Opinions
April 3, 1994: Genocide and death of Habyarimana as prophesy

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Remains of a plane that was carrying former President of Rwanda Juvénal Habyarimana. INTERNET PHOTO

The death of President Juvénal Habyarimana did not erupt into a political vacuum. Nor did the genocide we commemorate today emerge from sudden chaos or spontaneous rage. A commemoration which is a way of fighting the most heinous crime. It unfolded within a discursive environment already saturated with prophecy, incitement, rehearsal, and moral conditioning. Before the first roadblock was erected, before the first lists were executed, language had already done its work.

One broadcast in particular—aired by RTLM on April 3, 1994, Easter Sunday—offers a chilling window into this environment. It does not merely hint at violence. It reveals not only how violence was anticipated, but how it was pre-explained. It narrates it, justifies it, and—most crucially—assigns blame in advance. It is not coded in silence. It is loud, performative, and repeated. This is something that was a live broadcast—openly, cynically, and repeatedly.

The announcement which was delivered in a joking, almost playful tone said:

"And now, the Tutsis, those who have bitten Karungu, who have bitten Karungu and who are with the RPF, they want to take power. To take it by force of arms. They want to do a "small thing," they want to do this small thing during the Easter holidays, and they even say that they have dates. They have dates, and we know them. In fact, they would do better to calm down. We have

agents, yeah, heh, ha!"

The announcer's voice raises until it pauses, as he continues:

"Our agents are there with the RPF; we have agents who send us information. They tell us the following: on 3rd, 4th and 5th April they say that there will be a small thing, here in Kigali, Kigali City. From today [3 April], Easter, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, a small thing is planned for Kigali City. And even on the 7th and 8th April. And then you will hear the sound of many bullets, you will hear grenades exploding..."

He goes on:

On the 3rd, 4th and 5th April, we expect this little thing will happen here in Kigali, and then they will follow up and rest on the date of the 6th April, and on 7th and 8th April they are going to do another small thing, using their bullets and their grenades. But in reality, there will be the attack Simusiga (in kinywarwanda, he used igitero simusiga (meaning an attack that saves or spares no one, i.e. the final attack) that they are waiting for and expecting. And they say "when we have finished with this small thing to stir up the town, we will then throw ourselves into the Simusiga attack."

Shudders in speech: "But as for the date, my agent [in the RPF] has not yet told me, he has not yet told me..." He persists: "Let the RPF understand: before the history of the world, before history and before the people, one day, it [the RPF] will have to explain before the entire human race, how these sons of the country, these good sons of the country, how the RPF led them to their deaths, how the RPF lead them right to their deaths. One day they will have to explain. Ha! Rutaremara, if you are listening to me, you go tell them, you tell them "Hey, yeah! That's the way it is in war time." Ha! You will tell them like this, "That's the way it is with war." Yeah! Ha! Ha! Blood gets spilled, but it doesn't get cleaned up! [a Rwandan proverb—Araseseka ntayorwa] Ha! There will be news about all of this soon."

There was more he had to announce but a message to those supposed to counter the Tutsi who have bitten Karungu:

"But in fact, people, we are calling on you. I often call you the fourth column. The people, you are the real shield, you are the true army of strength. The armed forces may fight, but the people tell them: "we will guard your rear, we will be your shield."

The announcer had a very strong message to conclude his urgent Easter Sunday announcement:

"The day when the people stand up and they don't want any more of you [the RPF], they will hate you in unison and to the bottoms of their hearts, when you make them sick, I ask you how you are going to escape. Where are you going to go? You cannot rule over people who want nothing to do with you. It's impossible. And even Habyarimana himself, if the citizens don't want him anymore, he couldn't even get to his office. It's impossible..."

The name Habyarimana in this announcement was not a man on the street or somewhere in the village hills of Rwanda. He meant Rwanda's president Juvenal Habyarimana. This was broadcasted three times and 2 times the 6th April was skipped. The day

Juvenal Habyarimana was killed. But the conclusion was important too. "And if Habyarimana himself..."

