

Seventh-day Adventists in Burundi during the Political Upheavals of 1965, 1972, and 1976

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The political upheavals in Burundi in 1965, 1972 and 1976 have impacted the history of the country as well as the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Burundi.

Background

The Independence period begun with the willingness of the Belgian authorities to create space for indigenous people, who were in reality the assistants of the colonial master. Some of those people had attended schools run by the same colonial master and had been molded in a certain way. Beginning on July 14, 1952, measures were put in place to secure the democratization of local political life. Indigenous institutions were allowed to organize elections. There was competition between political parties. That is how Burundi began decolonization. The wind of independence that was blowing on the African continent had just reached Burundi.

Beginning in January 1960, the Belgian authorities launched a system of many political parties. More than 20 political parties were competing with each other to take control of national independence and management of the country. The following were very prominent: People's Party (PP) of Nigane Emmanuel, Christian Democratic Party (CDP) of Birori Joseph and Ntidendereza, Republican Democratic Party (RDP) of Bigayimpunzi Pierre, and Union for National Progress (UPRONA) of Rwagasore Louis. They all favored monarchy and had been allowed to operate since 1960.¹

Though it was a multi-party era, there were only two general trends of opinion when communal elections took place in 1960. UPRONA was the party for those who sought immediate independence. Political parties which envisioned getting independence at a later time were led by CDP. Their concern was to have time prior to independence for political institutions to get acquainted with democratic rule and practices, in order to reach a self-governance status.

On September 18, 1961, under the supervision of the United Nations, one political party, UPRONA, won the legislative elections with 58 seats out of a total of 64. The leader of UPRONA, Rwagasore Louis, the son of King Mwambutsa IV Bangiricenge, had been nominated on September 28, 1961, as prime minister and was authorized to establish his government. Unfortunately, two weeks later, on October 13, 1961, he was assassinated. The country got its independence on July 1, 1962, without the hero who had done much to see the country get its independence. The coming of independence meant that Burundi ceased to be a United Nations Trust Territory under Belgium.²

The Post-Independent Period

Burundi had just become independent as a constitutional monarchy with the king at the top and his prime minister. However, soon after independence, Burundi experienced a political crisis. There was much tension and confusion following the death of Rwagasore Louis. Political leaders were not of one accord as to who was to lead the ruling party, UPRONA, and replace Rwagasore Louis as prime minister. Mirerekano Paul and Muhirwa André, though they were of different ethnic backgrounds, were the favorites for that position. The conflict ceased to be looked at politically, ideologically, or based on leadership competences, but rather on ethnic lines. That was the beginning of a political situation that led to deaths, refugees, and displaced people in 1965; it became a forerunner of the crisis of 1972.³

The crisis that erupted in 1972 originated with the sad events of 1965 which were the results of the dissension among political leaders of the independence period. The political discourse on decolonization created two groups among indigenous leadership. The issue at stake was the change of the traditional structure to access power. It was an opportunity to compete for leadership position between two major components of the Burundian population (Hutu and Tutsi). The rivalry started as an ideological one, but it evolved as a competition which had an ethnic basis.

The discourses for independence based on democratic ideas and practices were a two-edged sword. They led the country to independence, but at the same time they filled peoples' minds with deep resentment toward one another. As people started to compete for positions in leadership, they enhanced socio-ethnic stereotypes to exclude their opponents. The democratic ideas came as a threat to a "pre-colonial stratification of society along ethnic lines where Tutsi were treated as superior while the majority Hutu were considered second-class citizens."⁴

It is quite evident that Hutu-Tutsi ethnic rivalry did not originate with colonial authorities who worked through the existing power structures; but by so doing, they enhanced the pre-colonial inequalities along ethnic lines and this served to strengthen their hold on power. It served their strategy of domination. Thus, the democratic move of the independence period was a threat to the Belgian colonial authorities and to the pre-colonial power structures they had strengthened. Surprisingly, the ethnic rivalry remained a strategy of power struggle for

political leaders of the independence period. Later it evolved as a way of securing power. Finally, it led to political, ethnic, and regional cleavage. This is how “the politicization of ethnicity and social stratification along ethnic lines” became deeply rooted. It was the beginning of an eventful period in the history of Burundi that led to the events of October 1965.

