



AN ADVERSARY VANQUISHED

How far will President Ndayishimiye go?

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative

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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 or +1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp). Additional information is available at burundihri.org or on Twitter at twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB.

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Cover photo: President Évariste Ndayishimiye (left) stands alongside Alain Guillaume Bunyoni after he was sworn in as prime minister on 24 June 2020. ©2020 Private

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	How the mighty fall	4
	Methodology	5
2.	The political and human rights significance of Bunyoni's arrest	5
	Human rights not part of the equation	6
	Bunyoni's henchmen and aides arrested	9
	The shrinking circle of "generals"	10
	The wild card at the head of the party: Révérien Ndikuriyo	13
	Cultivating a new crop of loyalists	15
3.	"We surrender to the strongest"	18
	Reactions among CNDD-FDD members	18
	Reactions in the security forces	19
4.	The <i>Imbonerakure</i> : an unpredictable weapon in the CNDD-FDD armoury	21
5.	The CNL in turmoil	24
6.	An uncertain future: will Ndayishimiye succeed in consolidating his position?	27

1. How the mighty fall

On 21 April 2023, President Évariste Ndayishimiye did what was once inconceivable: he ordered the arrest of his former prime minister, Alain Guillaume Bunyoni.

Bunyoni, former rebel combatant turned police officer turned senior politician, had been a fixture of the political scene in Burundi since the current ruling party came to power in 2005. Known for his ostentatious wealth and his role in masterminding killings and other attacks against those who got in his way, he seemed almost untouchable. Most Burundians never dreamed he would end up in prison.

But Bunyoni's arrogance and riches alienated him from many influential 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). While Bunyoni was a major figure in the political establishment, particularly under Ndayishimiye's predecessor, Pierre Nkurunziza, who died in 2020, President Ndayishimiye had gradually marginalised him and dismissed him from the post of prime minister in September 2022. Until then, he had tolerated Bunyoni's ego and obstructive behaviour. But in 2023, when rumours began circulating that Bunyoni may have been plotting a coup against him, a line was crossed. By then, Ndayishimiye had carefully appointed loyal political and security officials in key national institutions, giving him the confidence and backing he needed to arrest his nemesis.

With Bunyoni's arrest, Ndayishimiye appeared to redraw the political power map in the CNDD-FDD. By engineering Bunyoni's downfall and persuading enough senior party members to back his strategy, he reinforced a longstanding CNDD-FDD trend: when the tide turns against you, regardless of who you are, you're likely to end up in prison, in exile or stripped of any influence.

Two of Bunyoni's collaborators – police officer Désiré Uwamahoro and intelligence official Samuel Destino Bapfumukeko, who have also committed numerous serious human rights violations – were arrested too.

Bunyoni's arrest exposed the shifting dynamics in the CNDD-FDD and signalled Ndayishimiye's willingness to act decisively against opponents within his party. In less than three years, he had broken with some CNDD-FDD practices and did what many thought he was too weak to do. He sidelined, fired or redeployed some generals and other hardliners, placed people loyal to him in key positions and gradually reduced the influence of those he perceived as threats or untrustworthy allies.

Despite this new display of strength, Ndayishimiye has been careful not to cross certain lines. He has not purged the party of all his potential opponents and has allowed some of the old guard to keep senior government positions. Yet some hardliners in the CNDD-FDD, who may see their

power waning, resent his latest moves, and while they may not currently appear to pose a threat to him, that could quickly change.

This report explores the significance of Bunyoni's arrest and its possible impact on the dynamics in the CNDD-FDD, on President Ndayishimiye's position and on Burundi's future political direction. It considers whether these and other developments could result in long-awaited human rights reforms or simply lead to a realignment at the top of the political hierarchy, with business as usual in terms of political repression and silencing of dissent. It also outlines the likely consequences of turmoil in the main opposition party, the National Freedom Congress (*Congrès national pour la liberté*, CNL), particularly in advance of legislative elections in 2025.

Methodology

The information and analysis in this report is based on information from a range of sources in different provinces in Burundi, including members of the CNDD-FDD and the CNL, members of the security forces, and Burundians with no political affiliation. The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) also interviewed former members of the government and political parties in exile.

BHRI wrote to President Ndayishimiye, to the minister of interior, community development and public security, Martin Niteretse, to the prosecutor general, Léonard Manirakiza, and to the secretary general of the CNDD-FDD, Révérien Ndikuriyo, before publishing this report, with a view to incorporating their responses. None of them replied.

The main events described in this report triggered numerous rumours and speculation in Burundi, many of which have proved impossible to verify. Information about the evolving dynamics in the CNDD-FDD and about the president's intentions is restricted to a small circle. Many CNDD-FDD and government officials are reluctant to express their views openly, even several months after Bunyoni's arrest.

2. The political and human rights significance of Bunyoni's arrest

After three years of Ndayishimiye's presidency, many Burundians have become disillusioned with his failure or inability to implement his promises of reform.¹ Some are also critical of the government's inability to handle the economic crisis and its failure to address financial mismanagement, chronic shortages of fuel and spiralling prices. "The economic situation is terrible. It affects everyone. I have brothers in the police and in the army, and they don't have any money," said a former government official in exile. An official who worked closely with the president had

¹ For an overview of Ndayishimiye's human rights record during his first year in power, 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, June 2021. For information on developments in 2022 and 2023, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative's more recent publications available at https://burundihri.org/index_english.php.

confided to him: “We, the intellectuals (those with a high level of education), we can see everything that’s going wrong. The government has no vision. But we can’t say anything.”²

The economic crisis even affects members of the ruling party and could erode confidence in the president in his own ranks – including among powerful CNDD-FDD businessmen, some of whom were reportedly close to Bunyoni.³ With Bunyoni out of the way, Ndayishimiye can no longer blame his former prime minister for the mismanagement of the economy or large-scale embezzlement. Persistent rumours about the increasing wealth of Ndayishimiye’s wife, Angéline Ndayishimiye, and her taste for expensive clothes and international travel have not improved the president’s public image. Nor has the fact that he has surrounded himself with officials who either lack the ability to adopt sound economic policies or are not allowed to do so.

Against this backdrop, President Ndayishimiye’s decision to arrest Bunyoni felt like a momentous act. He had finally shown he was capable of dealing with one of his main rivals, reversing the image some had of him as a weak leader who avoided confrontation. But it may take more than that to secure his future and the long-term support of the heavyweights in the CNDD-FDD.

Human rights not part of the equation

Bunyoni’s arrest, confirmed by the prosecutor general on 23 April,⁴ was big news in Burundi. In WhatsApp groups and private conversations, people remembered their relatives who were killed in previous years. Whether Bunyoni was involved in those killings or not, his arrest triggered negative memories. “Bunyoni was really hated. People say: it’s fine, he can go to jail,” said a member of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Burundi.⁵ Some tried to imagine what Bunyoni himself might have been thinking in the face of such a dramatic humiliation. “Bunyoni never imagined he could be put down like this,” said a justice official.⁶

While rumours that Bunyoni and people close to him may have been planning a coup to topple Ndayishimiye remain unsubstantiated, it is clear that Bunyoni’s arrest was the culmination of personal rivalry and tension between him and Ndayishimiye. Bunyoni had blocked some of Ndayishimiye’s announced reforms, making him look weak and ineffective. By first firing him in September 2022, then ordering his arrest in April 2023, Ndayishimiye got back into the driving seat and strengthened his position almost instantly.

² Interview with former government official in exile, 12 April 2023.

³ Interview with CNDD-FDD member with business interests linked to the government, 24 August 2023.

⁴ Parquet général de la République, “Communiqué de presse”, https://twitter.com/MiniJustice_BDI/status/1650041134977089536, 23 April 2023.

⁵ Interview with member of an NGO in Burundi, 25 May 2023.

⁶ Conversation with local justice official, 8 June 2023.



