

The life and times of Michel Rwagasana

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Uwimbabazi, 49, is the only surviving off-spring of Michel Rwagasana, a national hero, who falls in the Imena group, the second category of heroes, who will today be honoured.

“I know him as a man who would never rescind on a cause once he was convinced it was justified, he even put this cause ahead of his family when, in 1960, mindful of the imminent danger he faced back home, he decided to return home to pursue politics,” Uwimbabazi told The New Times in an exclusive interview.

Rwagasana was a founding member of UNAR (Union Nationale Rwandaise), a political organisation that agitated for the unconditional independence of the country, and was its Secretary General at the time of his death

in 1963. Against all odds – including turning down offers of a ministerial position from former President Gregoire Kayibanda, who was a close relative – Rwagasana and his colleagues strongly opposed the then ruling Parme Hutu, mainly because it agitated for the alienation of one section of the Rwandan society.

Accounts indicate that in the early 1960s, after the abdication of King Kigeri Ndahindurwa V, many founders of UNAR went into exile after pogroms against the Tutsi became increasingly widespread, but after a few months, decided to come back home and face Parme Hutu from within.

“Of course I was not yet born then but then it is not difficult to establish that his was then a young family, having had our first born in 1957,” said Uwimbabazi, who is Ragasana’s only surviving child, having lost all her four brothers.

Accounts from former acquaintances indicate that Rwagasana, who once served as the Personal Secretary to King Mutara Rudahigwa – himself a decorated hero, under the Imena category – actually addressed in the early 1960s, the United Nations, agitating Rwanda’s wish to become independent of Belgian colonialism.

“It was clear the Parme Hutu stalwarts never wanted independence un-

like UNAR – which had by the end of the 1950s entrenched its structures across the country – and had already established contacts with others across Africa seeking independence of the respective countries,” said historian Tom Ndahiro.

Parme Hutu, seemingly oblivious to the wave of revolutions that swept across the continent which ensured independence of many African countries, wanted Rwanda to remain a Belgian protectorate, at least for the next 30 years. Ironically, faced with the reality, the Belgians decided to instead hand power to the highly divisive Parme Hutu, on a silver platter, to the chagrin of UNAR. This independence, which many have termed as a ‘farce’ was declared on July 4, 1960. Ndahiro says that because of the unifying principle that defined UNAR, cutting across the tribal spectrum, the Belgian colonial masters were threatened by the growing influence of the party which was later outlawed.

“After the founding members fled the country, and most took refuge in Uganda, Rwagasana returned and pushed for the re-registration of UNAR, but he was told that he needed signatures from across the country to be able to do this. We traversed the country and eventually got them hence the authorities had no option but to re-register us,” said Pierre Claver Karyabwite, a former close friend to Rwagasana.

Karyabwite, 76, was the vice-president of the UNAR youth wing and one of the few people who had been with Rwagasana and his colleagues during their last days before they were murdered by the Kayibanda regime in December 1963.

The final moments

According to Karyabwite, he was tipped off by a local leader that all national leaders of UNAR were to be rounded up and killed, following attacks in the 1960s by Rwandan refugees from neighbouring countries. Authorities accused UNAR of being the political wing of the attackers.

“Following the tip-off, I rode to Nyamirambo, the area called Mirong’ine (40) which served as the party headquarters and residence of both Rwagasana and the party president Rutsindintwarane and their families to tell them of the imminent danger,” said Karyabwite.

He said that upon delivering the message, Rwagasana flatly ruled out the idea of fleeing the country.

“In his own words, which I still remember 50 years on, he told me; ‘don’t you get it? I came back to remain with the people. They will only be killed after I am dead. Under no circumstances will I flee to leave them to be killed by Parme Hutu...’ and he was seconded by Rutsindintwarane.”

Karyabwite says that, indeed, the following day they were picked up and driven off to Ruhengeri where they were killed on December 23, 1963, on Nyamagumba hill, near the current Musanze town. The extermination of these top leaders, whose number is said to have been above 20, including those from another party called RADER, according to Karyabwite, marked the end of both parties. He says that after this, the political environment became very hostile which made it practically impossible to remain in the political arena, as killings, not only of the political elite, but also the ordinary citizens increasingly became open, and

eventually, he also had to flee the country.

He fled to Burundi, following series of pogroms that mainly targeted the Tutsi.

Rwagasana's wife, Suzana Nzayire,

died in exile in 1988 while two of his sons died during the 1990-94 Liberation struggle. One was killed in the Genocide while the other one died in an accident.