The Tutsi and Karungu idiom

It is fundamental to understand when the announcer said Tutsis have bitten or eaten Karungu. The wit—sharp, bitter, and deliberate. Usually Karungu is wild but known to be a medicinal plant. Its scientific name is Gladiolus spp. Although there are several species in Rwanda and the region, Gladiolus psittacinus is thought to be more effective. It is a plant with a spherical red tuber. In Rwandans' traditional medicine the tubers are dried and then ground to produce a medicine used against the disease called "akaniga". Superstitiously it is used to make an amulet against a certain illness called "ikimungu".

In Kinyarwanda language, "Akaniga" is a throat illness or disease, particularly one associated with yaws, which may cause aphonia (total loss of the voice). Ikimungu is any illness or pain felt internally, without a clearly identifiable or localized source. The examples given to describe ikimungu are conditions such as poliomyelitis, osteomyelitis, etc.

Karungu, a plant, is associated with healing and protection. RTLM flipsides this symbolism. What heals becomes what threatens. What protects becomes what endangers. The medicinal is recoded as murderous. This inversion taught listeners to see the Tutsi presence itself as toxic, requiring purification.

The most revealing phrase, as it came out on the Easter 1994 announcement, is also the most culturally encoded: "Abatutsi bariye Karungu"—the Tutsis have bitten Karungu.

This expression is not haphazard. It is not attractive rhetoric. It is a deliberate invocation of a deeply rooted Kinyarwanda idiom whose meaning is unmistakable to its audience. To "bite Karungu" (kurya Karungu) means to become furiously angry, to reach a point of rage where one is ready to cause harm.

According to the legend story, and as narrated by Benoit Mulihano in Ibirari by'Insigamigani (traces of proverbs); it is an expression born of a well-known legend: Karungu, a man who lived long ago on Mburabuturo hill in what is now Kigali, loved food seasoned with long-kept, rancid butter. One day, during a quarrel over this food, his wife Nyirakamagaza bit him and tore off his nose. When neighbors rushed in and found him bleeding, they exclaimed, "Nyirakamagaza has bitten Karungu." From that moment, the phrase entered the language as a metaphor for uncontrollable anger leading to violence.

Creating a people as perpetual danger

The phrase "the Tutsis have bitten Karungu" operates at a deeper level still, one that moves beyond political accusation into something closer to anthropological manipulation. It

does not simply define hostility; it allocates a condition. To understand its force, one must return not only to the idiom itself but to the cultural memory it activates.

The story of Karungu is not about ordinary anger. It is about a moment when anger crosses a threshold into physical destruction, when a domestic quarrel erupts into facial mutilation. People who have "bitten Karungu" are no longer just troubled—they are overtaken by a rage that destroys the other.

RTLM takes this culturally precise expression and performs a radical expansion. What was once an idiom describing an individual state—Nyirakamagaza against Karungu— is now applied wholesale to an entire group. The Tutsi are no longer individuals capable of reason, negotiation, or restraint. They are reimagined as a collective psychological condition—permanently enraged, inherently dangerous, already on the brink of violence. To say that the Tutsis had "bitten Karungu" was therefore to say something very precise: they were ferocious, dangerous, and ready to harm the Hutu.

This is where discourse becomes deadly. Michel Foucault's observation that discourse produces the objects it claims to describe (The Archaeology of Knowledge, 1969) is not an abstract theory in this context—it is an operational reality. By repeatedly associating Tutsi identity with uncontrollable rage, RTLM does not merely reflect fear; it manufactures it. It creates a population that must be forcefully managed, contained, neutralized.

And once a group is understood in those terms, the moral calculus shifts radically. One does not discuss with a pathology or reason with a disease. One acts—preemptively, decisively, even violently—to prevent its spread. The language in the announcement has already done the work of justification. The violence that follows will feel—to those conditioned by this discourse, not like aggression but like defense.

Hannah Arendt's warning that totalitarian systems aim not to persuade but to condition behavior (The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1951) finds a precise echo here. Listeners are not invited to weigh evidence or consider alternatives. They are guided toward a single conclusion: that the danger is imminent, that the enemy is irrational, and that waiting is itself a risk.

In that sense, the phrase "bitten Karungu" does more than dehumanize. It preauthorizes life-threatening violence. It removes the moral burden from the perpetrator and transfers it entirely onto the constructed nature of the victim.

