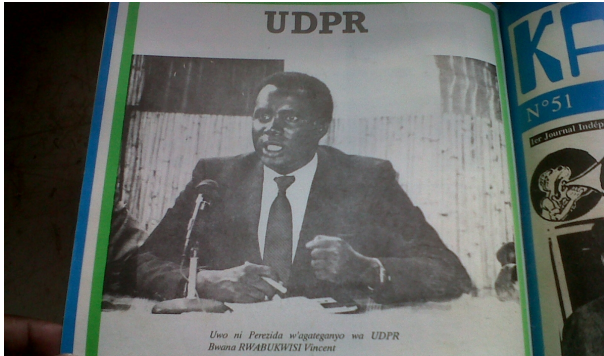


Genocide: Remembering Vincent Rwabukwisi, founder of Rwanda's first private newspaper

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In 1987, Vincent Rwabukwisi, a 28-year-old came up with a unique idea of starting his own private newspaper. At that time, all newspapers were run by either the government or institutions like the Roman Catholic Church.

His venture into journalism began with a light-hearted yet satirical publication titled "Kazagwa," featuring a fictional character named Kazagwa, who symbolized the typical Rwandan.

While initially apolitical, the paper evolved over time to serve as a tool for highlighting the injustices faced by ordinary Rwandans

under the government's unfair policies that were characterised by divisionism based on ethnicity and regions.

As the newspaper's popularity started to grow, Rwandans began sharing their own stories with Rwabukwisi, urging him to address their concerns by writing about them. He changed the publication's name to "Ejo Nzamera Nte" to better reflect its focus on addressing societal issues.

By 1989, the newspaper underwent a major change, adopting a more direct political stance against government policies, particularly those perpetuating divisionism and injustice.

Rwabukwisi renamed it "Kanguka."

Hailing from Gitarama prefecture (now Ruhango), Rwabukwisi used his writing to oppose the perceived unfairness and unequal distribution of resources that favoured regions like Ruhengeri and Gisenyi, which were the home of many government officials then.

Adrien Rangira, a former Rwandan lawmaker and work-mate of Rwabukwisi at the Kanguka publication, told The New Times that "Kanguka," played a pivotal role in fos-

tering the growth of private newspapers in Rwanda.

“Many journalists who later launched their own publications had previously worked for Kanguka,” he narrated.

Rangira says he crossed paths with Rwabukwisi at the University of Rwanda in Huye in 1988. At that time, Rwabukwisi, having recently launched his newspaper, sought young writers to contribute articles, albeit without remuneration due to financial constraints.

Despite the risk of government persecution, several university students including Rangira joined Rwabukwisi in writing for the paper. However, they refrained from attaching their bylines to the articles they wrote in order to avoid being identified.

Their efforts to evade persecution did not last long, as they came face to face with it in 1990.

That year, Rwabukwisi was apprehended upon his return from Nairobi, where he had interviewed King Kigeli. His arrest led to a 17-year prison sentence in Kigali Prison, where Rangira and other journalists joined him later as persecution against the media continued.

Fortunately, in 1991, former president Juvenal Habyarimana granted amnesty to political prisoners, including Rwabukwisi and his colleagues.

However, their freedom was short-lived, as they were rearrested a month later for publishing a satirical piece portraying the panic and anxiety that Habyarimana was allegedly experiencing under the new multi-party system.

This time, they were detained at Nyanza prison for four months. It was after this ordeal that someone warned Rwabukwisi of how his life was in danger.

“Someone told him, ‘you were sentenced to 17 years in prison before. Now you are back in jail for four months. The next thing is that they are going to kill you,’” Rangira narrates.

This advice prompted Rwabukwisi to suspend, at least publicly, his media work and delve into politics. He reasoned that becoming a politician would give him some kind of immunity from persecution, since the government feared confronting politicians, in order to shun external pressure from foreign countries.

At that time, Rwabukwisi founded the Union Démocratique du Peuple Rwandais (UDPR) party but continued to be an undercover boss of Kanguka.

The Kangura counterfeit

Many people may think that the notorious genocidal newspaper Kangura existed before Kanguka, but that was not the case, according to Rangira.

He explains that the genesis of Kangura can be traced back to 1990 when Rwabukwisi wrote about the persecution of Valens Kajeguhakwa, a Tutsi businessman from Gisenyi.

One day, in 1990, according to Rangira, Kajeguhakwa was attacked at night by army officers and policemen at his home in Gisenyi, accusing him of working with the RPF Inkotanyi.

In the morning of the next day, he called Rwabukwisi and showed him all the damage that the attack had done on his home. He asked him to write about, implicating the officers behind it.

After publishing the story, military officers made an attempt to compel Rwabukwisi to publish a dissenting opinion, showcasing Kajeguhakwa as a liar and an enemy of the government. When he declined to do what they wanted, they contacted Hassan Ngeze, a Gisenyi-based journalist who worked part time for Kanguka.

They asked him to go to the printer, and publish the newspaper with the dissenting opinion, without Rwabukwisi's authorisation. He did it but it required him to change the last letters of the name of the publication, in

order to be allowed to publish without the owner's consent.

That was the birth of the notorious Kangura newspaper which disseminated a lot of hate speech in the build-up to the Genocide against the Tutsi.

Death of Rwabukwisi

Tragically, Rwabukwisi became a target during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. He was Hutu, but was targeted due to suspicions of collaboration with the RPF Inkotanyi. He was fatally shot at his residence in Nyamirambo on April 11, 1994. His wife and son survived and now reside in Belgium.