

Assassinations In Ivory Coast Overshadowed By Civil War

Popular Comedian's Death Is Called Political Killing

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 8 -- He was Ivory Coast's version of Bill Cosby, the goofy comedian with his own good-natured family television program.

But Ash Karamoko Camarah was also a leader in the political party led by Alassane Ouattara, the northerner and Muslim who had been barred from recent elections and has been in hiding during a four-month civil war that has left half of the country in the hands of rebels who express support for him.

The 51-year-old comedian was found dead last Sunday, his body covered in blood and lying on the street with those of other opposition leaders in what the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and others have called a political killing. Today he was buried on a rocky hilltop, his grave surrounded by his five children and thousands of fans and supporters who wore T-shirts that bore his face and his favorite saying: "It's better to have an awful ending than to live awfully."

"It hurts us so much to think of our father dying like this," said Aboubakar Camarah, 24, his eldest son, who sat draped in the white gown traditionally worn by Muslims in mourning. "The only thing we can hope for is that this country sees peace and that our father didn't die for nothing."

Throughout Ivory Coast's war, attention has focused mostly on fighting between the government and three rebel factions and on efforts to reconcile the warring parties. But Camarah's funeral, the first public mourning of a major Ivorian figure who died during the conflict, illuminated another facet of the fight: the unsolved political killings of dozens of Ivorians.

Last week, the deputy U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bertrand Ramcharan, reported that death squads have killed dozens of opposition politicians and hidden their bodies in the forest outside Abidjan, the country's commercial capital. The report cited evidence indicating that the death squads had links to some government officials.

The government has denied any involvement in the deaths, and government leaders, some of whom attended Camarah's funeral today, have played down the allegations, while promising to investigate the death of the popular comedian.

Camarah was born in a small northern village and moved to Abidjan to work as an accountant, his children said. He liked to perform in plays as a hobby but soon became so popular that he earned his own television show, which became one of the most popular

shows in the nation. On the program -- called "Who's Doing That?" -- Camarah became known for poking fun at everyday Ivorian life.

He got involved in politics after Ouattara was barred from running in the 2000 presidential election because of a law which said that presidential candidates must be born in Ivory Coast and both parents must be Ivorian. In 2000, Camarah was arrested for voicing his political views and criticizing the concept of *ivorite* -- a movement to decipher who was a true Ivorian and who was not.

"Our father thought it was safe to voice his views because of his fame," said his son, Aboubakar Camarah. "But now we see how much our country has changed."

Today's funeral occurred at a time of high tension and uncertainty, as Ivorians wait to see whether a French-brokered peace deal brings an end to the civil war or serves to reignite tensions between the warring factions. On Friday, President Laurent Gbagbo urged Ivorians to support the plan, which calls for disarmament on all sides and creation of a new government in which the president would share power with a new prime minister, Seydou Diarra.

Government supporters, angered by the rebels' claims that the power-sharing agreement grants them the powerful Interior and Defense Ministries, have held violent street protests denouncing the pact and its French patrons. But when Gbagbo did not say on Friday whether the two ministries would be granted to the rebels, it was their turn to voice reservations about the deal.

In the rebel-held town of Seguela, rank and file rebel fighters were angered by what they said was Gbagbo's effective rejection of the deal, the Reuters news service reported. But Guillaume Soro, secretary general of the rebel Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, said he needed more time before giving an official response.