That tone matters. In the message, mass violence is normalized before it occurs. The announcer mocked, laughed, and insinuated. He spoke of "a small thing" that the Tutsis—those "who have bitten Karungu" and who are "with the RPF"—were allegedly planning to carry out in Kigali during the Easter holidays.

And with that sentence, rage was projected, violence was authorized, and history was pre-emptively rewritten—before the blood, before the graves, before the world began asking questions that denial would later try to silence.

The omission of April 6

Dates were mentioned. Kigali City was named. Sounds were anticipated: gunfire, grenades. The presenter claimed to have "agents" inside the RPF. He did not use individuals' names or "agents" haphazardly. He wanted to demonstrate he had foreknowledge. This was to give him the power to claim inevitability.

The sequence of dates in the broadcast appears, at first glance, as a simple enumeration: April 3, 4, 5, then a leap to the 7th and 8th. But what is absent is more telling than what is present. April 6—the day the presidential plane was shot down—is not integrated into this narrative in any stable or consistent way. It hovers as a gap, a silence—an absence that speaks.

This omission does not function as prophecy; it operates as groundwork. What RTLM announcer constructs is not a precise prediction of events but a flexible interpretive frame into which any triggering incident can be inserted. Roland Barthes' notion of myth as a system that transforms contingent history into naturalized meaning (Mythologies, 1957) is brilliantly shown here. The broadcast prepares its audience not to ask questions when violence erupts, but to recognize it as confirmation of what they have already been told.

Thus, when the plane falls on April 6, the event does not arrive as a shock requiring investigation. It is immediately absorbed into a pre-existing narrative: the enemy had plans, the enemy was enraged, the enemy sought power, and violence—therefore—was inevitable. The cause does not need to be established because the explanation has already been rehearsed.

This is the spot-on sophistication of the propaganda. It does not depend on accuracy, but on readiness. It ensures that when reality intrudes, it will be understood through a lens that has already been fixed in place. Facts become secondary, because meaning has already been assigned.

When "Simusiga" become "akantu"

The most dangerous word in that entire broadcast is not "attack," nor even the chilling finality of Simusiga. It is the disarming, almost childish diminutive word akantu— "a small thing." In that linguistic minimization lies the discreet genius of genocidal discourse. Dreadful violence is not announced as rupture or catastrophe; it is domesticated, reduced, made to appear controllable, even mundane. The horror is not denied—it is shrunk.

George Orwell captured this mechanism with disconcerting precision when he wrote that political language is designed "to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable" (Politics and the English Language, 1946). Yet what unfolds here goes even further: murder is not only made respectable; it is made trivial. Repetition performs the work. The more the listener hears of this "small thing," the less it sounds like a hecatomb and the more it resembles an ordinary

event—something that happens expectedly—something already normalized before it occurs.

And yet, in the very same breath, this "small thing" is described through the unmistakable language of war—bullets, grenades, coordinated attacks, culminating in Simusiga, the assault that spares no one. The contradiction is not by mistake. It is the method. The violence to be committed is linguistically lessened, while the violence attributed to the enemy is magnified into existential threat. Teun A. van Dijk's analysis of ideological discourse becomes almost literal here: the positive self is protected through minimization, while the negative other is inflated into danger (Discourse and Power, 2008). The asymmetry is so glaring that it disappears from view.

This irregularity deepens further in the way identities are distributed across the speech. The announcer names the enemy explicitly— "the Tutsis"—fixing them as a distinct, marked category, repeatedly invoked and associated with danger, conspiracy, and rage. But the opposing side is never named as "Hutu." Instead, it dissolves into abstraction: "the people," "the population," "the real army," "the shield." This is not accidental imprecision. It is ideological expertise of a high order. By refusing to name the Hutu openly, the discourse universalizes them; they become one and the same with the nation itself—with legitimacy, with normality. The Tutsi, by contrast, are particularized, isolated, and exposed as the abnormality or aberration within that imagined whole.

Norman Fairclough's insight that power operates through the ability to universalize one's own position while particularizing the other (Language and Power, 1989) finds here a vicious and practical application. One side becomes indistinguishable from "the people"; the other becomes the problem from which the people must be saved.