Alain Guillaume Bunyoni prepares to take his oath of office as prime minister on 24 June 2020. © 2020 private

Although Bunyoni's arrest boosted Ndayishimiye's image, few people believe it will fundamentally change "the system" – the entrenched CNDD-FDD apparatus that has clung to power for almost 20 years. The fact that Ndayishimiye had chosen to replace Bunyoni as prime minister with a man who has an equally bloody past – Gervais Ndirakobuca – did not help (see "The shrinking circle of generals"). "It's internal CNDD-FDD business. The 'system' is there and human rights violations continue," said a former opposition politician.⁷

There was also consensus that while the infighting in the CNDD-FDD could get nasty – as it has done many times before – in the end, the interests of the party would trump and its main protagonists would close ranks if they felt the CNDD-FDD's future was in jeopardy. "Always put the party's interests first" has long been the doctrine and saved the CNDD-FDD on several occasions, particularly when a long list of senior figures, known as the *frondeurs*, defected in 2015. But in 2023, who or what constitutes the leadership of the party and which protagonists will guarantee its future has become increasingly unclear. Dynamics at the top levels of the CNDD-FDD have become ever more opaque and intentions ever more secretive, particularly since Bunyoni's arrest. Financial interests have emerged as a dominant explanation for the actions of certain individuals, even if it is sometimes difficult to disentangle personal from political interests. "The party is a family. You cling to the family for your personal interests," said a former military officer, originally from the armed opposition.⁸

It quickly became apparent that Bunyoni would not be held to account for his involvement in human rights violations. "Bunyoni wasn't eliminated to do good. He was sidelined out of fear," said

⁷ Interview with former opposition politician, 18 May 2023.

⁸ Interview with former military officer, 27 March 2022.

a Burundian academic.⁹ Bunyoni was charged with endangering internal state security, endangering the proper functioning of the national economy, illegal appropriation of interest, illegal possession of weapons and insulting the head of state.¹⁰ None of these charges relate to killings, torture and other crimes committed during some of the worst political repression in Burundi in recent years, when Bunyoni was minister of public security from 2007 to 2011 and from 2015 to 2020.¹¹

This didn't come as a surprise. Few people expected him to be brought to justice for ordering or overseeing human rights violations, since that would make other senior officials in key positions fearful of prosecution and risk precipitating the collapse of the whole CNDD-FDD edifice. "The crimes committed by Bunyoni... and others are not considered crimes by the CNDD-FDD government. These crimes served the government and it went along with them happily. Then it turned into a personal conflict and Bunyoni went too far in challenging Neva (Ndayishimiye's nickname)," said a former CNL politician.¹²

On 13 July 2023, the spokesperson of the Supreme Court announced that Bunyoni had appeared before the pre-trial chamber for a ruling on his preventive detention and that the case was following normal procedure. She said investigations were ongoing and the prosecutor had requested additional time to investigate new information, without giving any details.¹³ After an initial period of detention at the national intelligence service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR), Bunyoni was sent to Ngozi prison, then transferred to Gitega prison, where a special cell had been built for him. At the time of writing, no date has been set for his trial.

Some Burundians have expressed doubts as to whether Bunyoni will be tried at all. "How can he be tried without trying the (CNDD-FDD) system?" said a Burundian academic.¹⁴ A provincial CNDD-FDD representative said: "Alain Guillaume Bunyoni won't be convicted... Do you think he'll be able to defend himself in court in relation to this illicit wealth? Not at all. I know this system and they work together."¹⁵ Others speculate that he may be tried behind closed doors. Many senior government and CNDD-FDD officials would have much to fear from a public trial in which Bunyoni could implicate them and reveal their secrets.

When news of his arrest first emerged but before his whereabouts were known, there was speculation that there may have been a plot to kill him, although that could have triggered even

⁹ Interview with Burundian academic, 7 June 2023.

¹⁰ Supreme Court, "Chambre de conseil du 08/05/23, extrait du rôle pénal", 5 May 2023, and comments by Agnès Bangiricenge, spokesperson of the Supreme Court, during a public broadcast in Muramvya on 12 July 2023.

¹¹ For details, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "A stranglehold on Burundi's future", https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

¹² Interview with former CNL politician, 18 May 2023.

¹³ Comments by Agnès Bangiricenge, spokesperson of the Supreme Court, during a public broadcast in Muramvya on 12 July 2023. See also Iwacu, "Émission publique des porte-paroles: Le gouvernement salue le 'patriotisme' manifesté par la délégation burundaise à Genève", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/emission-publique-des-porte-paroles-le-gouvernement-salue-le-patriotisme-manifeste-par-la-delegation-burundaise-a-geneve/>, 13 July 2023.

¹⁴ Interview with Burundian academic, 7 June 2023.

¹⁵ Interview with provincial CNDD-FDD representative, 12 May 2023.

more serious problems for Ndayishimiye. A former senior military official summed up the dilemma: “Bunyoni is inconvenient alive and he is inconvenient dead.”¹⁶

Bunyoni’s henchmen and aides arrested

On 18 April 2023, three days before Bunyoni was arrested, his former right-hand man, police officer Désiré Uwamahoro, was arrested, allegedly on suspicion of conspiring with Bunyoni. Uwamahoro was initially detained and questioned by the SNR in Bujumbura, like Bunyoni, then sent to Gitega prison, and finally transferred to Ngozi prison in July.

It later emerged that intelligence official Samuel Destino Bapfumukeko was also arrested, allegedly in connection with the same events, as were three other individuals: engineer Côme Niyonsaba, Melchiade Nduwimana and Isaac Banigwaninzigo. All five of Bunyoni’s alleged collaborators have been charged with endangering internal state security, violating professional secrets and failing to uphold public solidarity.¹⁷

Uwamahoro and Bapfumukeko have both committed serious human rights violations in the past. Uwamahoro, who previously headed the police anti-riot brigade, was involved in killings, torture, ill-treatment and other human rights violations over several years.¹⁸ Bapfumukeko personally tortured government opponents when he was the provincial head of the SNR in Makamba province and has been cited in connection with illegal detention and enforced disappearances, particularly in 2015 and 2016.¹⁹ Their arrest was a golden opportunity for Ndayishimiye to live up to his promises and make sure these men were brought to justice for their involvement in human rights violations. Even if the main motivation for their arrest was the suspicion that they had been complicit with Bunyoni, that could and should have opened the door to prosecuting them for offences related to their participation in human rights violations.

The same strategy should have applied to former intelligence official Alfred Innocent Museremu, who was questioned by the SNR in April 2023, reportedly on suspicion of collaborating with Bunyoni, but not detained. Museremu’s participation in serious human rights violations has been well documented over several years – most recently, when he was head of the internal intelligence department of the SNR, and previously as head of the traffic police during the 2015 crisis in Burundi.²⁰ But in a pattern that has become typical, the authorities simply demoted him instead of

¹⁶ Interview with former senior military official, 5 May 2023.

¹⁷ Supreme Court, “Chambre de conseil du 20/07/2023, extrait du rôle pénal”, 20 July 2023.

¹⁸ For further information on Uwamahoro’s human rights record and his relationship with Bunyoni, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A stranglehold on Burundi’s future”, https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

¹⁹ Notes of confidential interview with torture victim, on file with BHRI; interview with person close to a victim of torture and enforced disappearance, 17 July 2023; “Déclaration du FOCODE no.033/2017 du 15 décembre 2017”, <https://ndondeza.org/emile-kwizigira-emmanuel-bizimana-faustin-gashema/>, 15 December 2017.

²⁰ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A stranglehold on Burundi’s future”, https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020, and “The Kira Hospital saga: an example of the failings of Burundi’s justice system,” https://burundihri.org/english/october_2022.php, October 2022. For information on Museremu’s removal from the post of head of internal intelligence at the SNR, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative,

bringing him to justice. In mid-May 2023, he was banished to what some described as a “non post” in the regional police headquarters in Muyinga, from which he could do little or less harm.²¹ As soon as he arrived there, he requested a period of leave and was seen in Bujumbura. According to a police source, later that month, the minister of interior, community development and public security, suspecting that Museremu might have been planning to leave the country, demanded that he be called back to the regional police headquarters and account for his movements.²²

The calculations that led to the arrest of Bunyoni, Uwamahoro and Bapfumukeko and the marginalisation of other known human rights violators were not based on any concern for human rights; they were motivated by the president’s desire to weaken his adversaries and maintain his hold on power. Ndayishimiye may currently be the only senior official able to shift the direction of the government in terms of human rights and justice. Unlike some of his contemporaries in the CNDD-FDD who have killed and tortured their opponents, he is not known to have been personally involved in serious crimes, either as a combatant with the CNDD-FDD when it was a rebel group or in the various positions he has held in government.²³ But under Ndayishimiye’s presidency, impunity for senior officials responsible for serious human rights violations is as entrenched as ever.

