Richard Havyarimana

Found dead in a river, three days after his abduction

When Richard Havyarimana’s family finally found his body on 7 May, their fears became a grim reality – he had been killed and dumped in a river. They had been looking for Havyarimana ever since members of the youth league of the ruling party, the Imbonerakure, violently abducted him three days earlier from his house on Mbogora hill in Nyabihanga commune (Mwaro province).

In the months leading up to the 20 May 2020 elections in Burundi, Imbonerakure had repeatedly threatened Havyarimana, the representative of the opposition party Congrès national pour la liberté (CNL) in Mbogora. Only days before his abduction, an Imbonerakure told him: “I see you don’t want to change parties. That’s a problem… If you don’t want to change, I can call (someone at) a higher level and they can punish you.” Havyarimana replied that he didn’t like the Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD), the ruling party. He didn’t take the threats seriously; he thought they were just a joke.

Imbonerakure were campaigning in Mbogora on 3 May, telling residents to vote for the CNDD-FDD. They were accompanied by Pamphile Bigirimana, the son of the party chairperson in Nyabihanga, who
asked where Havyarimana’s house was located. Bigirimana was on the CNDD-FDD’s list of provincial candidates for the legislative elections, but didn’t win a seat.

Around midnight that night, a car parked in Mbogora, and several men stepped out and headed to Havyarimana’s house. They shattered a window and broke down his door. Four of them forced their way inside, while others stood guard outside.

Neighbours suddenly woke up when they heard Havyarimana and his wife scream: “Come to our rescue! There are thieves here!” One of the assailants responded: “We’re not thieves, we’re from the intelligence services.” When neighbours rushed to Havyarimana’s house, the men standing outside stopped them from approaching. Some of them wore police jackets and had guns. One of them warned: “We’re going to shoot at anyone who comes close.”

When two of the four men who had broken into the house were recognised, it soon became clear that they hadn’t come to steal the meagre profits Havyarimana made from selling local beer or the crops he’d harvested. Dieudonné Nsengiyumva, also known as Rwembe, the head of the Imbonerakure in Nyabihanga commune, and Boris Bukeyeneza, another Imbonerakure, had come to abduct Havyarimana. Havyarimana’s wife begged them to spare him, hoping they would take pity when she showed them their 3-month old baby.

Neighbours saw the men drag Havyarimana to the car, after handcuffing him and beating his face. The car sped off to the main road and headed in the direction of Gitega, the country’s capital.

This marked the start of a frantic search by Havyarimana’s family. They first checked the police cells in the neighbourhood – the destination of most of the hundreds of CNL members arrested in recent months – and informed the police about the Imbonerakure involved in the abduction. A local resident claimed that a police officer privately acknowledged that the two Imbonerakure had been involved and identified the owner of the car they had used: Oscar Ndayizeye alias Romeo, a local CNDD-FDD member and businessman.

Yet the police ignored repeated requests to arrest them. It pained those close to Havyarimana to see the two Imbonerakure walk around freely in Nyabihanga and participate in the CNDD-FDD’s electoral campaign. The local police commissioner claimed they couldn’t arrest the suspects while investigations were ongoing. The administrator of Nyabihanga commune, Adrien Ntunzwenimana, accused CNL members of being troublemakers and told his family Havyarimana would soon turn up.

The family continued searching, hoping to find Havyarimana, dead or alive. When residents of nearby Kibogoye hill informed them that they had seen a suspicious car and heard screams near the river Ruvyironza the night of the attack, Havyarimana’s family focused their search on the riverbanks. In the following days, they received several alerts from people who had seen a body floating in the river, but they didn’t manage to find it.
Finally, on 7 May, residents of Muyebe hill alerted the family that a body was stuck behind a tree where the Ruvyironza flows between Nyabihanga and Giheta commune, in Gitega province. Havyarimana’s relatives pulled the body out of the water and onto the riverbank.

