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The revolution devours its children: The fall of a royal house in republican Rwanda

BY FILIP REYNTJENS ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/AUTHOR/FILIP-REYNTJENS/](https://africanarguments.org/author/filip-reyntjens/)) / 🕒 OCTOBER 8, 2024 / 💬 0

The rise and scattering of an elite family, not on account of their ethnicity, but despite it, exemplifies the tragedy of authoritarianism in Rwanda.



President Paul Kagame on Liberation Day, 4 July, Amahoro Stadium, Kigali.

In 1793, political analyst Jacques Mallet du Pan wrote: ‘Like Saturn, the Revolution devours its children’. He referred to the French revolution, but this saying has proved true in many places and at many times. It is applied here to the aftermath of the seizure of power by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1994. A large number of former prominent personalities of the RPF have since been killed, ‘disappeared’, jailed or fled into exile. The story of one family offers a relevant example.

I call this family Byabagamba because that was the name of the father of the siblings at the heart of this story. Looking at their positions in the post-1994 military and civilian establishment, this was a modern ‘aristocracy’. But it also linked up with the genuine precolonial aristocracy. Byabagamba’s grandfather was chief Nzigiyé, a trusted advisor in king Rwabugiri’s court during the second half of the 19th century. Nzigiyé sided with Rwabugiri’s successor Rutarindwa, killed during a coup successfully orchestrated by queen Kanjogera in 1896. Kanjogera was President Kagame’s great grandaunt. In one of these ironies of history, Kagame’s and Byabagamba’s families were in opposing camps at a crucial political juncture a century ago, and they are again today.

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The relationships in the family are as follows. David Himbara, Tom Byabagamba and Christine Kanyange are children of Byabagamba senior. Tom Byabagamba is married to Mary Baine, who is the sister of Rosemary Museminali. Christine Kanyange was Frank Rusagara's wife. The functions exercised by our *dramatis personae* speak for themselves. Among other positions, David Himbara was head of the strategy and policy unit in the Office of the President, Rosemary Museminali was Foreign Minister, Mary Baine headed the Rwanda Revenue Authority (RRA), Col. Tom Byabagamba commanded the Presidential Guard, Brig. Gen. Frank Rusagara was commander of the Military Academy. This sounds like a true Gotha in the 2000s, but the family's fate started to turn sour at the end of the decade. Kigali-based *The Chronicles* titled the story (<https://www.chronicles.rw/2020/04/from-grace-to-prison-the-story-of-family-that-once-ruled-rwanda/>) "From Grace to Prison"

Rosemary Museminali was sacked in 2009. Blacklisted and unable to find a job in Rwanda, she joined UNAIDS in 2011, and has lived in Geneva ever since. Her brother-in-law David Himbara abruptly left the country in 2010 and exiled himself, initially in South Africa. In 2011, Mary Baine lost her position at the RRA to become the permanent secretary at the Foreign Ministry. However, signs of impending trouble came a few months later when her husband Tom Byabagamba lost his powerful position as responsible for the President's security and was moved to the army headquarters.

Worse was to come in 2014 when Byabagamba and his brother-in-law Frank Rusagara were arrested. They were accused of inciting insurrection and tarnishing the image of the government and sentenced to 21 and 20 years in prison respectively. The wives of both men went into exile. Christine Kanyange became terminally ill in London, and Rusagara was refused the opportunity to leave the country and see his wife before she died.

The latest victim in this saga was John Museminali, Rosemary's husband. He was arrested in 2020, suspected of involvement in the alleged prison escape attempt of Tom Byabagamba. He was released after a couple of weeks on condition that he reported monthly to the Rwanda Investigation Bureau. Museminali fled to Geneva where he joined his wife. Several other family members are in exile elsewhere in Africa, Europe and North America. In under fifteen years' time, the entire family went from grace to prison or exile.

The Byabagamba family is just one example of what the revolution does to its children in Rwanda. Dozens of former military and civilian office holders, businesspeople, journalists and civil society leaders who helped the RPF capture power were eliminated. Interestingly, from the 2000s most of the victims of repression by the Tutsi-dominated RPF were themselves Tutsi, again showing that conflict in Rwanda is political rather than ethnic – just as was the case before 1994. Indeed, while Rwanda is an ethnocracy dominated by Tutsi elites (<https://africanarguments.org/2021/11/from-ethnic-amnesia-to-ethnocracy-80-of-rwanda-top-officials-are-tutsi/>), those persecuted are not targeted primarily on account of their

ethnicity but because they are perceived as opponents. After the elimination of elite Hutu as a political force, which was achieved before the end of the 1990s, Tutsi counter elites became a threat that was, and is, aggressively combated.

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