

Rwanda

* Interview With President Habyarimana

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[Interview with Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana: "Juvenal Habyarimana: The Plain Truths of a Quiet Man" by Marie-Roger Biloa; first 11 paragraphs are JEUNE AFRIQUE introduction]

[Text] The difficulties of regional integration, the Belgian-Zairian crisis, ethnic problems and refugees, and the death of Dian Fossey: the Rwandan head of state responds frankly to the questions of our special correspondent.

Does the Nile begin in Burundi or Rwanda? Only a reckless man would venture to settle this amical controversy whose repercussions are essentially touristic! One thing is certain, however: of all the countries through which the world's longest river (6,670 km) passes, Rwanda is politically the most stable. In 27 years of independence, this tiny 26,338-km² state has in fact changed regimes only once.

Yet the notoriety of Major General Juvenal Habyarimana, Rwanda's president, trails well behind that of more recently sworn-in presidents such as the Ugandan Yoweri Museveni (3 years), the Kenyan Arap Moi (10 years), or even the Burundian Pierre Buyoya (1 and ½ years), head of Rwanda's "twin" state and neighbor to the south. This is probably because his government, in the manner of a long, tranquil river, strives to avoid troubled waters....

Certainly the country has seen its water roiled since 1959. First the monarchy, Tutsi and tribalism, was abolished. Then the Hutu majority came to power. Gregoire Kayibanda, (civilian) president from the time of independence from Belgian tutelage in 1962 until his ouster 5 July 1973, was the man of the "Rwandan revolution" and all its battles. In succeeding him in 1973, Habyarimana inherited a touchy situation: hundreds of thousands of Tutsis, the country's second-largest ethnic group (14 percent of the population), had gone into exile, not without having attempted several times to forcibly regain power. In the exclusive interview published below, the Rwandan head of state amply discusses that subject.

Presiding over the fates of the Rwandan people for over 15 years, Juvenal Habyarimana, educated by the Barnabite fathers of Bukavu (Zaire), is a simple and discreet man. Few anecdotes filter from his residence, adjacent to a military camp near the Kigali-Kanombe airport, where he lives with his wife Agathe Kanziga and several of his eight children. Whatever opposition he has to face, this 52-year-old military man (born 8 March 1937) is a very popular president. One rarely sees citizens—students, shopkeepers, ecclesiastics—so concerned with the image of their leader. To a French journalist who spoke of a "personality cult" on seeing the likeness of the major

general on dancers' loincloths, a Muslim and English-speaking (due to having lived in Kenya) Rwandan retorted: "It's just that in your country, you no longer know how to venerate the chief...."

The major general's collaborators appreciate his calmness and circumspection. "Before making a decision," confides a high-ranking party official, "especially if it involves a sanction, the president always takes the time to request several investigations and counterinvestigations." An elementary precaution, but one not necessarily in use everywhere in Africa.... Likewise, in contrast to a custom widespread in Africa, ministers do not learn of their nomination or dismissal out of the blue, from the radio; they are consulted and informed in advance. When relieved of their duties, they are treated to vociferous praise for having "valiantly and honorably served the state." In January, President Habyarimana asked his fellow countrymen to "assist him in seeing to it that those who resign their positions do not become general laughingstocks."

This desire for detente is conducive to domestic dialogue—and to development. Rwandans—nearly 6 million souls—have applied themselves to the task with a seriousness that would be the envy of more than one African leader. The crucial problem is overpopulation, which translates, for this farming people, into overworking of the land and erosion.

Making the cross-country trek from north to south, from Gisenyi to Butare, the visitor is struck by the absence of fallow land. Every square inch, absolutely every one, is cultivated—peas, bananas, rice, potatoes. Every peasant knows how to recover marshland and terrace slopes. They till right up to the top of the hills that model the countryside by the thousands. A civil servant in Foreign Affairs confided to me that he could still picture, from his student days in Cameroon, an unforgettable sight: forests unfolding as far as the eye could see, fertile lands not owned by anyone. It is a dream that must haunt many Rwandans.

