

The murder of Burundi's prime minister, Louis Rwagasore¹

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On July 1, 1962, Burundi was granted independence. Less than nine months before, on October 13, 1961, the newly elected prime minister, prince Louis Rwagasore, son of mwami Mwambutsa, king and head of state of Burundi, was murdered, sixteen days after he had been sworn in. A few weeks before that, his party, Uprona, had won a landslide victory in Burundi's first parliamentary elections. The murderer, a Greek citizen, Jean Kageorgis, who had lived in Burundi for many years, was arrested, sentenced to death and executed on the eve of independence. Under Belgian rule, three of his accomplices and five persons involved in the conspiracy were convicted and given jail sentences. After a thorough study of the archives of the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry the author's conclusion is that important elements pointing to the involvement of the Belgian authorities, Belgium being granted a UN trusteeship to govern the country before independence, were almost completely overlooked in the investigation and at the trial itself. The judiciary neglected oral testimonies and written documents, refrained from questioning people who might have been implicated in the affair and did not examine facts that might have shed light on the motives and the background of the accused. One cannot but infer that the investigation and the trial were characterized by a clear lack of seriousness. On top of that, it is striking that the then king Baudouin, referring explicitly to Belgian involvement in the affair, made considerable efforts to grant a pardon to the murderer and commute his death sentence to life-long incarceration. Taking all those elements into account, it would seem reasonable that the inquiry be reopened. The establishment of a parliamentary commission, similar to that which investigated Belgian responsibility in the Lumumba murder case, would be an appropriate framework. Up to now there has been no official reaction to the book the author published recently. He concludes it is time that Belgium deals with this episode of its colonial past.

Key words: King Baudouin, Belgium/colonial rule, Burundi, colonialism, Jean-Paul Harroy, Patrice Lumumba, Raymond Scheyven, Roberto Regnier, Robert Scheyven, Ruanda-Urundi, Louis Rwagasore, Paul-Henri Spaak

¹ This is the report of a presentation given at GAPSYM8 ('Colonial memories at present – Decolonizing Belgium?'), on 27 November 2014.

Introduction

My book on the Rwagasore murder case, “*De moord op Rwagasore, de Burundese Lumumba*”², originally edited in Dutch in 2011, and published in French one year later as “*L’assassinat de Rwagasore, le Lumumba burundais*”³, is based on research of the archives of the Belgian foreign ministry, focusing on what is commonly known as the Rwagasore files. My main aim was to give access to the information in the archives, i.e. documents dating from the thirties to the early sixties, including the records (*procès-verbaux*) of the examinations related to the murder case. They give an excellent idea of how senior Belgian officials of the territory of Rwanda-Urundi (*la tutelle*) looked at Louis Rwagasore, at his background, his education, his network, his personality, his convictions, and his economic and political activities.

In the course of my research, I came across relevant elements from other sources and also sets of information were handed to me. This was of course added to what I had gathered in the archives themselves. But by no means does this mean that my research has been exhaustive. I invite scholars who might find additional items that shed light on the case to share their findings with me.

The story

First, let me summarize what happened in Burundi’s capital Usumbura (now called Bujumbura) in 1961. On October 13, the then prime minister, Louis Rwagasore, was assassinated at the sidewalk restaurant of the local Hotel Tanganyika. One shot proved to be enough to kill him on the spot. Burundi was to become independent but at the time of the murder the date had not been set yet. Eventually, Burundi became independent eight and a half months later, on July 1, 1962.

September 18, 1961, parliamentary elections had been held and Rwagasore’s party, Uprona, had won a landslide victory, his party taking 58 of the 64 seats. September 28, Rwagasore was installed by Parliament as the prime minister, 16 days before he was murdered.