With Bunyoni in prison and other former powerful officials marginalised, Ndayishimiye could choose to take a bolder stand against impunity, but instead, he appears to faithfully follow the CNDD-FDD tradition of punishing perceived opponents and protecting senior loyalists. The scale of serious human rights violations in Burundi may have decreased in the last two years, but the factors that enabled these violations to take place remain untouched, particularly the politicisation of the justice system which Ndayishimiye has been unwilling to tackle. The status quo, in this respect, suits him: he can intervene when it is in his interest – or when sufficient pressure is applied on him – or not when it isn’t. This should be a cause of concern, particularly in advance of legislative elections in 2025 and presidential elections in 2027. Prior to previous elections, SNR agents, police officers and members of the CNDD-FDD youth league, the *Imbonerakure*, have cracked down on political opponents, killing, arresting and ill-treating scores of them.²⁴

The shrinking circle of “generals”

In the first months of his presidency, Ndayishimiye was surrounded by hardliners in the CNDD-FDD, particularly the close-knit circle of “generals” who held sway under his predecessor, Pierre

“An uneasy alliance: who holds the power in Burundi?”, https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023.php, February 2023.

²¹ Museremu was named head of the department for social action in the eastern region police headquarters.

²² Conversation with police source, 8 June 2023.

²³ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “Party loyalist or reformer? The man who could become Burundi’s next president”, https://burundihri.org/english/april_2020.php, April 2020.

²⁴ For examples of violent attacks against government opponents before the 2020 elections, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “The deadly price of opposition”, <https://burundihri.org/english/opposition.php>, June 2020-February 2022.

Nkurunziza.²⁵ Reluctant to give up their power and resistant to reforms that would threaten their privileged positions, some of the generals, such as Bunyoni, set about obstructing some of Ndayishimiye's policies. Some former colleagues and battlefield comrades of Ndayishimiye had predicted that Ndayishimiye would not have the strength to stand up to these generals, in part because of his aversion to conflict.²⁶ Others believed that the only way Ndayishimiye would be able to govern would be through a gradual approach, by marginalising these hardliners one by one over a period of a few years. The latter predictions have turned out to be broadly correct.

In addition to arresting Bunyoni, Ndayishimiye removed other senior officials, including Gabriel Nizigama, alias Tibia, dismissed from his post as presidential chief-of-staff in September 2022. He left Nizigama in limbo for several months, then, in May 2023, demoted him to an inconsequential post of advisor in the ministry of interior, community development and public security.²⁷

While Bunyoni and Nizigama had made clear their dislike of Ndayishimiye behind the scenes, another potentially problematic figure played his cards differently. Gervais Ndirakobuca, alias Ndakugarika ("I will kill you" in Kirundi), the former minister of interior, community development and public security known for his brutality in previous years, chose to align himself behind Ndayishimiye and declare his support for his reforms. He was rewarded with the post of prime minister when Bunyoni was fired in September 2022.²⁸ But alliances in the CNDD-FDD are notoriously fickle, and many of the CNDD-FDD strongmen have repeatedly changed sides over the past 20 years, according to where they perceived the centre of power and who they thought would best protect their interests.

A Burundian academic described the relationship between Ndayishimiye and Ndirakobuca as "an alliance of convenience... In the CNDD-FDD, there has never been much consistency... There have always been alliances of convenience for the survival of the system."²⁹ Under President Nkurunziza, alliances between senior officials shifted repeatedly, with some of the generals (including Ndayishimiye) taking a stand in 2014 against the excessive powers granted by Nkurunziza to Bunyoni and the former head of the SNR, Adolphe Nshimirimana, who was assassinated in 2015.³⁰

²⁵ The term "generals" is used in Burundi to refer to the group of senior CNDD-FDD military officials who fought as combatants in the civil war, when the CNDD-FDD was an armed group; many of them were behind a policy of violent repression under President Nkurunziza.

²⁶ For a profile of Évariste Ndayishimiye, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "Party loyalist or reformer? The man who could become Burundi's next president", https://burundihri.org/english/april_2020.php, April 2020.

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/Ikiriho/status/1658450355930161160/photo/2>.

²⁸ For further information, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "An uneasy alliance: who holds the power in Burundi?", https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023.php, February 2023. For information on Ndirakobuca's human rights record, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "A stranglehold on Burundi's future", https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

²⁹ Interview with Burundian academic, 7 June 2023.

³⁰ Iwacu, "Cinq clefs pour comprendre le 'départ' de Guillaume Bunyoni et Adolphe Nshimirimana", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/cinq-clefs-pour-comprendre-le-depart-de-guillaume-bunyoni-et-adolphe-nshimirimana/>, 8 December 2014.



Prime minister Gervais Ndirakobuca watches events during *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba province on 26 August 2023.
© 2023 private

Under Ndayishimiye’s presidency, the circle of powerful generals has shrunk further. The group of around a dozen generals who were a permanent presence under Nkurunziza has been reduced to barely three: President Ndayishimiye, prime minister Gervais Ndirakobuca and Prime Niyongabo, chief-of-staff of the armed forces. A few others, such as Silas Ntigurirwa, military advisor to the president since September 2022, still hold senior positions on paper, but are not seen as major players. The political dynamics at the top of “the system” are therefore very different from what they were when Ndayishimiye became president in 2020.

Prime Niyongabo is a key piece of the puzzle; as head of the armed forces, his position could determine Ndayishimiye’s future. Niyongabo and Ndayishimiye have had a close personal relationship for many years, and until recently, Niyongabo’s support to Ndayishimiye was critical in the balance of power. But his support cannot be taken for granted: Niyongabo is an inscrutable character whose loyalties have been questioned at critical moments. In May 2015, Niyongabo was widely believed to have sided with the military officers who launched a failed coup d’État against President Nkurunziza, only to then switch sides and deploy loyalist forces to defend the president; he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in September 2015.

More recently, there were rumours that Niyongabo was not in favour of Bunyoni’s arrest because he feared that if Bunyoni were prosecuted for economic crimes, he would risk being exposed too. Niyongabo is often described as one of the wealthiest senior officials, having made a fortune in recent years through opaque deals and major stakes in key industries, such as the pharmaceutical sector. His rumoured corruption increases his unreliability, especially as he may no longer feel completely immune from prosecution after Bunyoni’s arrest; it also accounts for his loss of popularity among low paid members of the military – factors which Ndayishimiye will have to take

into account. “Prime can go one way or the other, so Neva lets him get rich in exchange for his security,” said a Burundian academic.³¹ Furthermore, while the support of the army may protect Ndayishimiye against the threat of a coup d’État, it does not protect him against other forms of attack or revenge from potential opponents.

Were Niyongabo to turn against Ndayishimiye, the consequences could be serious. “Prime can’t be arrested as he has the army behind him. It would be too risky for Neva,” said a former CNL politician.³² A former military officer, originally from the armed opposition, described Niyongabo as “a good traitor... He is clever. He only looks after his own interests. He has been that way since the 2015 putsch. It’s the same thing today with Neva. He (Niyongabo) is watching to see who is the strongest. He’ll support whoever will act in his interests... For now, Prime is with Neva... (but) he doesn’t reveal his position.”³³

The wild card at the head of the party: Révérien Ndikuriyo

One person who has openly undermined Ndayishimiye is the secretary general of the CNDD-FDD, Révérien Ndikuriyo. Believed to have been an ally of Bunyoni, Ndikuriyo, a hardliner, has not hidden his disagreements with Ndayishimiye and has flaunted his allegiance to Nkurunziza by publicly honouring his legacy.

Divisions in the CNDD-FDD leadership between a pro-Nkurunziza group, with Ndikuriyo as one of its most prominent proponents, and a pro-Ndayishimiye group persist. These divisions were particularly noticeable when Ndayishimiye was absent at public events to commemorate the third anniversary of Nkurunziza’s death in June 2023; he attended a summit abroad, while Ndikuriyo led the commemorations in several locations in Burundi. Ndikuriyo also led commemorations on 2 August 2023 to mark the eighth anniversary of the assassination of Adolphe Nshimirimana, held up as a hero by many in the pro-Nkurunziza camp. Ndayishimiye was absent from the commemoration as he was returning from a trip to Russia and China.³⁴

The role of the *Imbonerakure* has been a bone of contention between Ndikuriyo and Ndayishimiye, with Ndikuriyo wanting to continue using the *Imbonerakure* as a parallel security force and Ndayishimiye preferring them to contribute to developing the country.³⁵

However, in a high profile, animated speech at the celebration of *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba on 26 August 2023, attended by Burundi’s most senior officials, Ndayishimiye appeared to

³¹ Interview with Burundian academic, 7 June 2023.