This scenario negatively impacted the political structures of the country that found itself with two antagonist blocs called “Monrovia” and “Casablanca.” According to Raphael Ntibazonkiza, the bloc called Monrovia included Hutus who cherished the European ideology of capitalism while Casablanca included Tutsis close to China who favored communism.⁵ In the context of this rivalry between the western and eastern blocs, Burundi became a spot where capitalism and communism gained supporters. Very soon after the independence declaration, UPRONA, the ruling party was accused of linking with communism as it entertained close relationship with the M.N.C. of Lumumba Patrice, the TANU of Julius Nyerere, and some eastern political parties. Thus, dissensions rose within the ruling party and they were extended to parliament.⁶

It may be difficult to trace with exactitude when ethnic antagonisms erupted in Burundi because the Hutu-Tutsi ethnic rivalry has been the dominant feature of Burundian society for a long time. However, the ethnic mindset was deeply rooted during the independence period which led to political competition. Ethnic cleavage between Hutu and Tutsi intensified. Hutus felt progressively excluded by Tutsis from political and government institutions. Tutsis feared, at any time, the reactions of Hutus who could follow the “Rwandese model.” These factors fed a spirit of dissension and perennial suspicion among political leaders.

Rwanda experienced a tough political crisis known as “the Hutu Rwandese Social Revolution in 1959,” where ethnic antagonisms erupted into violence, “when a majority regime of Hutu drove away a minority regime of Tutsi.”⁷ The Rwandan Tutsi king was deposed and he fled the country. Consequently, many deaths occurred and an exodus of some 200,000 Tutsis followed, many of whom went to Burundi while others crossed over to Congo.⁸

In addition, Tutsis in Burundi were worried because of the events which occurred on Christmas day in 1963 in Rwanda.⁹ This political orientation known as the Rwandese model has served, on one hand, as something to avoid and, on the other hand, as an objective to achieve for the two major components of the Burundian population. This led the former president of Burundi (1976 to 1987) to say: “Personally, this is what I consider as the very first ingredient of the crisis that has befallen our country. Rwandese refugees who got established in Burundi after the crisis of 1959, along with Congolese refugees, had created an opportunity for Burundians to develop their mindset, to modify their sentiments and visions as they were still unexperienced in modern life of dealing with political life and ruling the country.”¹⁰

In light of the above history, it is evident that there was political volatility. Disagreement between political leaders and political instability had surfaced. The king had dismissed six governments within four years. He often changed his prime minister. When Rwagasore Louis was assassinated on September 13, 1961, he was

replaced by Muhirwa André on October 21, 1961. He was replaced in June 1963 by Ngendandumwe Pierre. Later on, in 1964, Nyamoya Albin became the prime minister. In January 1965, Ngendandumwe Pierre was again nominated as prime minister; unfortunately, he was assassinated on the day of his nomination. Bamina Joseph replaced him until March 1965.¹¹

The assassination of Ngendandumwe Pierre seems to have led to the legislative elections held in May 1965 being held with an ethnic mindset. A great majority of those elected to the parliament and senate were Hutus. Those elections were followed by the sad events of 1965. It started as a military coup against the monarchy, but it ended up as a civil war which plunged the country into desolation.

The election held in May 1965 was intense, the Hutu gained a majority in the national assembly and in the senate. Mwami Mwambutsa IV appointed Leopold Biha, a Tutsi, as prime minister. This move proved quite unpopular and caused a rise in ethnic tensions. A group of military personnel and policemen attempted to overthrow the monarchy on October 18, 1965, accusing Mwami of causing intrigues to hold on to power, but the attempted overthrow failed. In the following days, some Tutsi families in Muramvya province were attacked, their houses burned, and people killed. That was the first time that an ethnic massacre was reported following the killing of people of Kamenge in 1962 following the independence period. The way that crisis was dealt with opened the door for the events of 1972.¹²