The Kigali government has therefore embarked on a policy of emigration to ease congestion in villages where population density sometimes reaches 300 inhabitants per square kilometer! Tanzania in particular could take people—if Rwandan authorities foot the bill for all the infrastructures associated with their settlement: roads, schools, hospitals. These expenditures are estimated at several billion CFA francs. Nothing has been settled.

Ranked among the least advanced countries on the planet, Rwanda is home to many development aid organizations, which for the most part appreciate two aspects of the country: the ease with which projects can be monitored, due to the country's small size, and the homogeneity of political orientations. "Elsewhere," a German volunteer, an old cooperation hand, confides, "we have been known to receive contradictory instructions from three different authorities. In the end, we

sometimes had to wait months to know what the authorities really wanted." It is not surprising that a television crew from Rhenanie-Palatinat, a German province paired as a "sister" with Rwanda, has decided to film a report on this "Switzerland of the Great Lakes." Their purpose is very specific: "It will enable us to show German taxpayers that all the money they spend for Third-World aid is not being used for the sole purpose of fattening the Swiss accounts of leaders...." Rwanda's punctuality in paying its debts and various contributions (OAU, CEPGL [Economic Community of the Countries of the Great Lakes], CEAC [Community of Central African States]) also makes the honor roll.

This rigor is not superfluous for Rwandans, who begin work at 0700 and retire early (to the despair nightclub-lovers); the problems that need to be resolved to rise above a GNP [gross national product] per inhabitant of \$290 are many. The literacy rate remains low, even though classes are taught essentially in Kinyarwanda, the national language, with students not learning French until the secondary level. There is no national newspaper (the Rwandan press agency bulletin is intended only for civil servants) and music lovers are wasting their time: production of records (or cassettes) of local music has not yet gotten off the ground. Nor has the film industry: to date, not a single Rwandan director has produced a work of fiction. One engine is being cranked up, however—in 2 years, there may be television....

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] The last annual summit of the CEPGL held in Gisenyi, Rwanda, ended, as did previous ones, without your two partners, Burundi and Zaire, ratifying the convention on the free flow of people, goods, services, and capital and on the right of settlement. Aren't you disappointed?

[Habyarimana] I was in fact disappointed going to Gisenyi because, as acting president of CEPGL, I believed the convention would be ratified during my mandate. Since we have fallen behind the deadline for the agreement to take effect, that is January 1987, we insisted in Bujumbura in January 1988 on the necessity of ratification. You heard the language used in Gisenyi and the insistence on reciprocal security: I noted a climate tainted almost with mistrust. Nevertheless, the heads of state made solemn and public pledges. I therefore hope the convention will be ratified at the next summit.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Of all the legal instruments adopted by CEPGL, this convention is exceptional.

[Habyarimana] It is the backbone of integration of our subregion. But all possible steps must be taken to avoid treading on the sore spots of one side or another.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] In concrete terms, what is holding back Zaire and Burundi?

[Habyarimana] I sent emissaries to both countries. I was informed by Zaire that the convention must make it through several political bodies, notably the Central Committee and the Parliament. And President Mobutu assured me that the process would be complete in March. As far as Burundi is concerned, the minister of foreign

affairs, Cyprien Mbonimpa, in his official statement in Gisenyi, referred to the Ntega and Marangara incidents to explain his reticence. President Pierre Buyoya likewise mentioned them in his banquet allocution. Thus, there is some suspicion. According to the first version of these events, the instigators came from outside Burundi, a version which we do not at all share. It's probably true that there were tracts—what country doesn't have tracts—or even rumors coming from outside. But to believe that that is the cause of the incidents is a fundamental mistake. The problem is internal and President Buyoya is aware of it since he is now engaged in the process of shoring up national unity. He has also created a commission to reflect on the question. All these insinuations, therefore, in my opinion must be taken as such. Nevertheless we agreed that our security services would meet periodically and seek in a very concrete way means of strengthening security between our countries.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Do you think, as do others in your country, that Rwanda gives much more than it receives within CEPGL?