³² Interview with former CNL politician, 18 May 2023.

³³ Interview with former military officer, 20 May 2023.

³⁴ Agence burundaise de presse, “Commemoration du 8ème anniversaire de l’assassinat du Lieutenant Général Adolphe Nshimirimana, <https://abpinfo.bi/2023/08/03/commemoration-du-8eme-anniversaire-de-l-assassinat-du-lieutenant-general-adolphe-nshimirimana/>, 3 August 2023.

³⁵ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An uneasy alliance: who holds the power in Burundi?”, https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023.php, February 2023.

backtrack. In comments designed to show his hardline credentials and flatter the *Imbonerakure*, he praised them for defending Burundi's borders and encouraged them take part in patrols. "He who doesn't guard his country is not an *Imbonerakure*. He who is afraid is not an *Imbonerakure*. An *Imbonerakure* patrols. I saw you marching today and I was very pleased," he told an enthusiastic audience. "Burundi is guarded because we have the *Imbonerakure*. Whoever doesn't believe it, let them come and attack us... The *Imbonerakure* can surround all Burundi's borders... Remain vigilant." At the same time, he urged the *Imbonerakure* to take part in development and income generating activities. He said that he and the secretary general of the party (Ndikuriyo) had decided to ask all CNDD-FDD members to contribute to development projects for *Imbonerakure* in every province. He adopted a defiant tone towards the international community, attacking the "colonisers" – a term used by hardline CNDD-FDD members to refer to Westerners in general – and asserted that Burundi was standing on its own two feet, in part thanks to the *Imbonerakure*. He closed his speech by promising that he was on the side of the *Imbonerakure* and vowed that no one could separate them.³⁶



Révérien Ndikuriyo, Secretary General of the CNDD-FDD, salutes during *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba province on 26 August 2023. © 2023 private

Ndikuriyo's speech at the *Imbonerakure* Day celebrations attracted less attention than the president's. Since Bunyoni's arrest, Ndikuriyo has been less openly defiant towards Ndayishimiye. His current attitude towards him remains unclear. A person close to Ndikuriyo said that after a private meeting with Ndayishimiye in June 2023, Ndikuriyo appeared, reluctantly, to fall into line.³⁷

³⁶ Extracts from President Ndayishimiye's speech at the *Imbonerakure* Day celebrations in Makamba, 26 August 2023, and information from a person present at the event, 27 August 2023. See also SOS Médias, "Burundi : Les Imbonerakure de nouveau mis à honneur et sollicités", <https://www.sosmediasburundi.org/2023/08/26/burundi-les-imbonerakure-de-nouveau-mis-a-lhonneur-et-sollicites/>, 26 August 2023.

³⁷ Interview with a person with first-hand knowledge of the situation, 9 August 2023.

A provincial CNDD-FDD representative said in late July that the relationship between the two men was improving.³⁸ But as always with the CNDD-FDD, alliances can change from one moment to the next.

There were allegations that Ndayishimiye tried to remove Ndikuriyo from the post of secretary general of the CNDD-FDD in January 2023, but Ndikuriyo has held on to his position.³⁹ For the time being, Ndayishimiye may prefer to manage his transgressions quietly to avoid a public confrontation that may not serve his interests. In late August 2023, a well-connected CNDD-FDD member who supported the president said that Ndikuriyo's "stubborn" personality meant that he would not surrender completely to Ndayishimiye, but his capacity to unsettle or cause harm to him appeared to have diminished.⁴⁰

A person close to Ndayishimiye explained that Bunyoni had many allies, but Ndayishimiye couldn't arrest them all. "It's a long list and they're known. Even Kora (Ndikuriyo's nickname) is behind Bunyoni, but Neva left him alone. Imagine if Bunyoni, Kora and the president of the parliament (Gélase Ndabirabe) were all arrested at once. Wouldn't it be a disaster for the CNDD-FDD?" He said that Ndayishimiye's decision not to go after all Bunyoni's suspected allies was part of a political strategy, intended to protect the party.⁴¹ But the question hanging over the top echelons of the CNDD-FDD remains: will Ndayishimiye make another move and if so, who will be his next target? The president has set the wheels in motion. His next moves will depend in part on how far particular individuals have gone in crossing him, and in part on how much he can benefit from removing them from the political equation.

Cultivating a new crop of loyalists

Ndayishimiye has also gradually reconfigured the make-up of the government and the civil service. Many mid to high level posts are now held by individuals who were not previously well known and keep a low public profile. Those holding positions in the government today include different categories of people, particularly from Gitega, Ndayishimiye's province of origin, as well as "army guys who were feeling frustrated with the generals and who were getting nothing... a group of survivors, like Prime (Niyongabo), who always go with the wind... and those who felt frustrated by the former government."⁴² Other officials in strategic positions have been chosen for their loyalty and obedience, for example the minister of interior, community development and public security, Martin Niteretse, who succeeded his former boss, Ndirakobuca. In one of the more recent high-level changes, on 25 July former Supreme Court judge Léonard Manirakiza became the new prosecutor general, replacing Sylvestre Nyandwi who had held the post since 2016.

³⁸ Conversation with provincial CNDD-FDD representative, 23 July 2023.

³⁹ Interview with diplomat, 1 March 2023.

⁴⁰ Interview with CNDD-FDD member with business interests linked to the government, 24 August 2023.

⁴¹ Conversation with person close to the president, 2 June 2023.

⁴² Interview with NGO representative in Burundi, 25 May 2023.

The head of the national intelligence service, Ildephonse Habarurema, is rarely spoken of, although his institution continues to be at the heart of the CNDD-FDD's strategy to hold on to power and repress the opposition. In September 2022, police commissioner Domitien Niyonkuru was appointed to the influential position of head of internal intelligence in the SNR. Originally from Makamba province, Niyonkuru is reportedly close to Révérien Ndikuriyo and serves as the vice-president of Pax Burundi Foundation, a private foundation set up by Ndikuriyo.⁴³

Several well-known human rights violators, particularly former intelligence officials, have been deployed to embassies abroad, away from the public eye, and have been replaced with relatively unknown agents. Others, such as the notorious intelligence agent Alexis Ndayikengurukiye alias Nkoroka, remain in post in Burundi, but appear to be less active than in previous years.⁴⁴ Several other officials who held considerable power under Nkurunziza have been cast aside and almost forgotten about – for example, former deputy head of the police Godefroid Bizimana, who, at the time of writing, was working as an advisor in the president's office, and Étienne Ntakirutimana alias Steve, former head of the SNR, who is hardly ever mentioned or seen in public. “Steve had already been pushed out. He's nothing anymore. Now, it's just Neva who remains with Prime and Ndakugarika,” said a former senior military official.⁴⁵

One of the results of these moves has been the marginalisation of certain officials responsible for serious human rights violations, but that does not appear to be Ndayishimiye's main motivation. His primary aim is to shore up his power base. It is likely that he will continue with this progressive removal of obstacles in the period leading up to legislative elections in 2025, ensuring his candidates are favoured and, most importantly, preparing the ground for the 2027 presidential election in which he is expected to seek a second term. “Neva is using his power to stop anybody from emerging... He wants to coerce people to follow. But it's not about good governance. It's about keeping power,” said a representative of an NGO in Burundi.⁴⁶

Some observers still doubt Ndayishimiye's ability to hold on to power. The economic crisis has exacerbated frustration and intensified resentment among CNDD-FDD members and opponents alike. A CNDD-FDD member, loyal to former President Nkurunziza, said that many members of his party had lost confidence in Ndayishimiye because of the economic situation and government measures that didn't produce any results. He expressed frustration that the resumption of relations between the Burundian government and foreign donors under Ndayishimiye had not led to any improvement in the economic situation.⁴⁷ A CNL member complained: “Look how the population is frustrated: no fuel, no drinking water, no sugar, spiralling prices in the markets, a worrying level of unemployment, all while the DD (CNDD-FDD) are squabbling up there.”⁴⁸

⁴³ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An uneasy alliance: who holds the power in Burundi?”, https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023.php, February 2023.