Loyalist forces thwarted the rebels. Those forces were led by Colonel Michel Micombero who was state secretary of defense.¹³ It followed a fierce repression of Hutus. It was a massive, selective, and systematic execution of Hutu intelligentsia, who were politicians, military or police officers, members of parliament or senate, and government employees. Many people died. Others fled the country, including M. P. Kayabu Simeon. The king was worried but nevertheless left behind this chaotic situation and went on leave in Switzerland,¹⁴ causing a power vacuum. Many people who died were from the Bugarama and Busangana communes in Muramvya, the kingdom site. Meanwhile, the fierce repression spread to other regions.

The period following those sad events was the lull that preceded the storm of 1972. This is when everything worsened. King Mwambutsa IV Bangiricenge had found refuge in Switzerland in 1965. His son, Ndizeye Charles, profited from the power vacuum and replaced his father on July 8, 1966, and became Ntare V. After his enthronement, he nominated Michel Micombero, the former state secretary for defense as prime minister. Later on, Michel Micombero, in cooperation with a military group called National Revolutionary Committee, led a coup which deposed Ntare V and declared Burundi a republic. He placed Ntare V under house arrest and appointed himself president at the age of 26.¹⁵

In 1972, King Mwambutsa IV Bangiricenge was ready to return to power and pursue national reconciliation.¹⁶ At the same time, his son Ntare V, returned from exile and, despite a guarantee that he would be allowed a safe return to Burundi, he was promptly arrested on arrival.¹⁷ On April 29, 1972, there was an uprising for which no one has been able to establish whether it was led by a Huutu, or whether it was an attempt to free Ntare V by

Tutsi royalists from the north who wanted him restored to the monarchy. Though the truth about it may be difficult to establish, what cannot be denied is that violence arose following the return of Ntare V from exile. This kindled a general unrest in the country leading to a systematic massacre of people. Many people died, others fled, and still others were counted missing. The Tutsi-led reprisals were particularly brutal.¹⁸ Nearly 100,000 Hutus were killed in targeted massacres of any Hutu with a secondary education, including teachers, civil servants, and religious leaders, among others.¹⁹ Three of the former cabinet ministers were also among those killed.²⁰ The uprising was eventually quelled, but unrest continued, and nearly 50,000 Hutus fled to nearby countries. Over the months the number rose to more than 200,000.²¹ The unrest and the perennial suspicion of one another have remained since that time.

The Adventist Church during the Political Turmoils

From the beginning of the Adventist Church in Burundi until the year of independence, the church had grown and become influential. When Burundi became independent, the Adventist Church had already made an impact. The Adventist message had spread from the Ndora Field Station and other locations, including the areas beyond the natural forest, the Kibira, and reached Yanza and even Gatunda in the southern part of Rwanda. It had spread toward Bugarama, Kuwinteko, and Ruheru in Rwanda where Magagara Nehemie, Burindege Elie, and Bikebere David had been sent from Ndora as front-line workers. It had spread along the plain of the Rusizi River in Congo, where those who worked there were called *Abavunyi* meaning those in charge of conversion.²² It had spread to Muyinga, Cankuzo, Ruyigi, and Gitega, where Munyenkiko Ezeckiel and Nyagatema Elie worked as the first field administrators.

In the years before independence and prior to the storm of 1972, the church had remained influential. It had developed an educational system and started schools in different locations, especially in the western part of the country which contained the major portion of the church membership. The locations which were far from roads ran school programs which were limited to the first three years of school. Those locations included Muramba, Buhayira, Muzenga, Butosho, Bubenga, Rubona, Kabogo, and Bukinanyana. The schools which were located near the road were called the “centers” and their school programs covered the first six years of school.²³ Those locations included Ndora, Buganda, Butahana, Mugina, and Magarama. Prior to 1961, only the school of Ndora offered the seventh and eighth grades. Beginning in April 1961, Ndora Mission was authorized to offer the ninth grade. Before Kivoga School was established in 1964, students who wished to go higher attended the Seminaire Adventiste at Gitwe, Rwanda.²⁴ However, during the leadership of Michombero Michel, the Adventist education system was jolted. In 1966, Micombero Michel decided that all primary school teachers would cease getting salary from the church and would instead be paid by the government.²⁵

