



What's the Frequency, Nkurunziza?

In central Africa, where on-air demagogues caused chaos in the 1990s, a Burundian radio broadcaster is playing with fire.

BY JINA MOORE | JUNE 25, 2010



Radio is king in Africa -- anyone who has spent much time on the continent knows that. Virtually no African government lacks a friendly frequency. A coup isn't really a coup here until the general commandeers a local radio station. In Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the only weapon as infamous as the machetes that the country's ethnic Hutus wielded against their Tutsi neighbors was the Hutu-allied Radio Mille Collines, whose broadcasts incited them to do it. The experience has taught the region that a radio station that traffics in rumors, subtle threats, and political accusations can be dangerous in and of itself -- and a sign of darker things to come.

So in Burundi, where an electoral crisis threatens to undo a decade of steady, if slow, democratic progress, all eyes -- and ears -- are on the media. Tiny Burundi is Rwanda's southern twin, a nation of Hutu and Tutsi with a parallel history of bitter violence between them. The country has made major strides since the days of its own genocide, eclipsed by Rwanda's better-known massacres, in the early 1990s. A decade-long peace process ended last year, when a holdout rebel group finally signed a peace accord. Diplomats and donors privately think of Burundi as a rare central African success story, and, unlike Rwanda, a genuinely democratic one.

Or they did, until this election season. In May, the ruling party of President Pierre Nkurunziza, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD by its French initials), handily won the local election, and Nkurunziza is expected to win the presidential election on Monday. Opposition parties say the May vote was stolen, and have spent the last two weeks hurling allegations at the ruling party, poll organizers, and the independent electoral commission -- not necessarily without cause. They're boycotting the June 28 vote and urging Burundians to skip the one-man race.

The political crisis has rippled through Burundi's media as well. Burundi has four television stations and several newspapers, but most influential are the country's 18 radio stations, whose product Burundians consume insatiably. It is common to see people walk down busy city streets with a small radio held to their ear; every latest news item flies by word of mouth around communities in something approximating a nationwide game of telephone, driving Burundians back to their radios in the evening to find out whether what they heard was truth or rumor. Distinguishing the two, they say, requires a lot of time.

In a laudable (and rare) effort at impartiality, 15 radio stations pooled their journalists and airtime to provide unbiased nationwide coverage of the election in four languages, an effort dubbed Synergy. It was an attempt to avoid the problems of the 2005 election, when the media were more fragmented and vulnerable to political donors with deep pockets than they are five years later. "Media, when they are single, are fragile," says Adrien Sindayigaya, Burundi director of Search for Common Ground, a conflict-prevention organization which helped launch the initiative. "When you are trying to out some political actors, it's easy for them to say, 'Oh, you must just be against us.' But when there is a huge number of journalists who say, 'We know this,' or 'We witnessed this,' it's difficult to compel such a group" to toe a given line.

But amid the tensions of the election, the Synergy experiment is starting to crumble. For one thing, it's hard to give equal airtime to political contenders when there's only one official candidate on the ballot. And one station has emerged as a potential spoiler -- Rema FM, a privately owned radio station with close ties to the ruling party -- playing what some journalists here describe as dangerous political games with its programming. And it's starting to scare people.

"They're just like Radio Mille Collines," says Amadou Ousmane, spokesman for the United Nations mission in Burundi, making an oft-heard comparison. The European Union elections-monitoring mission, which also keeps tabs on media coverage of campaigns, calls the tone of Rema broadcasts "increasingly aggressive."

Media-monitoring outlets say Rema has taken to broadcasting the names of prominent opposition politicians and their supporters -- a subtle invitation for harassment, and an uncomfortable echo of what happened in the weeks before the Rwandan genocide, when local Hutu radio hosts read names of Tutsis targeted for killing.

Other Rema messages are less subtle. Two weeks ago, the radio station compared the political parties that pulled out of the presidential poll to the death squad that 15 years ago assassinated Melchior Ndadaye, the country's first Hutu president and first democratically elected leader since independence. "For Burundians, talking about

Ndadaye's killers is still dangerous," explains Justine Nkurunziza, vice president of the Forum for the Reinforcement of Civil Society, a network of local NGOs (and no relation to the sitting president). "Many Burundians are Hutu, and Ndadaye is a hero. Whoever fights him is [seen as] the enemy of democracy."

Rema is also taking up politics directly, airing rumors and offering theories about who's behind the grenade attacks and other violence that has become common in the capital city of Bujumbura since the presidential campaign started. The station's broadcasters accused well-known opposition leader Alexis Sinduhije of handing out money and gasoline to supporters and encouraging them to burn down CNDD-FDD headquarters. The next day, almost 20 party offices were torched throughout the country, according to the European Union's elections-monitoring mission in Burundi; some Burundians, suspicious of Rema's ties to power, say they think the ruling party sabotaged itself in order to frame the opposition.

Rema also fans the flames with its citizen-cop style, says Innocent Nsabimana, director of media monitoring for the Central African Media Organization's Bujumbura office. "[After] the grenades one Saturday, Rema said, 'This is an act of the FNL,'" he says, referring to the rebel-group-turned-opposition party, whose leader was once thought to be President Nkurunziza's only serious challenger. "They confirm and say, 'We are sure, we have made an investigation.' This is not the job of a journalist."

Nsabimana rattles off several other troubling innuendos and subtle threats the station has broadcast. "And these things, they become reality after a few days," he says. Seven professional journalism associations sent a letter to the country's media council two weeks ago asking it to take measures against Rema. The letter has not been acknowledged, and several of the signatories and the European Union say they don't expect a reply. Meanwhile, Rema's owners are planning to expand their franchise with a television station.

It's hard to say what impact all this will have on Monday's election, and its aftermath -- whether Rema's activities are an ominous echo of the region's grim recent past, or an anachronism in a Burundi where proliferating information sources have produced a degree of skepticism among the media-consuming public, and the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s have largely been replaced by more conventional power struggles. Although Rema is generally considered the bad apple of the bunch, Burundians say they hear an editorial bias in the commentary and talk shows of almost every station, and correct for this bias by trolling the airwaves.

"Some radio [stations] we trust, but we listen to all of them," says Josiane Nsengiyumya, a dry-goods seller in the capital city. "We're always changing, because we don't know who's giving the truth," she says. "And some of them give bad news, destructive news. We don't need that. We need news that helps unity."

Which stations run the "bad news"?

She drops her voice.

"It's better not to say," she says.

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