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Rwanda, Twenty Years After the Genocide

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The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda started on 7 April 1994. In a mere hundred days, three-quarters of the Tutsi minority was exterminated. At the beginning of the massacres, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) –the rebel movement that invaded the country in October 1990 from Uganda and with Ugandan support– launched an offensive that gave it military victory in early July. As the Hutu extremists had massively killed Tutsi "live" on television, these were the "bad guys", while those who fought them, the RPF rebels, had to be the "good guys". Few observers realised in these days that this was not a conflict between "good" and "bad" guys, but one between "bad guys".

When the RPF took power, it claimed to continue adhering to the spirit of power-sharing included in the August 1993 Arusha peace accord. It however soon set out to gradually but radically close the political landscape. Opposition parties were eliminated and autonomous civil society was neutralised through infiltration and intimidation. The independent media too were curtailed, and they disappeared altogether in 2010. From 2001 on, elections were used not to further democracy and nurture participation and debate, but to support the RPF's hegemonic project. All the polls were profoundly flawed: candidates and voters were intimidated, ballot boxes were stuffed, and counting and consolidation procedures were fraudulent. The only parties allowed to participate were those that did not contest the definition by the RPF of what was politically acceptable. "Consensus democracy" became in effect de facto single party rule. Legal instruments, such as legislation on "divisionism" and "genocide ideology" further served to protect the RPF's narrative (also see below).

While claiming to pursue a policy of de-ethnicisation, arguing that "there are no longer Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, but just Rwandans", the regime has at the same time actively promoted Tutsi interests and discriminated against the Hutu. Ethnic amnesia has thus become an instrument to hide Tutsi dominance in politics, the administration, the parastatal sector, the security services, diplomacy, local government and education. While they number around 10% of the population, Tutsi occupy about two-thirds of all major functions in the public sector. Respondents in field research state that "when you are not Tutsi or RPF, you are not a Rwandan". This feeling has recently been reinforced by the meting out of collective guilt to the Hutu for the genocide.

The human rights record of the regime has been dismal from Day One. The RPF killed tens of thousands of civilians inside Rwanda in 1994, massacred possibly over one hundred thousand civilian refugees in Zaire/DRC in 1996-7, and again inflicted a massive toll on the civilian population during the 1997-8 insurgency in North-western Rwanda. Several thoroughly researched reports, both by the UN and international human rights organisations, show that these were massive crimes against humanity and war crimes. According to at least two UN reports, the crimes committed in Zaire/DRC may well have constituted genocide. Despite the well documented nature of this widespread and systematic abuse, the RPF ensured impunity for itself. Of course RPF crimes were not prosecuted before Rwandan domestic courts, but even the Arusha based International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) became a pathetic example of victors' justice, as a result of the Rwandan regime successfully using blackmail and international diplomatic support to evade condemnation.

Kigali has tackled the international community aggressively. It has addressed criticism by putting into place effective information management and communication techniques, by exploiting the "genocide credit" to the fullest, by asserting its "victim" status, and by ensuring a monopoly on the narrative concerning Rwanda's past, present and future. Likewise, it has embarked on aggressive regional behaviour, attacking Zaire/DRC on several occasions, and occupying large parts of it directly and/or through proxy rebel movements. Despite being a very small and intrinsically poor country, Rwanda has exercised extraordinary political, military and economic control over its vast but weak neighbour. In addition to aid, the exploitation of Congolese resources has contributed to Rwanda's economic performance. This aggressive behaviour has led to considerable conflict with other African countries: Uganda first, with which Rwanda fought several battles in the DRC, but more recently with Tanzania and South Africa too.

Besides skilful communication and the use of the genocide credit, the regime has also earned international tolerance by establishing decent bureaucratic/technocratic governance. Economic growth has been steady in the 2000s, a business-friendly environment was created, progress was made in areas such as education and health, Kigali is clean and safe, and experienced a building boom, petty corruption is

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combated, civil servants are at their desk, and the new elites are cosmopolitan and speak the language donors wish to hear. They feel that their money is "well spent", and Rwanda is a much needed "African success story". However, this is short and medium term, and there is a real risk that the achievements of bureaucratic governance will be destroyed by deeply flawed political governance.

The regime has embarked on an ambitious engineering project, attempting to create a new Rwanda and a new Rwandan. This involved bold experiments in transitional justice, land and agricultural policies, re-education, spatial reorganisation, and the instauration of pervasive control. The modernisation drive was extremely fast, especially after 2000, and for most Rwandans it was too fast. While the rural world was strongly affected by profound and invasive change, the modernisation went at two speeds, further compounding the urban-rural rift and leading to increased inequality. People were confronted with ever mounting cumbersome and costly obligations, and compliance with these duties is enforced through fines and even imprisonment. Scholars noted a profound mismatch between elite policies and the reality of everyday rural life experienced by 85% of the population, Hutu and Tutsi alike. This is understandable in light of the fact that most policy-makers are relative newcomers to Rwanda who returned from the Diaspora, and therefore are ill-informed about realities on the ground. Scott found "a pernicious combination of four elements in (...) large-scale forms of social engineering that ended in disaster": the administrative ordering of nature and society; a high-modernist ideology that believes it is possible to rationally redesign human nature and social relations; an authoritarian government that is "willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring these high-modernist designs into being"; and "a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans". This is the combination of elements prevailing in post-genocide Rwanda.

Developments like the progressive tutsisation, the frustration caused by fraudulent elections, the assignment of collective guilt to Hutu, massive human rights abuse, the risky and disturbing land and agricultural policies, the mismatch between the "public" and the "hidden" transcript, and mounting inequality all contribute to pervasive structural violence, just like was the case in pre-genocide Rwanda. This structural violence is often invisible, but it surfaces when field research discovers resentment, frustration, rage and hatred, and even unexpressed ethnic polarisation. Structural violence may once again be triggered into large-scale acute, physical violence. Straddling the African Rift Valley, the metaphor that naturally comes to mind about Rwanda is that of a volcano waiting to erupt, thus opening the way for renewed conflict, the scale and consequences of which are impossible to predict.

Mamdani argued that "[t]he dilemma of post genocide Rwanda lies in the chasm that divides Hutu as a political majority from Tutsi as a political minority. While the minority demands justice, the majority calls for democracy. The two demands appear as irreconcilable, for the minority sees democracy as an agenda for completing the genocide, and the majority sees justice as a self-serving mask for fortifying minority power". This dilemma would not exist in case of genuine (i.e. non-ethnic) democracy and genuine (i.e. not victor's) justice. Both aims would then be reconcilable, and this is what a responsible political leadership in Rwanda would have to strive for if the nation is to survive in the long term.

MORE INFORMATION

☛ A more detailed analysis can be found in F. Reyntjens, Political Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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