⁴⁴ For information on Ndayikengurukiye, see The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “A stranglehold on Burundi's future”, https://burundihri.org/english/december_2020.php, December 2020.

⁴⁵ Interview with former senior military official, 12 April 2023.

⁴⁶ Interview with NGO representative in Burundi, 25 May 2023.

⁴⁷ Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 19 August 2023.

⁴⁸ Interview with CNL member, 13 July 2023.

Ndayishimiye has attempted to allay some of these concerns through a populist approach, presenting himself as an ally of victims of corruption and extortion. For example, in a press conference on 2 August 2023, he publicly shamed corrupt local government officials and judges, and called on the public to support him in his efforts to halt corruption. “We should rise up against these (corrupt) people,” he said. “I have risen up (against them), so why aren’t you, the population, supporting me?... We can’t accept that the population is always sad... As we’re together, there are no more worries. The worry was when the president wasn’t with the citizens, but if we’re together with the population against a handful of people, they can’t (succeed).”⁴⁹

In his speech on *Imbonerakure* Day on 26 August 2023, he referred to the government’s duty to protect human rights and lashed out again at corrupt and abusive officials: “Officials who commit injustice or who are corrupt, let them go home... If tomorrow you are an official behaving in this way, don’t be surprised if you’re overthrown. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that leaders should make sure human rights are respected. If this doesn’t happen, the people can get rid of leaders who commit injustice.” Responding implicitly to criticism of his failure to act, he warned: “It’s time people realised that the time for joking is over. Some people think we’re joking... Some people have said that my bark is worse than my bite.”⁵⁰



President Évariste Ndayishimiye (waving) and his wife, Angéline Ndayishimiye, greet the crowd during *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba province on 26 August 2023. © 2023 private

⁴⁹ Extracts from President Évariste Ndayishimiye’s press conference at Bujumbura airport, 2 August 2023.

⁵⁰ Ndayishimiye used the Kirundi expression “arakanga ntaryana”, which refers to someone or something whose appearance instils fear but is not harmful. Extracts from President Ndayishimiye’s speech at the *Imbonerakure* Day celebrations in Makamba, 26 August 2023. See also Iwacu, “Imbonerakure Day : Quand Neva rappelle la Déclaration universelle des droits de l’Homme...”, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/imbonerakure-day-quand-neva-rappelle-la-declaration-universelle-des-droits-de-lhomme/>, 28 August 2023.

It is unclear to what extent these grand speeches and gestures convince his critics. A former government official questioned whether Ndayishimiye could last until the 2027 presidential elections: “No one is reassured, not even those who take advantage of his weakness. I don’t see how he can impose himself. I don’t know what or who the alternative is, but it’s likely to come from the pro-Nkurunziza camp.”⁵¹

3. “We surrender to the strongest”

Reactions among CNDD-FDD members

At first, some CNDD-FDD members were incredulous when they heard about Bunyoni’s arrest. “I don’t understand how the man we used to greet by kneeling before him is now wearing green” (the colour of prisoners’ uniforms in Burundi), said an *Imbonerakure*.⁵²

Other CNDD-FDD representatives and grassroots members at provincial and local levels reacted to the news with guarded wariness – as they had done when Bunyoni was dismissed from the post of prime minister in 2022: a combination of caution, suspicion, fear and, in some cases, tentative opportunism. There was talk of a witch-hunt against Bunyoni’s suspected collaborators, and a sense that nothing could be taken for granted anymore. Some CNDD-FDD members feared that Bunyoni’s arrest could have negative consequences as his supporters could seek revenge; to date, those fears have not materialised.

Bunyoni’s arrest led to a noticeable increase in Ndayishimiye’s popularity among some CNDD-FDD members: having got rid of such a formidable obstacle, the president suddenly seemed stronger and worth supporting. CNDD-FDD members began aligning themselves behind him; these included local party representatives who had previously opposed him or thought he was too weak. Some of this repositioning may have been motivated by self-protection or opportunism.

There were exceptions. Ndayishimiye’s treatment of Bunyoni did not go down well with all CNDD-FDD members. A provincial CNDD-FDD representative, speaking less than a month after Bunyoni’s arrest, was critical of Ndayishimiye “because he wants to take decisions unilaterally... It’s not Évariste Ndayishimiye who should have the final say on the Bunyoni case.” He claimed that Ndayishimiye did whatever he wanted without consulting the CNDD-FDD’s decision-making bodies – for example, engaging in dialogue or external negotiations, whereas according to him, overtures towards the international community were not part of the CNDD-FDD’s national policy.⁵³ However, Ndayishimiye has at times discussed significant policies and other matters with senior members of the CNDD-FDD.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Interview with former government official in exile, 12 April 2023.

⁵² Conversation with *Imbonerakure*, 8 June 2023.

⁵³ Interview with provincial CNDD-FDD representative, 12 May 2023.

⁵⁴ See, for example, <https://twitter.com/RTNBurundi/status/1676523683165110274>.

A justice official – a CNDD-FDD member whose sympathies lie with former president Nkurunziza – predicted that Ndayishimiye’s internal opponents would end up overthrowing him because, according to him, he had failed in all sectors of public life. He criticised Ndayishimiye and his wife for wasting the country’s dwindling foreign currency on numerous trips abroad and claimed that Ndayishimiye had only increased the salaries of the security forces (see below) to protect himself against internal opponents in the CNDD-FDD.⁵⁵

A local CNDD-FDD member who had close connections with the party’s national headquarters said that CNDD-FDD members were divided, and there were different WhatsApp groups of party members with diametrically opposed views.⁵⁶ An *Imbonerakure*, speaking a few weeks after Bunyoni’s arrest, said that he and some other members of the youth league had found the contradictions and disagreements in the senior levels of their party disturbing; they were still waiting for the dust to settle. “We’re like observers waiting for a goal to be scored before we start clapping. We follow the masses,” he said.⁵⁷



Adolescent girls march during *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba province on 26 August 2023. Youth who participate in CNDD-FDD activities are known as eagle chicks (*ibiswi vy’inkona* in Kirundi), a name linked to the party’s mascot, the eagle. © 2023 private

Reactions in the security forces

Soon after Bunyoni’s arrest, some police and soldiers began sending messages on WhatsApp groups saying that if anyone tried to attack Ndayishimiye, they would kill them. Some replaced their profile pictures with photos of Ndayishimiye and posted videos of police dancing to express their

⁵⁵ Interview with justice official, 2 August 2023.

⁵⁶ Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 13 July 2023.

⁵⁷ Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 8 June 2023.

support for the president.⁵⁸ An army officer, speaking three months later, said: “Here, in the army, it’s already settled, Neva is the one we want. Whoever touches Neva will be touching the army.”⁵⁹ Some police officers said they were willing to defend the president if he were to stand for one or more further terms.⁶⁰

Ndayishimiye’s popularity in the security forces was boosted when he announced a large increase in salaries for police and soldiers in April. Lower ranking police and soldiers, many of whom were badly paid, were overjoyed.⁶¹ “The president has done a lot (for us) because the police were living in an extremely precarious situation,” said a provincial police commissioner. “Imagine someone who is responsible for public order and security but earned less than 100,000 francs (approximately US \$35) (a month). It was shameful... Long live our dear president!”⁶² In reality, their new, higher salaries may not have been an increase as such, but rather the amount that had been due to them for some time but had reportedly been embezzled by senior officials.⁶³ The initial excitement may also have been dampened by the steep increase in the cost of living. A police commissioner described the salary increase as “crumbs” that were woefully insufficient to cover the rising prices of basic goods.⁶⁴

The salary increase appeared to dispel, at least temporarily, the negative feelings of some members of the security forces who had been loyal to Bunyoni. An army officer said that Ndayishimiye had done well to pacify the military because many former CNDD-FDD combatants who were now in the army had not been happy with Bunyoni’s dismissal and exchanged anxious messages after his arrest. Another army officer had declined an invitation to have a drink with a colleague on the day Bunyoni was arrested: “I can’t have a drink today. Our *mutama* (term of respect for a leader, referring here to Bunyoni) is being persecuted.” These feelings didn’t last long. The commander of a military camp said that the president had acted intelligently and that those who had intended to try to overthrow him should abandon their plans.⁶⁵

A similar dynamic was observed in the police. Some police officers who had been close to Bunyoni or had worked with him in the national police force when he was minister of public security had to endure humiliating comments from colleagues who taunted them, saying Bunyoni could no longer protect them. A police officer said that many colleagues in the provincial police station where he worked had now placed their trust in the president.⁶⁶ At a more senior level, even a police commissioner known for his repression of government opponents under Nkurunziza had begun comparing Ndayishimiye favourably with his predecessor, saying that he was different from

⁵⁸ Photos and videos viewed by BHRI, May 2023.