In the meantime, because of the crisis in Congo following the period of independence, the headquarters of the Adventist church in central Africa which had been in Congo was transferred to Bujumbura, Burundi, where

offices and houses were acquired to house the new administration. Daniel Gutekunst, who previously was the education department director at Lubumbashi, went to Burundi in 1964 to run the school at Kivoga, which had just been established on the land which the church purchased and on which it had constructed houses.²⁶

By this time the church had become influential and it had members who were in government. Some were elected at the communal level as counselors. Those included Salatiel Kiraga, Nsekerangandya Justin alias Fatake, Hesironi Mwumvaneza, Seth Ntibarora, and Salatiyeli Ntawusigimana. Paul Barinzigo and Aaron Ngozirazana were bourgmasters. Samuel Ngendahimana and Efraim Kananiye were judges. Lazare Hatungimana was working for the national radio.²⁷ The very first Burundian parliament had in its midst a member of the Adventist Church whose name was Kayabu Simeon, a native of Ndora. The national assembly, following the legislative election of 1965 had in its midst an Adventist member, Semi Mbazimitima.

Because the Adventist Church had gained influence, King Mwambutsa IV Bangiricenge, accompanied by his private secretary, Bamina Joseph, paid a visit to the Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Ndora.²⁸ He was received with honors by the church leadership there, spearheaded by Mark Sembagare. Kayabu Simeon, church member and member of parliament, played a major role in engaging the king for the visit to become a reality. That provided a positive impact by the church, which became popular countrywide, even in the southern part of the country. As a consequence of such influence, Ndora School was flooded by many students from around Burundi and in countries such as Rwanda and Congo.

Burundi evolved in a context where the political life of its neighboring countries impacted its political development. In other words, the political situation in Burundi was influenced by the political events which occurred in Congo and Rwanda. The Adventist Church in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi was all under the leadership of the Trans-Africa Division. Congo became independent in 1960, before Rwanda and Burundi. However, its independence was followed by upheaval. Katanga wanted to be separated from the rest of Congo. Moise Tshombe engaged the country in a conflict that became known as *Katanga Cessation*. As a consequence of this political situation, the headquarters of the Congo Rwanda-Urundi Union Mission, located at Elizabethville (Lubumbashi) was transferred to Bujumbura, Burundi. The Church in those three countries ceased to remain under a one union leadership. Congo remained with its leadership at Lubumbashi, and Rwanda-Urundi became an independent entity with a new headquarters in Bujumbura. The transfer of the headquarters of the Rwanda-Urundi Union to Bujumbura found the church already well rooted and influential.

An education system was in place with some primary schools. The system was reinforced by the appointment of Elizaphan Ntakirutimana as the union education department director and the establishment of Kivoga School in 1964.²⁹ However, the Church was severely injured by the civil war. Pastors, teachers, and elders were killed, and the rest ran to neighboring countries. It all started with the sad events of 1965. During this period the church lost its workers for the very first time. Kabuteri Naason, alias Gihanda, was assassinated along with Philip Makangara, a layperson, when pastoring at Butahana, in Cibitoke. Pastor Harayabo Eliazar, along with Modoka

Simeon, a lay person, was murdered together with the pastor in Muyinga. Ndora, known as a place where popular businessmen lived, became a killing ground for church elders, while others fled the country.³⁰ The loss increased with the crisis of 1972, when the church lost many assets as well as people. Pastor Andre Mahura was assassinated in Muyinga; Pastor Pfagutungu Zachariah and Ndabanitse Simon, an accountant, were murdered at Kivoga; Pastor Rwabudigi Job was massacred in Karurusi, in Kayanza province. Kabura Simon, a school principal at Buganda and some teachers—Matatias Matata, Garikani, and Shekaniya—were killed, and Kivoga High School lost 46 students.³¹

As a result of so many losses, church development was hindered. It was difficult to replace the pastors and businessmen who were church employees. Those who fled the country were scared to return. The refugee camps in neighboring countries, especially Rwanda and Tanzania, were flooded with many church members. The education system was paralyzed. Adventist schools vanished as the teachers who had run them were assassinated. There was a general discouragement among church members which prevented them from engaging in any activity toward development. The future was uncertain as many businessmen were abruptly stopped from their money-making activities. The church's mission, which had seen progress soon after independence, started a backward and downward move.