[Habyarimana] I have not compared figures....

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] In fact, it's an overall impression....

[Habyarimana] I was shown a not very in-depth study on the infrastructures and investments made in the three territories. But since we founded CEPGL in 1976 and decided to install it in Rwanda, we haven't gotten anything more, it's true.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] A member of the CEPGL trio, Zaire, is in conflict with a foreign country, Belgium. What is Rwanda's position?

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] It is not our place to take a position in this conflict. Of course President Mobutu informed us of the progress of the affair and we gave our opinion. But it is a problem between Zaire and Belgium.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Could Rwanda reproach Belgium for the same kinds of things as Zaire? Your country was also under Belgian administration....

[Habyarimana] No, we maintain productive, cooperative relations with Belgium. The deterioration in the relations between Belgium and Zaire does not in any way disturb our relations with Belgium. What does disturb us is that two countries who are our friends are at odds.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] All the same, President Mobutu came to reassure himself of the support of his CEPGL partners and reminded you of the pact uniting you: if one CEPGL member were the victim of subversive intrigues, the others would immediately react. Didn't you see an allusion there to Belgium?

[Habyarimana] No, because it's not at that stage! I don't imagine that Belgium will attack Zaire or vice versa! I don't know whether that was what was implied, but since we talked about intra-CEPGL security, it was normal to touch on its extension outside [of the CEPGL]. Concerning the support to be given Zaire, I think that certain truths are inescapable in the discussions between our neighbor and Belgium: in cooperative matters, when a country provides aid, it is also profitable for that country. There is no reason for conflict, one must simply draw the necessary conclusions in order to recent ties on new bases.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] What are the goals of the new special commission for Rwandan emigrants, created in January?

[Habyarimana] Its mission is to study all the questions facing Rwandans living abroad—and that doesn't concern refugees only. The case of the latter is certainly the most poignant and sensitive. The commission's task will therefore be to resolve all these questions in concert with all interested parties: neighboring countries, which shelter the refugees and in some cases grant them citizenship. We are prepared to receive them, with or without foreign citizenship, but we don't claim they can come live here. Our position on this subject is known. Rwanda is an overpopulated country, there isn't a single square centimeter free. Where would you have us put new arrivals when we are negotiating with neighboring countries to allow emigration of Rwandans living in Rwanda? It would be contradictory. The commission was therefore created so that neighboring countries and the international community would understand our position. If we are mistaken, they will tell us. If we are right, they will help us find solutions. That said, I have heard of one or another countries that called for its refugees to return home. But situations are not comparable from one country to another. Some of them, unlike us, do not lack land. Before colonization, Rwanda extended beyond its present borders. Moreover, things are different when you are talking about recent refugees. Imagine someone who left 30 years ago: the land that he occupied alone now holds 10 or 15 families. In the meantime, he has founded a large family himself. You see the complications.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] In fact, why are they still considered refugees, even after 30 years of living in a foreign country?

[Habyarimana] I don't know. Obviously there is international law, according to which a refugee remains a refugee. But all the same, laws are made for and by men. After 30 years, the sons and grandsons of refugees are nationals, or at least they should be.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] These arguments don't seem to convince a portion of your expatriate fellow countrymen. Rwanda is still our country, they say, and the right to return there is inalienable....

[Habyarimana] That is all very good, but if there are 100 of us in a small room and 50 people outside want to come in, all we can tell them is: you have the right, but there is no room!

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] After the bloody events in Burundi, where the ethnic question brutally resurfaced, people were quick to draw parallels with Rwanda and particularly to mention the practice of quotas, or proportioning: 85 percent of positions going to Hutus, 14 percent to Tutsis, and 1 percent to Twas, according to the proportion of each in the Rwandan population. Can such a system also generate injustices, even if its goal is precisely to correct them?

