

# Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a hero whose entire political career had seen constant threats

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The New Times, February 1, 2023



Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the first female Prime Minister in Rwanda's history, is among the national heroes. File

In a big way, the May 5, 2014 headline "*Agathe Uwiringiyimana : A heroine unfortunate to have lived in evil era,*" says it all.

Uwilingiyimana, the first female Prime Minister in Rwanda's history, is one of Rwanda's leading lights who exemplified heroism in her self-sacrificing fight against the regime that perpetrated the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

She served as Prime Minister from July 17, 1993, to the time of her untimely death, in April 1994.

Uwilingiyimana married Ignace Barahira in 1976. The couple was blessed with five children, four boys and a girl. Before becoming Prime Minister, she served as Minister of Education. She strongly advocated for equal rights among students, and for the rights of women in addition to spearheading the fight against divisionism.

Her last born, a boy, was merely three years old when the parents were tortured and assassinated by members of the genocidal regime's presidential guard.

Fortunately, the children survived.

Marie-Christine Lussi Umuhuza, who was 15 when her parents were assassinated, lives in Switzerland. She is scheduled to speak, along with other Rwandans in the diaspora, at a round table event themed : "*L'héroïsme des Rwandais, notre dignité [Rwandans' heroism, our dignity]*" in Geneva, on February 4.

A day before Heroes Day, Umuhuza told *The New Times* that : "*I am proud that Rwandans recognize her [Uwilingiyimana] commitment and determination to the detriment of her life for equal opportunities in*

*education, women's rights and unity."*

How has her late mother inspired her? "*I try to educate my children with respect for life and others. To have my own [good] judgment without following the ideas of others.*"

Umuhiza stressed that Uwilingiyimana "*is my mother before becoming prime minister and national hero!*"

It is hard to appreciate her mother's sacrifice, she acknowledged.

*"It's hard to appreciate her personal sacrifice! I was 15 [years old] in 1994. She had already received several death threats. As a child, I did not want to lose my mother."*

On the night of April 6 to 7, 1994, following the downing of a Falcon 50 plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana, the Interahamwe and soldiers of the presidential guard began to set up roadblocks in many parts of Kigali, and killing the Tutsi. The massacres coordinated by the state machinery quickly spread all over the country. In an effort to eliminate politicians who did not support Habyarimana's government and the Genocide plot, on April 7, Uwilingiyimana, and several others, were assassinated.

## **Uwilingiyimana knew her life was in danger**

British journalist Linda Melvern's book, *A People Betrayed : The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*, published in 2000, gives what the author said is "*a fuller account of the murder.*"

Melvern's book also tells more about a cou-

rageous, patriotic and self-sacrificing Uwilingiyimana.

A section of the book reads : "*In March 1994 Agathe Uwilingiyimana had made one last and desperate appeal for her country. She was thirty-eight years-old, a former chemistry teacher, the prime minister of a government that in accordance with the Arusha peace agreement was planned to last thirty-seven days. In a wide-ranging interview with a Belgian journalist Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana had addressed her desperate remarks to the UN Security Council. Even as early as March the Council was actively discussing the closure of [the] UN mission for Rwanda. In her interview Uwilingiyimana explained the reality. There were extremists actively manipulating ethnic differences to sow confusion and division. 'If we are abandoned the Rwandan people will be left to their fate ... What will happen? ... This is not the moment for pulling out,' she pleaded. 'Extremists will always be wrong, whatever their ethnic origins.' Uwilingiyimana knew her life was in danger. She had openly blamed the president for the continual delays in the peace process and for having engineered the divisions destroying the opposition parties. She had questioned why weapons were being issued to civilians. Her entire political career had seen constant threats, and she had been continually at risk. When in 1992 as minister of education she had tried to put an end to the quota system for Tutsi in schools she had been attacked in her home by armed men and some days later three thousand women had demonstrated in Kigali in her support. The announcers on RTLM called for her assassination on 26 November 1993, and she*

was increasingly portrayed as an ‘accomplice to the Tutsi enemy’. A few months later, in March 1994 she was characterized in Hutu Power propaganda in animalistic terms, for example as a rat eating money. The extremist newspaper, *Kangura*, published a caricature in which Uwilingiyimana, and the Minister of Finance, Marc Rugenera, appeared in the guise of rats. They were persecuted because they were members of the MDR and the PSD, respectively, parties not aligned with the Hutu Power party of extremists who planned the genocide. In the same picture also appeared a man armed with a cudgel, commonly called ‘Nta mpongano y’umwanzi,’ literally ‘No mercy on the enemy’, and ready to use it to beat these two people. The cudgel was one of the weapons which the killers used to cruelly kill their victims during the genocide. Scheduled for assassination on April 7, and while her killers closed in, Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana took flight at 8.20 am with her husband and her five children, the youngest three years old and the children still in their pyjamas. That night she had spoken with Tito Rutaremara when she told him she thought she would be killed,” the account in Melvern’s book noted.

“She was murdered later that morning,” Melvern wrote.

## **She stood for the truth, no matter what**

Dafroza Gauthier, Uwilingiyimana’s former classmate at *Lycée Notre Dame de Ci-*

*teaux*, secondary school in Kigali, recalls how Uwilingiyimana was a very smart girl.

“She especially did very well in mathematics. We were young [but] I never saw any politician in her, then. I think it was, perhaps, just inside her because even when we were on the bus going home to Butare, I never heard her talk about politics. I think her bravery showed when, later, she started seeing how the country was changing in line with the policies of Habyarimana and his followers,” Dafroza said.

“I think she never wanted to see her country continuously going to waste. She became so brave and stood her ground against bad leaders who were opposed to the Arusha Accords. She stood for the truth, no matter what.”

In a different way, Dafroza too, as well as her partner, Alain Gauthier, continues to push through with their risky pursuit of tracking down Genocide suspects. The couple has dedicated a lot of time and resources to pursuing Genocide suspects sunbathing in French cities without a bother to the horrors their crimes in 1994 caused Rwandans.