Rwagasore’s victory was a surprise for the Belgian administration. Considering him a nuisance they had done everything in their power to prevent him from engaging in political life. Rwagasore, the son of the local mwami, king Mwambutsa, who was to become head of state once Burundi became independent, was put under house arrest at a certain point and told to refrain from political activities. Belgium clearly opted for the local Christian Democrats as the rulers of the country, considering them to be more lenient politicians, while Rwagasore was thought to be influenced by radical political ideas such as those adopted by Congo’s first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. Ahead of the September 1961 elections, the Belgian administration installed a transition government, mainly consisting of Christian Democrats, taking into account their result in the 1960 local elections (*élections communales*). Those Christian Democrats were soundly beaten in the September election run.

2 Poppe Guy, “*De moord op Rwagasore, de Burundese Lumumba*”. EPO, Berchem, 2011, 270 p

3 Poppe Guy, “*L’assassinat de Rwagasore, le Lumumba burundais*”. Editions IWACU, Bujumbura, 2012, 229 p.

The administration's partisan position was reasonably logical. At the time, the Christian Democrat PSC was indeed by far the strongest political party in Belgium, dominating a coalition government with the liberal party from 1958 to 1961, and remaining highly influential in the coalition government with the socialist party which came to power in April 1961.

Let us also keep in mind that Congo's independence, June 30, 1960, was the start of a traumatic experience for Belgian politics, ending with Lumumba's murder, in January 1961, just a couple of months ahead of the Rwagasore murder. In 2002, as the result of a parliamentary enquiry, Belgium assumed responsibility for its role in the Lumumba murder case.⁴ In other words, enough reasons were to be found in Belgian politics of the day to explain why high officials in Burundi and other personalities in the political arena were inclined to opt for a path leading to independence on which there was no room for Rwagasore, in order to avoid a decolonisation process similar to that which occurred in Congo.

That being said, it shows the burden that was put on the country's future, eliminating the person charged by the majority of the Burundian people to guide them. As a royal prince, and therefore member of the Ganwa elite in Burundi, it was Rwagasore's ambition to ease potential tensions between the Tutsi minority, eager to consolidate their dominant position in society, especially in the army and in business life, and the extended Hutu community, of which most members were poor peasants. Rwagasore wanted to become a bridge builder.

A future without Rwagasore

Looking at events in Burundi during the first years of independence, we notice how the government keeps on struggling with Rwagasore's heritage and tries to come to grips with the prosecution of those involved in the murder case. The mwami, Rwagasore's father, proves ill-equipped to fit his traditional position into a modern society and will be replaced in 1966, 4 years after independence, first by his youngest son and finally by a military leader. Military leadership of Burundi then actually continues for 27 years, up to 1993, when at last new multi-party elections are held in the country. Other striking events in post-independence Burundi are the recurrent appearance of ethnic clashes between the ruling Tutsi minority and the Hutu majority. They occur in 1965, 1972 and 1988 and cause hundreds of thousands of deaths.

After the murder of Burundi's first elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, in October 1993, a civil war starts which lasts until 2000, some Hutu rebel groups not engaging in the peace process until as late as 2007. In 1996, during the course of the war which once again takes many lives, senior army officer, a Tutsi, takes power in a bloodless coup.

Let us be clear. I am not saying that all of this is the result of Rwagasore being mur-

4 The inquiry commission in the Chamber of Representatives, the Lower House of the Belgian federal parliament, was active for about 2 years, from February 24, 2000, the day the Chamber approved its establishment, until February 5, 2002, the day the Chamber approved its conclusions.

dered a couple of weeks after being elected as a prime minister. Nevertheless, I would like to stress the importance of this crime. As in the case of Patrice Lumumba, who was Congo's prime minister for two and a half months and was unable in such a short period of time to show his qualities as a politician, Rwagasore did not have the slightest chance to prove he was the one who could guide his country through the transition period up to independence and lead it afterwards. As in Congo, a heavy burden was put on Burundi's future, by killing Rwagasore, and thus violently disposing of the politician elected to pave the way in what was, both politically and economically, a difficult period marking the first post-independence years.

The facts

Let us return to what happened the evening of the murder, October 13, 1961. Thanks to an alert witness who linked the shooting to a suspicious car in the area surrounding the hotel, and an alert investigator, linking the car to people in Usumbura he spotted that same day, it took the investigative team no more than three days to arrest the murderer and the three people who were with him at the site of the killing. The murderer proved to be a Greek citizen, Jean Kageorgis. He was accompanied by Antoine Nahimana and two brothers, Henri and Jean-Baptiste Ntakiyica, all three of them Burundians and members of the Christian Democrat Party.