It was the body of Richard Havyarimana. Photos viewed by the Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) show several deep gashes on his head. Witnesses also described what appeared to be a stab wound in his chest. “It was horrible to see”, said one of the men who helped pull the body from the water. The body had started decomposing, so the family decided to bury him the same day.

They immediately alerted the local authorities. A judicial police officer came to assess the situation. The commune administrator said he was too busy to go to the scene and sent a low-level official. None of these authorities attended the burial – most were too busy drinking in a bar not far from the burial ground. When the family visited the bar after the burial, local leaders left quietly, without a word of comfort.

In recent months, several relatives of CNL members have informed BHRI about other disappearances. Like Havyarimana’s family, they first asked local government officials and visited detention centres, hoping to find out what had happened to their loved ones. When that failed to produce any results, a long period of anxiety set in. Some CNL members later turned up in detention, but many others didn’t reappear, and some were found dead.

Between January and May 2020, Burundian human rights groups reported the discovery of at least 51 dead bodies across the country. In many cases, it is not known if the victims were killed for political reasons. Some of the bodies were found in or near lakes or rivers. Rather than ordering an investigation, local authorities often ordered an immediate burial, even if the bodies showed clear signs of violence.

Dumping bodies in rivers and lakes has been a common practice throughout Burundi’s bloody history, and persists in 2020, as Havyarimana’s case shows. A similar fate was intended for a young CNL member from Bweru commune (Ruyigi province) who told BHRI that in January 2020, Imbonerakure had thrown him into a river, after pulling his testicles and beating him so badly with a bike chain that they thought he had died. He waited in the river until the Imbonerakure had left, then escaped.

The perpetrators of serious human rights violations such as these are rarely held accountable. But for Havyarimana’s family, there may be a glimmer of hope. Soon after Havyarimana’s body was found, police arrested Bukeyeneza and Nsengiyumva, the two Imbonerakure allegedly involved in the abduction. The family submitted a formal complaint to the prosecutor, who interviewed several witnesses.

Havyarimana’s relatives are afraid that because political interference is common in these kinds of cases, the two suspects might be released: “We submitted complaints, but we don’t know whether justice will be served or whether these people will soon be released,” a man close to the case told BHRI.

BHRI wrote to national government officials asking what action the authorities had taken following Havyarimana’s murder. BHRI also wrote to the prosecutor of Mwaro to ask whether other individuals with an apparent connection to the case, including Bigirimana, who was looking for Havyarimana’s house on
the day of his abduction, and Ndayizeye, the alleged owner of the car that may have been used to drive him away, have been questioned or arrested. None of these officials replied.

A neighbour of Havyarimana said that those responsible for Havyarimana’s murder and other political killings should be prosecuted to prevent future violence: “We need justice. If nothing is done, others will die.”

UPDATE: On 12 August 2020, the tribunal de grande instance (high court) of Mwaro province sentenced two members of the youth league of the ruling party, Dieudonné Nsengiyumva and Boris Bukeyeneza, to 15 years in prison for murdering Richard Havyarimana. The court also ruled that the two men, who had been part of a group that violently abducted Havyarimana on 4 May 2020, should collectively pay 10 million Burundian francs (approximately US$4,814) to the victim’s family.

The Mwaro prosecutor appealed the decision, asking for life imprisonment for the two defendants. He promised he would also investigate the role of other individuals involved in Havyarimana’s abduction and death. The two defendants appealed the decision too. On 2 February 2021, the court of appeal in Bujumbura upheld the judgment of the high court.

The defendants then appealed to the Supreme Court on procedural grounds. On 22 December 2022, the Supreme Court also upheld the judgement, rendering it final.

Despite his conviction, Nsengiyumva has repeatedly been seen near his home in Nyabihanga commune, causing anxiety among Havyarimana’s family members. The conditions under which he was allowed out of prison are not known. The judicial authorities should ensure that the court judgment is enforced: the two defendants should serve their prison sentences and pay financial compensation to the victim’s family.

For further information about the series, read “The Deadly Price of Opposition”.

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