The Impact of the 1976 Coup on the Mission of the Adventist Church

The third coup was non-violent and occurred on November 1, 1976 which was led by Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza. Colonel Bagaza Jean Baptiste made that coup with a group called Supreme Revolutionary Council. When Bagaza Jean Baptiste became the new president, he suspended the Constitution of 1974 and tried to create national reconciliation to bring together the Hutu and the Tutsi. He included the Hutu in his government and promised to bring more Hutu representatives into public life. Nevertheless, ethnic tensions continued.³²

The second Republic which resulted from the coup of 1976 put restrictions on the Adventist Church. The Home Affairs made it an obligation for everyone to attend community services on Sabbath, the day of worship for Adventist members. This was an attempt to find a political reason to accuse the leadership of the Church as subversive before the public opinion. Many Adventist leaders were imprisoned, including Munyenkiko Ezechiel (West Burundi president and deputy legal representative), Biyayire Laban (East Field president), Maganga Esdras (West Burundi Field treasurer), Silas Senkomo (departemental director at West Burudi Field), Birikunzira Laban and Ntirihera Joel (districts pastors), and Makanishi Eliakim (a church elder). Adventist pastors whose children did not attend classes on Sabbath had to pay a penalty.

In 1984, President Bagaza issued a decree to ban all denominational activities including church attendance. With that closure all the church buildings became sealed. The church lost its prime property at 126 Avenue Prince Louis Rwagasore, Kiriri. That property was taken by force and transformed into building office for the police of the municipality. Church houses for employees were also taken by force. Local church pastors were forced to

resign from their formal pastoral ministry.³³

As a result of the closure of denominational activity, the Africa-Indian Ocean Division dissolved the Central Africa Union Mission and designated Burundi as an “Attached Field” under the Division. Consequently, the West Burundi and East Burundi Fields were dissolved. The plot of Buganda Field headquarters, the birthplace of Adventism in Burundi, was divided into small plots and given to certain people.

While the ban intended to prevent the Adventist Church from functioning on Burundian soil, home churches flourished in the absence of a formal church structure. However, the speed of the mission slowed down. The former outreach programs of the Church through medical and educational work was inconceivable in the new setting when the Church’s health centers and the secondary school (Kivoga Secondary School) were nationalized.

Conclusion

From the independence period up to the civil wars in Burundi, the Seventh-day Adventists were impacted by how the political situation was evolving. This is because many church members, like other people, are usually never too far behind in the complications resulting from the ethnic matrix of society.³⁴ Thus the church mission was impacted by the political crisis of 1965 and later on by that of 1972 and 1976. The ethnic mindset was institutionalized and crystalized within the post-independence period. The rivalry is said to be the result of a colonial misdeed, but the Hutu-Tutsi ethnic rivalry was the dominant feature of Burundian society before the colonial administration. It was caused by different forms of discrimination within Burundian society and many Christians were not immune.

During both Republics, the Adventist Church was banned. But two weeks after Pierre Buyoya deposed Bagaza on September 3, 1987, restrictions on the Church were eased. On October 26, 1987 when he was visiting Cibitoke, the birth place of Adventism in Burundi, Buyoya issued a formal declaration by which he urged the Minister of Home Affairs to give back all properties which had been taken from the Adventist Church. In 1989, the Church got back all its properties which included schools, health institutions, houses for workers and other properties that had been nationalized.³⁵

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33. The information was supplied by Paul Irakoze, the executive secretary of Burundi Union Mission, April 2, 2020.

34. Sang, 2.

35. The information was supplied by Paul Irakoze, the executive secretary of Burundi Union Mission, April 2, 2020.

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