[Habyarimana] Listen, each country has its problems. Rwanda has its own and I suppose you know the history of our country. We had a monarchy based on a single ethnic group. We overturned it in 1959. To avoid reverting to that situation, we decided on a policy of equilibrium. We had to share, and thus to make calculations. If you are 14 percent, you will have 14 percent of the positions. Obviously, mathematics cannot be rigidly applied in human relations, yet basic principles are necessary.

We are criticized for mentioning, on identity cards, Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa ethnicity. Simply doing away with the notation "Hutu" on my identity card does not automatically erase my membership in that ethnic group. To indicate that a particular individual is Hutu does not make him any more Rwandan than another. When your passport says you are blond, blue-eyed, and so many centimeters tall, it's not discrimination: it's true. In countries where ethnicity is not officially recorded, how is it known, when incidents occur, that so many were killed in this or that ethnic group? Because they are identified anyway. Elsewhere they do not dare record it, we do. And then, it's an old system; it already existed when my father was born.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Given the sociohistorical context, mention of ethnic group is perhaps not as neutral an act as mentioning eye or hair color; attention is focused on a sensitive point....

[Habyarimana] But identity cards do not only give ethnic group membership! Besides a description of the holder, his region of origin is indicated. Notation of what you are on your identity card should not bother you. You should be proud of your Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa origin and simply consider yourself a full-fledged Rwandan. That is what we should aim for. If there were injustices, it is the latter sort that would have to be combatted, and not the secondary question of notation of ethnicity as such.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Let's move on, if you don't mind, to more personal questions. Many people would like to know more about how you live and work. For instance, when does the Rwandan president's day begin?

[Habyarimana] I wake up at 0500 with Radio Rwanda and go to bed around 2100. In between, as you might suspect, I study kilos of dossiers ...

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Do you find time to read?

[Habyarimana] Anything else? With great difficulty. I read correspondence, dossiers, technical documents on a multitude of sectors; one becomes a jack-of-all-trades in the long run....

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] You are a very religious and Christian man, as are nearly 70 percent of Rwandans.

[Habyarimana] I am Catholic as were my parents; I was baptized when I was 8 days old and go to mass regularly with my family.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] How do you organize your leisure time?

[Habyarimana] I very rarely take vacations. Sometimes, when I need rest, I arrange a week off for myself which I spend inside the country. But the telephone does not give me much respite. Twice I enjoyed myself vacationing in Greece, in remembrance of the Greece of antiquity which I encountered as a student. I stayed 2 weeks each time: Rwandans were not happy.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Rwandans wear your likeness on their chests: what is the significance of that?

[Habyarimana] It's the emblem of our party, the MRND (National Revolutionary Development Movement). It's not my idea and something else could perhaps have been found. I know that wearing the likeness of a leader can look like a personality cult. I don't think that's the case. In any event, I'm watching out for it....

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] In a fairly rare occurrence, Rwanda is the indirect star of a successful movie on the life of the famed friend to gorillas, Dian Fossey, who was settled in the north of the country near Ruhengeri. What do Rwandan authorities know about the circumstances of her death?

[Habyarimana] As far as the film is concerned, I have heard very positive things. My daughter, who is studying in France, phoned me to express her enthusiasm. We are expecting considerable tourist business to result.

That said, we are astonished to hear that Dian Fossey was supposedly killed by poachers in murky circumstances. Yet Rwandan judicial authorities know that Dian Fossey was killed by another American researcher whose name is known. Rwandan police found in Dian Fossey's hands blond hairs which were sent to Paris for examination. The results were irrefutable: they were indeed those of the suspect in question, who had already left the country.

[JEUNE AFRIQUE] Now that Dian Fossey is dead, is concern about protecting gorillas, a species that is dying out, still a priority?

[Habyarimana] Absolutely. We have set up a research outpost with other researchers, including an American, a Belgian, and several Rwandans. It is important that Rwandan citizens take up the baton. Protection of their environment concerns them more than anyone.