⁵⁹ Interview with army officer, 22 July 2023.

⁶⁰ Interviews with police officers, 12 and 22 July 2023.

⁶¹ Interviews with police officers, 12, 20 and 21 July 2023, and information from other members of the security forces, May 2023.

⁶² Interview with police commissioner, 12 July 2023.

⁶³ Interviews with army and police officers, 15 June 2023; interview with police officer, 12 July 2023.

⁶⁴ Conversation with police commissioner, 28 August 2023.

⁶⁵ Interview with army officer, 15 June 2023.

⁶⁶ Interview with police officer, 15 June 2023.

Nkurunziza because he was capable of taking decisions, even if these displeased people close to “the system”. In contrast, he said, Nkurunziza used to turn a blind eye to people close to “the system” who stole and embezzled state property. Whether these views were sincere or not, he had adopted a strategy of pragmatism and self-protection. “We have to align behind him (Ndayishimiye),” he concluded. “Otherwise, whoever tries to stand in his way, beware.”⁶⁷

4. The *Imbonerakure*: an unpredictable weapon in the CNDD-FDD armoury

As in previous years, and despite President Ndayishimiye’s instructions to the contrary, *Imbonerakure* – who have no powers of law enforcement – have continued to perform “security” duties in several provinces and apprehend and punish alleged offenders, sometimes with the collaboration of local government officials.

Since late 2022, *Imbonerakure* have beaten and killed several CNL members in different parts of the country. It is not clear whether these attacks were politically motivated, although the *Imbonerakure*, as members of the local community, would almost certainly have known the victims’ political affiliation. In some cases, the *Imbonerakure* accused the victims of theft or other alleged offences before punishing them. *Imbonerakure* have also beaten and killed people who were not known to belong to any political party. In a few cases, *Imbonerakure* were arrested in connection with these attacks, but in the majority of incidents, they were neither arrested nor held to account.

As in the past two years, the behaviour of *Imbonerakure* varied considerably from one geographical area to another, depending in part on the attitude of local CNDD-FDD leaders and local government officials. Residents of some provinces reported that the behaviour of *Imbonerakure* had improved. A CNL member said that in his area, tensions between *Imbonerakure* and opposition party members had decreased and structures had been put in place to deal with individuals who behaved badly.⁶⁸

In 2022, Révérien Ndikuriyo toured the country as part of a training programme for *Imbonerakure*, whipping up their fervour and inciting them to attack their political opponents in advance of the next elections.⁶⁹ These kinds of speeches were rarer in the first half of 2023, but in May 2023, Ndikuriyo embraced the use of violence again in a speech to CNDD-FDD members in Bubanza province.

A CNDD-FDD member who attended the meeting said that Ndikuriyo had given the green light to *Imbonerakure* to get rid of any obstacle in the pre-election period. As in some of his previous speeches, Ndikuriyo told the story of how he had paid 5 million Burundian francs (approximately US \$1,760) for an alleged armed opponent known as Kaburimbo to be brought to him dead or

⁶⁷ Conversation with police commissioner, 2 June 2023.

⁶⁸ Interview with CNL member, 27 June 2023.

⁶⁹ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An uneasy alliance: who holds the power in Burundi?”, https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023.php, February 2023.

alive.⁷⁰ He warned that if anyone tried to get in the way of the CNDD-FDD, they would not escape, and made a gesture with his hands which could have been interpreted as an indication that the person would be killed. Ndikuriyo said he knew he had the reputation of a killer and he accepted this. He praised the CNDD-FDD, recalling that the party was born from bloodshed, not from negotiations, that there was no question of anyone leaving the party and that anyone who attempted to leave would be pursued. He stated that the CNDD-FDD would rule for at least 100 years.⁷¹

In a speech in Muyinga province on 24 May 2023, Ndikuriyo adopted a slightly softer tone; an *Imbonerakure* who attended the meeting commented on a noticeable change in his rhetoric. Ndikuriyo said that people should not be forced to attend CNDD-FDD meetings, but predicted they would join the party of their own accord. He repeated the story of Kaburimbo and said that he was given his dead body. He asked: “Don’t you think I will go to heaven?”⁷²

Some local government officials and CNDD-FDD representatives have also taken a strong stand against the presence of the CNL in their area. In Gihanga *commune*, Bubanza province, on 20 May 2023, three weeks after Ndikuriyo’s speech in the area, Rémy Nsengiyumva, the local CNDD-FDD representative in Gihungwe *colline*, told residents not to rent their houses for the CNL to use as offices and issued a stern warning to anyone who defied this order. “No one should accept money from the CNL to rent their house. I’m telling you. Whoever accepts that money for their house and if the CNL flag is put up here in Gihungwe, where there hasn’t been any (CNL flag) since 2005, whoever takes this money, accept everything (that will follow), because you will have set fire to the village of Gihungwe. You will have put burning coals in your clothes and the war that you will have unleashed will start with you and end with you... Yes!... Do we agree with that?... Yes!”⁷³ At the time of writing, no sanctions or other actions had been taken against Nsengiyumva.

A resurgence of violence by the *Imbonerakure* remains a real threat, particularly in the period leading up to the 2025 legislative elections. It is not yet clear whether Ndikuriyo’s fiery speeches to the party youth are anything more than bluster, but his repeated expression of support for violence against opponents is alarming, particularly when echoed by local CNDD-FDD representatives. President Ndayishimiye’s surprisingly emphatic message to *Imbonerakure* entrusting them with Burundi’s security, delivered on *Imbonerakure* Day on 26 August 2023, is also worrying, as it undermines his directives for them to engage in legitimate work and concentrate on development (see “The wild card at the head of the party: Révérien Ndikuriyo”).

⁷⁰ Pascal Ninganza, alias Kaburimbo, was killed in 2020. See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “Rumonge: torture and killings in the name of security”, https://burundihri.org/english/march_2021.php, March 2021, and “A façade of peace in a land of fear: behind Burundi’s human rights crisis”, https://burundihri.org/english/january_2020.php, January 2020.

⁷¹ Interview with CNDD-FDD member, 3 May 2023.

⁷² Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 26 May 2023.

⁷³ Video footage of extracts of Rémy Nsengiyumva’s speech in Gihungwe, 20 May 2023, and information from a witness who attended the meeting, 2 June 2023.

For many years, some *Imbonerakure* have been given police or military uniforms. Not only has this given them a disproportionate sense of their power and emboldened them to carry out abuses, but it has sometimes made it difficult to differentiate them from members of the security forces. In early 2022, CNDD-FDD members recruited *Imbonerakure* to participate in the Burundian military operation in eastern Democratic Republic Congo. Some *Imbonerakure* were given police uniforms when they crossed into Congo. Others wore Burundian military uniforms when they participated in military operations.⁷⁴

In an unexpected move on 4 September 2023, the spokesperson of the Burundian national defence force issued a public statement prohibiting civilians from wearing uniforms similar to those of the police or the army and giving a two-week deadline for people to hand in these uniforms. The statement pointed to security risks as “terrorist groups” could use these uniforms; it did not refer to *Imbonerakure*, although as civilians, they are bound by this instruction.⁷⁵



Imbonerakure march past spectators during *Imbonerakure* Day in Makamba province on 26 August 2023. © 2023 private

At the time of writing, it is too early to know if or to what extent *Imbonerakure* have begun complying with this order or how the security forces will ensure that their instructions are obeyed. However, just before the announcement, a message from Shabani Nimubona, the head of the *Imbonerakure* in Muyinga province, started circulating in WhatsApp groups, ordering *Imbonerakure* to hold on to their military or police uniforms: “Those who wear clothes similar to those of the security and defence forces are ordered to keep them and refrain from wearing them... to avoid ruining the benefits we enjoy,” wrote Nimubona. “We’re asking all *Imbonerakure*

⁷⁴ See The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, “An operation of deceit: Burundi’s secret mission in Congo”, https://burundihri.org/english/july_2022.php, July 2022; information from confidential source, 23 August 2022.