The team soon admitted responsibility for the crime and implicated three others viz. another Greek citizen, Michel Iatrou, and two Burundian brothers, Jean-Baptiste Ntidendereza and Joseph Biroli. Those two, the former a former cabinet minister, the latter one of the few Burundians with an academic record in foreign universities, were both high ranking members of the Christian Democrat Party. The investigators see them as the brains behind the killing, those whose idea it was and who planned the operation. Iatrou will keep on denying this, Ntidendereza initially admits his role in the case but withdraws his words in a later phase of the investigation and then denies any involvement whatsoever in the conspiracy.

The aftermath

April 2, 1962, a Burundian tribunal, consisting exclusively of Belgian judges, passes its sentence. Next to Kageorgis, two Burundians, Nahimana and Ntidendereza, are sentenced to death. The other accused, including two petty suspects involved in a minor way, the Burundian Pascal Bigirindavyi and the Greek Liverios Archianotis, receive prison sentences. On May 7, the Court of Appeal passes the final verdict. The murderer, Kageorgis, is the only one sentenced to death. The other accused are given prison sentences of up to twenty years. On June 30, one day before independence, Kageorgis is executed.

An addendum. Once the country becomes independent, Burundian judges re-open the trial. January 5, 1963, five of the accused are sentenced to death, Biroli, Iatrou, Nahimana, Jean-Baptiste Ntakiyica and Ntidendereza. January 15, all five are executed.

Conclusions

Research of the documents in the archives of the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry brings me to the following conclusions.

Important elements pointing to the involvement of the Belgian authorities, Belgium being granted a UN trusteeship to govern the country before independence, were almost completely overlooked in the investigation and at the trial itself.

- The judiciary neglected oral testimonies and written documents. It refrained from questioning people who might have been implicated in the affair or could have offered valuable information.
- The judiciary did not examine elements that might have shed light on the motives and the background of the accused.

One cannot but infer that the judiciary, both the investigation team and the judges of the different courts passing sentence, did not engage seriously with the fields I have mentioned, thus creating a void.

On top of that, it is striking that the then king Baudouin, referring explicitly to Belgian involvement in the affair, made considerable efforts to grant a pardon to the murderer and commute his death sentence to life-long incarceration.

Let me elaborate on this.

1. Oral testimonies and written documents

- I.1. One of the most striking documents in the archives quotes explicit remarks made by resident Roberto Regnier – the no. 2 for Burundi in the Belgian administration – at a meeting a couple of days after the elections: “il déclare d’emblée qu’il ne reste qu’une chose à faire: tuer Rwagasore”. Regnier was never questioned. His remarks were not mentioned at the first trial. In the appeal they were,
- I.2. One of the accused refers to the involvement of Jean-Paul Harroy. The governor of Ruanda-Urundu has never been questioned,
- I.3. Charles Baranyanka is a brother of both Biroli and Ntidendereza. At the time of the murder he is a student in Liège, more in line with Rwagasore’s ideas than with his brothers’ positions. Once Burundi is independent, he will be in office as the country’s first ambassador to Belgium. Questioned by Belgian justice at the time of Rwagasore’s death, Baranyanka refers to Belgian citizens who might know more about the murder case. Among them is Robert Scheyven, resident in Burundi from 1957 to 1959, a cousin of the christian democrat politician, Raymond Scheyven. Raymond was a minister from 1959 to 1960, in charge of the economic and financial affairs of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. Baranyanka also points at countess Anne de Grunne, née la Renesse. There has never been any follow up.
- I.4. Max Vanderslyen, a Belgian businessman, close to Rwagasore, is a partner of his in some of his economic deals and a member of his party, Uprona. Questioned by Belgian justice, he prefers to give a written testimony. The document contains numbers of names and details which might be relevant to the case. Vanderslyen hints amongst others at a Belgian banker and a christian democrat politician, accusing them of fi-

nancing the criminal operation but he refrains from quoting the name of the politician, who in his eyes “*semblait avoir tout intérêt à voir l’Urundi sous la direction politique du Parti Démocrate Chrétien*”. The Belgian policeman who questioned Vanderslyen puts the question at the end of the minutes as to which elements of Vanderslyen’s testimony would deserve further investigation and consequently which next steps to take. He never gets an answer. There has never been any follow up,