Once that transformation is complete, what follows no longer feels like violence against fellow citizens. It begins to resemble a form of sanitation—an act carried out not against people, but against a perceived threat to the collective body.

Within that logic, the so-called "small thing" acquires its true meaning. It is not small in scale; it is small in moral weight according to the propagandist. It is the linguistic rehearsal of mass violence presented as necessity, even hygiene. And once such a diminutive framing takes hold, indecision becomes illogical, restraint becomes treacherous and dangerous, while participation begins to feel like responsibility—and more like patriotic.

The speech then slides seamlessly into moral inversion. The RPF, listeners are told, will one day have to explain "before the entire human race" how it led "good sons of the country" to their deaths. The responsibility for the death of Tutsi is displaced in advance. The dead are already being assigned to the RPF as 'enemy' and not to the real perpetrators. President Habyarimana is relativized: "And even Habyarimana himself, if the citizens don't want him anymore, he couldn't even get to his office." His authority is conditional. Legitimacy is with "the people." Any violence, therefore, becomes democratic.

Genocide foretold and the afterlife

To understand this continuity of ideology—between propaganda and pleading, between radio studios like the BBC and VOA or ICTR courtrooms or some publishing houses—one must return to RTLM's broadcast of April 3, 1994. For international audiences unfamiliar with Rwanda's linguistic and cultural landscape, this broadcast may be misread as incoherent ranting or crude incitement. It was neither. It was structured, coded, and pedagogical in its own way. It taught its listeners how to interpret violence before it happened.

The RTLM announcer did not merely predict violence; he framed its meaning in advance. He alleged that "the Tutsis who have bitten Karungu" and who were "with the RPF" were planning to seize power by force during Easter. The phrase "a small thing" was repeated with mocking understatement. Dates, Tutsi were furious, and weapons were named. And crucially, the population (Hutu) was addressed not as civilians but as a military force—the "fourth column," the "true army," the "shield." It was instructions and not noise.

This is what genocidal propaganda does at its most effective: it does not yell commands; it allocates roles. RTLM announced soldiers will fight. Civilians will support. The enemy will provoke. Violence will follow. Responsibility will lie elsewhere.

For a listener unfamiliar with Kinyarwanda idioms, the phrase "bitten Karungu" might pass unnoticed. But for a Rwandan audience, it carried a precise moral diagnosis. This figure of speech mattered because it promoted emotional pathology. The Tutsi were not portrayed as opponents with grievances; they were portrayed as people in a state of uncontainable rage and anger. And rage, once attributed, legitimizes pre-emptive violence. You do not negotiate with rage; you neutralize it with the most powerful means available. This was moral engineering of the society with manipulated cultural codes.

Applying cultural idioms in such an announcement is not incidental. Genocidal propaganda does not invent hatred ex nihilo; it reorganizes existing symbols. By anchoring political fear in cultural metaphor, RTLM made its message feel familiar, even commonsensical. The listener was not being radicalized; they were being "reminded" of what they already "knew."

The death of Habyarimana, then, must be understood within this framework. His killing did not "trigger" genocide in a neutral environment; it was planned, anticipated to activate a narrative that had already been rehearsed. The skipping of April 6 in the broadcast is not proof of foreknowledge. It is a proof of narrative preparedness. When the plane fell, the explanation was already waiting. The blame was already consigned. The population had already been told who the enemy was, what they wanted, and what had to be done.

To read this broadcast today is to see denialism in an ideological embryo. Every later claim is already present: the RPF as power-hungry, the Tutsi as uncompromising, the people as defenders, violence as reaction,

genocide as myth. What followed on April 7 was not spontaneous insanity; it was the execution of a story that had been told repeatedly enough to feel true. “The Tutsi have bitten Karungu,” RTLM said.

In that single sentence lies a complete architecture: a diagnosis that dehumanizes, a justification that absolves, a call that mobilizes, and a future denial that ensures the crime will be misunderstood even as it unfolds. The heartbreak is not only that such words were spoken, but that they worked—then, and, in subtler forms, even now. The killing, when it came, did not need to invent its meaning. The falsehoods had already done that work.