⁷⁵ Force de défense nationale du Burundi, État-Major Général, “Point de presse”, <https://twitter.com/fdnbbi/status/1698736571204149671>, 4 September 2023.

representatives in the *communes* of Butihinda and Muyinga and all the zones and *collines* (hills) to comply with caution and immediately, without anyone being injured. Keep them (the uniforms), the rest will come later, and avoid creating any disagreements with our brothers so they can pursue security matters professionally, without us bothering them.”⁷⁶

5. The CNL in turmoil

While the big men in the ruling party have been fighting it out at the top, the main opposition party, the CNL, has undergone equally dramatic developments, some of which could threaten not only its own future, but the future of the political opposition in Burundi.

Frustration with the CNL president, Agathon Rwasa, and his style of leadership had been brewing for some time among the party hierarchy, some of whom criticised Rwasa for, among other things, a lack of accountability and his reluctance to allow other potential leaders to emerge.

Tensions came to a head in April 2023, when Rwasa fired 11 members of the party’s leadership body – the political office (*bureau politique*) – accusing them of dissidence. The so-called dissidents appealed to the minister of interior, community development and public security to intervene.⁷⁷ Seizing this opportunity to weaken the government’s main opponent, the minister sided with Rwasa’s critics.⁷⁸ After an angry exchange of correspondence, each side accusing the other of violating the party’s statutes and other alleged offences, the minister suspended all the CNL’s activities on 2 June; only meetings aimed at resolving tensions in the party were allowed, and even then, only with prior authorisation from the government.⁷⁹ Police were deployed outside the CNL’s headquarters in Bujumbura on 3 June. At the time of writing, the party is still unable to organise most of its activities and its offices remain closed, although there is no longer a police presence at its headquarters.

In a further escalation on 4 July, 10 of the ousted members of the *bureau politique*, who are also members of parliament,⁸⁰ issued a public statement announcing that they were suspending Rwasa from the position of president of the CNL, accusing him of “serious failures”.⁸¹ The CNL’s secretary general, Simon Bizimungu, a Rwasa supporter, refused to take up the position of interim

⁷⁶ Translation of extracts from WhatsApp message from Shabani Nimubona, 2-3 September 2023.

⁷⁷ The ministry of interior, community development and public security is responsible for the oversight of political parties.

⁷⁸ Copy of letter from Martin Niteretse, minister of interior, community development and public security, to the president and legal representative of the CNL, 17 May 2023; Iwacu, “Le ministère de l’Intérieur rejette les conclusions des congrès du CNL”, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/le-ministere-de-linterieur-rejette-les-conclusions-des-congres-du-cnl/>, 20 May 2023.

⁷⁹ Letter from Martin Niteretse, minister of interior, community development and public security, to the president and legal representative of the CNL, <https://twitter.com/Ikiriho/status/1665961608512782342>, 2 June 2023.

⁸⁰ Since 2020, the CNL has 32 of the 123 seats in the National Assembly.

⁸¹ “Décision du 04 juillet 2023 portant mesure de suspension de l’Honorable Agathon Rwasa aux fonctions de président et représentant légal du parti CNL”, signed by 10 members of the CNL *bureau politique* and members of parliament, <https://twitter.com/BurundiCnl/status/1677613887615557632>, 4 July 2023.

leader,⁸² leading the dissident members to announce, on 14 August, that they were dismissing him too and appointing a replacement.⁸³

A member of the *bureau politique* said that Rwaswa had not followed internal party rules and was unwilling to discuss disagreements with ousted members of the political leadership: “(Rwaswa) has refused to come and sit together with us. We’ve extended our hand, and he responded by removing members of the *bureau politique*.”⁸⁴

Eventually, following a meeting between the CNL leadership and the minister of interior on 4 August, the minister authorised the CNL to prepare an extraordinary congress to try to resolve the crisis. At the time of writing, the date of the congress has not been set.

To date, these bitter divisions do not appear to be widely reflected among the party’s grassroots membership. Rwaswa – a former rebel leader⁸⁵ – is still popular among CNL members, many of whom have remained loyal to him and consider his critics inside the party to be traitors.⁸⁶ As with the CNDD-FDD, the CNL’s internal battles are largely confined to the national leadership. A CNL member in a province far from Bujumbura said the wrangles were taking place “in the higher sphere” and the dissident movement was not active in his province; “we are not concerned by this conflict of interests.” He said that despite a campaign by some CNL members against Rwaswa’s leadership, many members remained supportive of Rwaswa.⁸⁷ Several provincial CNL representatives were quick to condemn the action of the dissident members and affirmed that Rwaswa was still the head of the party.⁸⁸ But other CNL members have expressed their worries about the future of the party.

The consequences of this rift are potentially very serious and go beyond the immediate paralysis of the CNL’s activities. Although other political parties exist in Burundi, in practice, the CNL has been the only party capable of mounting a serious challenge to the CNDD-FDD for the past several years, despite the relentless intimidation, arbitrary arrests, killings and enforced disappearances of its members. If it ceases to exist or is reduced to a faction that can be compromised or bought off by the government, it makes for an easier victory for CNDD-FDD. At the same time, the CNDD-FDD needs the CNL, or some form of political opposition, to give the impression that there is a minimum of democracy in Burundi.

⁸² Iwacu, “CNL: le secrétaire général rejette l’offre d’assurer l’intérim après la suspension d’Agathon Rwaswa,” <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/cnl-le-secrtaire-general-rejette-loffre-d-assurer-linterim-apres-la-suspension-dagathon-rwaswa/>, 4 July 2023.

⁸³ Press release of 14 August 2023: <https://twitter.com/BurundiCnl/status/1691083778230304770>.

⁸⁴ Exchange with member of the CNL *bureau politique* with first-hand knowledge of these events, 4 August 2023.

⁸⁵ Agathon Rwaswa headed the National Liberation Forces (*Forces nationales de libération*, FNL), the armed wing of the opposition Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (*Parti pour la libération du peuple Hutu*, PALIPEHUTU), created in 1980. The FNL fought the Tutsi-dominated government during the civil war that started in 1993. It turned into a political party in 2009 and was renamed CNL in 2019.

⁸⁶ Interview with CNL member, 13 July 2023; interview with former CNL politician, 18 May 2023.

⁸⁷ Interview with CNL member, 27 June 2023.

⁸⁸ Interview with provincial CNL representative, 13 July 2023. See also Iwacu, “Coups et contre-coups au sein du CNL”, <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/coups-et-contre-coups-au-sein-du-cnl/>, 8 July 2023.

There has been much debate, inside and outside the CNL, as to whether the party's current plight is the result of internal dissent or government interference, or a combination of the two. Whichever is true, the result is the same: a dramatic internal rupture of the main opposition party and a gift to the government.⁸⁹

A CNL member of parliament denounced what he saw as the collusion between the government and the CNL dissidents: "The ministry is working with a group of people who want to sabotage the party... We can't deny there's a problem in the party, but it should be resolved by the party, through the party's mechanisms... We felt there was a problem before the ministry intervened. (Then) when the minister saw an opening to wipe out the activities of the main opposition party, he exploited that."⁹⁰ A senior CNL official described the dissidents as "mercenaries working on behalf of the CNDD-FDD... Their aim is to get the CNL struck off the list of political parties so that the CNDD-FDD doesn't have any competition, not now or ever." He accused the minister of interior of being judge and jury and taking sides in the CNL's crisis. "All the CNDD-FDD officials would like (the CNDD-FDD) to be the only one taking part in the 2025 elections. The president would like that too as it would help him in 2027."⁹¹

During a public broadcast on 12 July 2023, Pierre Nkurikiye, the spokesperson for the ministry of interior, denied that anyone outside the CNL was behind the rift. He said the minister had decided to suspend the CNL's activities because if large meetings were held, there could be clashes between members of the opposing factions.⁹²

In practice, the crisis in the CNL did not appear to threaten public order or warrant such heavy-handed interference by the government. The minister's intervention was clearly intended to paralyse the country's main opposition party, and was very much in character. The Burundian government, particularly under former President Nkurunziza, has a long history of splitting opposition parties, co-opting certain members and recognising only pro-government factions – a process commonly referred to in Burundi as *nyakurisation*.⁹³

These developments increase the vulnerability of CNL members, particularly those who support Rwasa. Government repression as well as attacks by *Imbonerakure* against CNL members have continued in 2023, albeit not on the same scale as around the 2020 elections. BHRI gathered

⁸⁹ The independent newspaper Iwacu published two editorials describing how the CNL's internal turmoil will benefit the government and its likely impact on the democratic landscape in Burundi. See Iwacu, "Le rouleau compresseur avance...", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/le-rouleau-compresseur-avance/>, 30 June 2023, and "Le CNL s'autodétruit", <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/le-cnl-sautodetrui/>, 7 July 2023.