- 1.5. A few days before his assassination, Rwagasore’s files a complaint against seven senior Belgian officials, including governor Harroy and resident Regnier. The public prosecutor, Jacques Bourguignon, is requested to reopen the investigation. The letter is sent to him by Kageorgis’ lawyer on June 21. June 28, Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak informs the Belgian High Representative, the investigation is almost closed. That same day, King Baudouin finally rejects Kageorgis’ request for grace. In a letter the day before his execution, Kageorgis again states that he is not the only one guilty of the crime. He explicitly accuses those two officials of being responsible. “*Ce crime fut perpétré par la tutelle, M. Harroy et M. Regnier*”.
At the time of writing the book, it remained unclear whether any new judiciary acts were carried out in the short time between filing the complaint and the execution. There is no mention of them in the archives. After the publication of the book, I was able to read and study written statements from the now deceased resident Regnier, kept in the family archives. In one of them he mentions a final questioning by Belgian justice in Brussels, as a result of Kageorgis’ complaint, of which, as already mentioned, the minutes are not to be found in the Foreign Ministry archives,
- 1.6. The enigmatic Mme Belya is not officially heard before the appeal trial. She is Ntindendereza’s secretary and a close friend of his. She is present at several important meetings, and at least one where according to Kageorgis the murder was discussed. At the end Belya accuses resident Regnier of being responsible for the crime. But during the investigation she is never officially questioned,
- 1.7. The Burundian government forwards a request to the Belgian administration to expel ten senior Belgian officials. Most of them are never questioned. Only one of them (Léonard) is, after a long delay, at the time the trial is already on. The records are not part of the Rwagasore file. I am not the first to take note of this.
- 1.8. Not one single Belgian witness appears at the first instance trial.
- 1.9. At the start of the first instance trial, the Foreign Ministry directs three former Belgian officials not to attend as witnesses. Should they make the trip to Burundi, they will be considered *persona non grata* at the ministry and lose their job.

Do these examples of the significant void we notice in the way the Rwagasore case was handled necessarily mean there was a definite Belgian connection? No. Some public statements, some testimonies and even written statements should not necessarily be taken at face value. Some witnesses and certainly the accused might have had an interest in involving other people. A person like Vanderslyen had a bad reputation. But in fact this kind of remark is irrelevant. As part of a serious investigation, one could expect all hints

to be examined and people mentioned to be questioned. Too often this has not been the case to the extent that one cannot dismiss the lack of rigour as mere coincidence.

