore public faith in his programme of reforms by pressing ahead with lasting changes – particularly by opening the political space and restoring freedom of expression in the critical period leading up to legislative elections in 2025.