

The dramatic return of Burundi's Rwasa
Former rebel leader reappears after years in hiding, announcing plans to run in 2015 elections.
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After three years in hiding, Agathon Rwasa - the infamous leader of the Burundian rebel group National Liberation Front (FNL) - emerged on August 6 to give his first public speech since 2010.

The police, though not aggressive, were prepared. Armed with AK-47s and tear gas, they blocked Rwasa from getting out of his car, claiming that he had not obtained the requisite permission for the gathering.



Rwasa was prevented by police from holding a public rally in Bujumbura [Teddy Mazina/Al Jazeera]

More than 1,000 people arrived to see Rwasa in the country's capital, Bujumbura, and the figure likely would have been higher had the government not stopped buses, searched individuals, and recorded the names of people going to the rally.

"It was a proof that we have to struggle hard for the freedom of Burundians," Rwasa said later in a one-on-one interview. "Why should we always be suppressed by the police when we have not infringed the law? Why should the police play the role of militias when it is a national institution?"

More than a decade of civil war in Burundi ended only in 2006, which means the country is still transitioning from political violence to a democratic

system. Conflict in the landlocked state erupted in 1993 after Burundi's first democratically elected president, a member of the ethnic Hutu majority, was assassinated after only three months in office by ethnic Tutsi members of the military.

The assassination sparked the formation of several Hutu groups that targeted Tutsi civilians. Though they shared a common goal - the alleged liberation of the Hutu population - the rebel groups adopted very different philosophies and strategies.

Today, tensions between Burundi's ruling party, the CNDD-FDD, and its largest opposition group, the FNL, are rooted in a precarious relationship former during their days as rebel groups fighting against a common enemy.

The CNDD-FDD was the largest rebel group during the war, and made significant compromises in exchange for representation in the military and government. The more radical FNL refused to drop arms until all its demands were met.

In 2005, while CNDD-FDD leader Pierre Nkurunziza was sworn in as president, the FNL kept fighting under the leadership of Agathon Rwasa. A controversial figure, Rwasa has been accused of some of the worst atrocities during the war and continues to be blamed for ongoing violence. However, he retains a strong base of support in Bujumbura and the surrounding province, which the FNL controlled during the last years of the war.

In 2008, the FNL finalised a peace agreement with the CNDD-FDD government and agreed to participate in the 2010 elections, though Rwasa never made it onto the ballot. Ultimately, Rwasa and other leading opposition figures united to withdraw their candidacies in protest of reports of alleged election fraud and intimidation. Rwasa then accused the government of threatening him and disappeared.

Crackdown on freedoms

Since then, critics say Burundi's government has clamped down on freedom of speech and press. One FNL supporter, Claude - whose name has been changed to protect his identity - said he has been jailed 11 times since 2010 for his open support of Rwasa. "Knowing how the government oppresses the opposition," he said, "it does not surprise me that the government did not let [Rwasa] hold his press conference".

In the absence of major political opposition, the government passed a law in April requiring journalists to reveal all their sources relating to national security and public order, or face a fine of 3000 euros (\$3985) - an impossible expense for a profession that earns an average of 100 euros (\$133) per month.

This follows the prosecution of Hassan Ruvakuki, a journalist who covered the recent emergence of a rebel group and was charged with treason in 2012. Police responded to protests against Ruvakuki's imprisonment with tear gas, claiming the gathering was illegal. These and other high-profile events have raised concerns about increased repression ahead of elections in 2015.

Burundi has long lagged behind in most development metrics, but the freedom of its press had been a source of pride. In an interview, Rwasa accused the international community of complicity in the destruction of these freedoms, by remaining silent on the Burundian government's activities while continuing to support development programmes in the country.

The Ministry of Information did not respond to requests for comment.

An uncertain future

It is unclear what will happen now that Rwasa has returned. He is no longer the head of his political party, and a government ally, Emmanuel Miburo, is now the official leader of the FNL.

Yet for many FNL supporters, this is a triumphant moment. "His return is a revival of our vision," said Claude. "After the elections in 2010, some of our members were persecuted and fled the country; others were killed. This means there is still a chance for us to be part of change in this country. Our only fear is that he might be jailed or killed."

Thus far, Rwasa has striven to portray himself as a politician rather than a militia leader, saying "fighting cannot build" and "I do not wish this for my country". However, Rwasa did not rule out the possibility of a return to violence. "Unfortunately, it is one of the scenarios which can be predicted."

Rwasa had a strong message for President Nkurunziza: "Who does he think would bear the responsibility of an escalation in this country? Does he hope that it will be upon my shoulders?" Rwasala laughed. "I think not. He would better give up his ambitions. He has served two terms. It's enough. We are fed up with his doings. He would be better going without tarnishing his image ... Otherwise his future will be dark."