⁹⁰ Interview with CNL member of parliament, 8 June 2023.

⁹¹ Interview with senior CNL official, 10 August 2023.

⁹² Broadcast by government spokespersons, Muramvya, 12 July 2023.

⁹³ The FNL has suffered this fate in the past, particularly in 2010 when it split into two factions: one, headed by Emmanuel Miburo and Jacques Bigirimana, which cooperated with the government, and the other, headed by Agathon Rwasa, which continued as an opposition party. Other parties such as FRODEBU, UPRONA and UPD-Zigamibanga have also been split into several factions by previous ministers of interior, leading to the marginalisation or exclusion of leaders who were unwilling to follow the government's line. As a result of these tactics, most of these parties have been significantly weakened or, in some cases, almost destroyed.

information on at least five cases of CNL members who were killed, abducted or beaten to death between December 2022 and June 2023, in five different provinces. The motives for these attacks were not always clear. A local CNL representative expressed his fears for the period leading up to the 2025 legislative elections: “We’re getting close to the elections and we know that’s the most difficult period for us.”⁹⁴

CNDD-FDD leaders and local representatives have stepped up pressure on CNL members to join the ruling party in the last two years, with tactics ranging from promises of jobs to threats of violence or even death. Some CNL members have resisted the pressure, but others have caved in, afraid for their security. A local CNL representative said that in his area, *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD members were going from house to house, intimidating CNL members and telling them that as their party had been “crossed off the list”, they had no choice but to join the CNDD-FDD; some CNL members had done so because they were afraid of being arrested.⁹⁵ The suspension of the CNL’s activities will make it easier for the CNDD-FDD to co-opt CNL members who may fear that their party’s days are numbered.

A local representative of the *Imbonerakure* said that if the CNL re-emerged under Rwaswa’s leadership after the recent events, it would count as a failure for the CNDD-FDD. He warned privately – in exaggerated language – that the CNDD-FDD would completely wipe out the CNL so that there would be no trace of it left. He expressed frustration that for many years, the CNDD-FDD had tried to make the CNL disappear, including by arresting its members and “working on them”, but the CNL had held on. He said that the *Imbonerakure* would get to work again soon and “the enemy will be arrested, even if they’re underground.”⁹⁶

6. An uncertain future: will Ndayishimiye succeed in consolidating his position?

New alliances may have given a temporary boost to Ndayishimiye, but there is no guarantee that his current supporters will stand by him in the long term. By acting against Bunyoni and his collaborators, Ndayishimiye will have alienated once powerful members of the CNDD-FDD, the security forces and the SNR, and possibly some businessmen who were close to Bunyoni. Unless they feel they have something to gain from the new arrangements, frustrated hardliners could try to reclaim their dominant position, with unpredictable consequences.

The severe economic crisis could increase frustration among Ndayishimiye’s critics in the CNDD-FDD, and he may be forced to backtrack, or slow down, his purge of inconvenient hardliners. Faced with what appeared to be a real threat from Bunyoni, he was prepared to act decisively, but if he takes similar action against his other critics in the party, his strategy could deepen lingering

⁹⁴ Interview with local CNL representative, 9 July 2023.

⁹⁵ Interview with local CNL representative, 12 July 2023.

⁹⁶ Interview with local *Imbonerakure* representative, 21 July 2023.

resentment. Past events in Burundi have shown how quickly the balance can tip. The CNDD-FDD has been ruthless in turning against some of its own leaders. When Bunyoni was arrested, many Burundians were reminded of the fate of Hussein Rujabur, the charismatic head of the CNDD-FDD who was overthrown by Nkurunziza and arrested in 2007, and sentenced to 13 years in prison.⁹⁷ Nkurunziza survived those events, but Ndayishimiye's position may be less secure.

As a product of the CNDD-FDD, Ndayishimiye knows he cannot count on anyone's unconditional support. Although he was a combatant with the CNDD-FDD from its early days, he has not built his reputation on fear and bloodshed and must therefore rely on other forms of persuasion. President Nkurunziza depended on a group of brutal henchmen to deal with his opponents, many of whom buckled under his strong-arm tactics, fearing they may be killed. It is not clear whether Ndayishimiye's blend of bravado and verbal threats to those who oppose him will have the same effect.

Ndayishimiye will have to balance his own interests against those of the party. At present, with the CNL in disarray, the CNDD-FDD's dominance appears a near-certainty, at least in the medium term, but even when it is not facing any serious threat, the government refuses to tolerate criticism. In this respect, there is a clear continuity between the periods of Ndayishimiye's and Nkurunziza's presidencies. Ndayishimiye may have sidelined some of the old guard, but their influence is still visible in the ongoing tight restrictions on freedom of expression and civic space; for example, journalist Floriane Irangabiye is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for criticising the government in an online radio broadcast.⁹⁸ Ndayishimiye has been unwilling to end restrictions on freedom of expression and association and his government has refused to engage in meaningful discussions on human rights with donor governments, UN human rights mechanisms or other international interlocutors.⁹⁹

The weakness of foreign governments to stand firm on human rights and their apparent willingness to believe in Ndayishimiye's empty promises have exacerbated the problem. Relieved at dealing with a president who was superficially more open than Nkurunziza, many diplomats were quick to take Ndayishimiye's talk at face value in 2020. Three years on, some have begun to see that much of that was a public relations show, intended to impress donors and polish the government's image. From the outset, Ndayishimiye's strategy has been to indulge in big public gestures and theatrical speeches, in which he professes his personal commitment to reforms in the justice system and

⁹⁷ In an extraordinary display of defiance, Hussein Rujabur, who still enjoyed a significant following, "escaped" from Mpimba prison by walking out, unhindered, in 2015. He left the country and joined the armed opposition in exile. His current whereabouts are not known. There are unconfirmed reports that he may have died.

⁹⁸ The Burundi Human Rights Initiative, "Floriane Irangabiye: another victim of politicised justice", https://burundihri.org/english/february_2023_2.php, 8 February 2023.

⁹⁹ The Burundian government refuses to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on Burundi. On 3 July 2023, the Burundian delegation walked out of a review of its human rights situation before the UN Human Rights Committee because of the presence of an exiled Burundian human rights defender in the room. See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Human Rights Committee regrets Burundi's withdrawal from public dialogue", [https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/un-human-rights-committee-regrets-burundis-withdrawal-public-dialogue#:~:text=GENEVA%20\(3%20July%202023\)%20%E2%80%93,of%20the%20delegation%20from%20Burundi,](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/un-human-rights-committee-regrets-burundis-withdrawal-public-dialogue#:~:text=GENEVA%20(3%20July%202023)%20%E2%80%93,of%20the%20delegation%20from%20Burundi,) 3 July 2023.

makes a spectacle of firing corrupt judges or humiliates local government officials who abuse their power, in a bid to garner public support. But his unwillingness to push through deep human rights reforms reveals a degree of hypocrisy and calls into question his verbal commitments.

The prospects for the months ahead are uncertain. Depending on how senior CNDD-FDD officials position themselves, Ndayishimiye's gains could be consolidated or overturned. A flare-up of violence against the party's rivals is likely in the run-up to the 2025 legislative elections, as has been the case during the last three electoral periods in Burundi. International actors should urge Ndayishimiye to take advantage of his current position of strength to implement bold reforms that will have a lasting impact on the human rights situation. In particular, he should end the impunity that has protected Bunyoni and other perpetrators of serious human rights violations for so many years, lift restrictions on civic and political space and create the conditions for free and peaceful elections in 2025.