

A portrait of Pierre Buyoya

This profile was prepared by a group of Burundians in Switzerland.

Pierre Buyoya staged his second coup d'état in Burundi on July 25, 1996. The first one had brought him to power on Sept. 3, 1987, when he overthrew his cousin Jean-Baptiste Bagaza. He remained in power until 1993, and was ousted after free and democratic elections held in June of that year.

Buyoya is by no means the democrat and moderate that some international media try to make him out to be. He is a military man, a member of a clan (Hima) that is a minority within the Tutsi minority. Just like all senior officers in Burundi, he comes from Bururi province, in the south, which has been the fiefdom of political and military power since 1966, at the time of the first military putsch by Michel Micombero, another cousin, who overthrew the king and proclaimed a republic.

Against the backdrop of an escalating church-state conflict since around 1985, Buyoya took advantage of the absence of Colonel Bagaza, who was attending a summit of French-speaking countries in Canada, in order to take power. He had, of course, the blessing of a large part of the Army. This putsch was carried out for reasons of personal ambition and to defend a small group of Hima officers, who feared that the struggle between Bagaza and the powerful Catholic Church might imperil their future. When Buyoya's putsch succeeded on Sept. 3, 1987, most seasoned observers saw in it the outcome of a quarrel among two cousins coming from the same hill and the same clan, just like their predecessor Michel Micombero, who was responsible for the 1972 genocide.

After taking over, Buyoya was unable to come up with a coherent political program. He instead consolidated the existing order, by keeping any and all members of the Hutu ethnic group out of power and the decision-making process, just as his predecessor, Bagaza, had done for ten years. He even went so far as to deny the existence of an ethnic problem in the country, and adopted the power politics inherited from Bagaza, especially in forming his government.

Eleven short months after his putsch, his staff ignored or even provoked massacres in the north of the country, in the villages of Ntega and Marangara. The official toll is 5,000 deaths and 60,000 refugees. Unlike previous crises, the one in 1988 was covered in the media. There was open domestic protest, denouncing the President and forcing him to change policy. In this way, Buyoya accepted the participation of (controllable) Hutus in the Executive branch; there were as many Hutus as Tutsis in the government. A Hutu prime minister was

named, though Buyoya was careful to have him surrounded by Tutsi chauvinists, to keep an eye on him.

But, Buyoya did not manage to fool the internal opposition. He only barely managed to sell, through political marketing operations, his image as a mediator to an international public, badly informed about realities in Burundi. The basic problems in Burundi, such as lack of education, remained untouched. The problem in the school system was that of an apartheid policy against the Hutu ethnic group, and even against Tutsis who were not from Bururi province. Problems related to defense and security (sectors traditionally monopolized by people from the south of the country), and to justice (the judges being independent in name only), were not raised.

Popular dissatisfaction continued to grow, and Buyoya's fate was quickly overtaken by other events, those that broke out in the northeast and in the capital, Bujumbura, in 1991. His Army once again became infamous for killing over 5,000 people. More and more strongly criticized, and confronted with an increasingly bold internal opposition, Buyoya arrived at the French-African summit in La Baule, France, weakened. While pretending to accept a democratic opening, he was counting on his Army to terrorize the population, especially the Hutu majority. In 1992, he promulgated a tailor-made Constitution, and moved elections up to June 1993. In anticipation, he activated his whole administrative, police, diplomatic, and financial machine.

But he was brought down by his own schemes, by a people ready to turn over a new leaf. In June 1993, he lost the Presidential and legislative elections. It was a catastrophe for him, especially since he had presented himself to international public opinion as such a perfect democrat. But pressure from the victors, and the weight of a leaf of history being turned, forced him to yield power to the newly elected President, Melchior Ndadaye. This was a gesture to save his image, while, in the background, he began maneuvering to return to power.

It all happened very quickly. First, his cabinet chief of staff, Sylvestre Ngingaba, made a coup attempt on July 3, 1993, even before the elected President had been inaugurated. Poorly coordinated, the putsch failed. Two other coups were foiled before the fateful day of Oct. 21, 1993, when President-elect Melchior Ndadaye was captured in his palace by the tribal army, which decapitated all the democratic institutions by assassinating all the President's constitutionally mandated successors.

An investigation led by an international commission of African and Western non-governmental organizations came to the conclusion that the main perpetrators of the coup were the military men, ministers, and personal advisers who were closest to Buyoya. Faced with international reproach, the Army realized it had gone too far. Buyoya then adopted a low profile, waiting for the situation to deteriorate, to his advantage.

Then, fearing that an international military intervention might reestablish an order leading to the arrest of the putschists, Buyoya completed his dirty work. On July 25, 1996, he asked the Army to put him back in the leading position.