2. *Facts that might shed light on the motives and the background of the accused have not been examined*
 - 2.1. Supposedly Kageorgis was given a number of incentives to carry out the assassination: a considerable sum of money – one million Belgian francs - and a job in a German company willing to invest in Burundi, once the country was governed by trustworthy politicians. But no steps were taken to check where the money came from, whether the murderer was actually paid and what he did with the money. No initiative was taken to check whether the German company was aware of the so called deal. Its name is not even mentioned in the files.
 - 2.2. At the first instance trial, in his final requisitory prosecutor Bourguignon referred to the murderer and his friend as follows: *“plusieurs grecs et Burundi constituaient depuis longtemps le club spécial que vous devinez”*. Without saying it explicitly, this is a clear indication that in Bourguignon’s eyes homosexual friendship amongst those involved in the conspiracy played a role. Reference to homosexuality is not limited to the Rwagasore file. Even in the minutes of some testimonies it was openly mentioned as an element, possibly tying together some of the members of the so-called “club”. But almost no questioning was carried out to get to know more about the somewhat strange link between the Greek and Burundians, one of them a former cabinet minister, another one a jobless and almost homeless youngster, nor about the impact of the apparent homosexual relationship between some of the persons involved in the murder conspiracy.
 - 2.3. Ntidendereza, Biroli and the other Burundians involved in the crime were members of the Batare-clan. Rwagasore was a member of the Bezi-clan. Historically there is an inherent struggle for political and societal power amongst the different clans within the Burundian Ganwa elite. At the time of the murder, the strongman of the Batare-clan was Pierre Baranyanka, father of Ntidendereza and Biroli, a person very much appreciated by the Belgian administration. There are indications in the file that he was part of the conspiracy. But he was never questioned about his role.
An addendum. In October 1964, a Burundian court condemns Pierre to a 21 year prison sentence for complicity in the murder of Rwagasore.
 - 2.4. Biroli and Rwagasore have been close for a long time, both studying in Belgium and later, back in Burundi, both playing active roles in modern Burundian politics. Ntidendereza was promised a high ranking post after he lost the elections. One might reasonably ask, why they suddenly started to plan the murder of Rwagasore ? They have not been thoroughly questioned on this apparent u-turn,
 - 2.5. Kageorgis was engaged to a Belgium woman. They had plans to get married. This information is to be found in the minutes. But his fiancée’s name, Lemiengre, is not even mentioned (I was not able to trace her first name). No steps were taken to hear or question her.

3. King Baudouin's intervention

It is striking that the then king Baudouin, referring explicitly to Belgian involvement in the affair, and made considerable efforts to grant a pardon to the murderer and commute his death sentence to life-long incarceration.

On June 26, 1962, Baudouin's chief of cabinet, Molitor, writes a remarkable letter to the chief of cabinet of Foreign Affairs Minister, Spaak. Attached is an unsigned 10-page document, the author of which mentions a meeting, where resident Regnier in the presence of high officials of "la tutelle", literally says: "il faut tuer Rwagasore".

On several occasions Spaak asks the king to reject Kageorgis' request to be granted grace, but Baudouin is insistent. The letter and its attachment are meant to convince Spaak, it is as if the king is reminding him of Belgian responsibility in the murder case. To say the least, this is a very strange step that Baudouin is taking. He goes to great lengths to make his point, a final attempt to convince Spaak, after having written several other letters which are not to be found in the Foreign Affairs archives. In one of them he summarizes Spaak's line of reasoning as follows: "La tutelle a été accusée au Burundi d'avoir une certaine responsabilité, voire une certaine complicité dans le meurtre du Prince Rwagasore. L'exécution du condamné à mort serait la preuve que la tutelle se désolidarise totalement du meurtre". Baudouin thus accuses Spaak of using Kageorgis as a scapegoat. The king continues: "Il est permis de se demander (...) si l'auteur matériel de l'assassinat est plus coupable que ceux qui en ont conçu l'idée et poursuivi l'exécution en l'utilisant comme un instrument".

My research leads me to conclude that the author of the anonymous document is former resident, Robert Scheyven. Above I identified him as a cousin of Raymond Scheyven, one of the leading christian democrat politicians at the time. There we have an additional reason to deplore the negligence of the inquiry, illustrated by the fact Robert Scheyven was never questioned about his potential role in the murder case.

At the time the PSC was the leading political party in Belgium with easy access to the king. All things considered, including the role of high ranking local Christian Democrats in the murder case, one cannot but conclude that either Baudouin is playing their game or that the PSC, anxious to cover up a crime in which their political friends in Burundi are involved, is using the king in an effort to prevent the worst consequences falling on their own heads.

Final appeal

Taking all these elements into account, alongside the fact that Rwagasore's assassination put a huge burden on Burundi's future, as already explained above, it would seem reasonable that the inquiry be reopened. The establishment of a parliamentary enquiry commission, similar to that which investigated Belgian responsibility in the Lumumba murder case, would be an appropriate framework. Up to now there has not been any official reaction to my book, "De moord op Rwagasore, de Burundese Lumumba". It is high time Belgium deals with this episode of its colonial past.

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