

# Rwanda: A State of Resilience

Written by David Chandler

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## Rwanda: A State of Resilience

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DAVID CHANDLER, APR 8 2025

Rwanda is perhaps the one state in Africa that is internationally recognised for its success in building resilience, moving from the horrors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis to becoming one of the most successful and unified states in the region. In fact, resilience as an approach to governance has been central to the post-genocide regime of President Paul Kagame. Illustrative of this, last year, the country launched a massive community-based participatory framework for the assessment of resilience led by the Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE), in collaboration with the Swedish NGO Interpeace. The University of Rwanda, in Kigali, was therefore an important venue for our third workshop on Decolonising Resilience (an AHRC-funded networking project) bringing together academics and policy experts from Ghana and South Sudan to discuss Rwanda's project of state reconstruction through building new mechanisms of resilience governance.

Resilience as a mode of governance may be a new concept to some *E-IR* readers, perhaps more familiar with resilience as an approach to psychology and engineering ('bouncing back' or coping with stresses) or perhaps with ecosystem resilience (the capacity for adaptation and change). Resilience as a mode of governance is processual, aspiring to operate beyond or outside of the liberal modernist binary conceptions of politics. In fine, politics is less likely to be conceived as a separate formal sphere, limited to elections every five years and operating separately from the private or social and economic sphere. Resilience governance is less broken up by distinct policy measures with a beginning and end and less likely to have discrete goals. Instead, resilience governance is likely to involve rolling processes of iterative and adaptive policy making and ongoing processes of consultation and public engagement.

For some commentators, resilience as a cohering framework is due to the ongoing trauma of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis, for others, it's a cover for a repressive regime, which has been criticised for a lack of human rights and civil liberties and for stoking ongoing conflict in the DRC. This paper suggests that a key reason why resilience has come to the fore in Rwanda is the lack of mechanisms of mediation linking the ruling regime with the populace. Not only were the governing institutions largely non-existent in the wake of the 1994 genocide but the incoming Rwandan Patriotic Front forces that took over the regime had little roots in Rwanda itself even within the minority Tutsi population. In fact, some authors argue there was little connection between the Rwandan Tutsi community and those in the diasporic Tutsi-led liberation army from Uganda. In this context, not only does governing through resilience attempt to make up for the lack of relation between the state and the populace it also seeks to ensure that no populist movements can emerge that might destabilise the regime. In the place of collective democratic mechanisms of legitimation and policy discussion are distributed mechanisms of governance, responsabilising and mobilising the population through the top-down enforcement of participatory and consultative programmes that reach down to the household and village level.

Post-genocide Rwanda has increasingly become the model of resilience governance, a resilient state *à la lettre*, in its attempts to present the state as the facilitator or enabler of the agency of the people. In Rwanda today, governance is a process of social mobilisation driven by the state but with a very clear 'bottom-up agenda'. Whereas the sovereign state is governed directly from the top – with the apocryphal saying attributed to Louis XIV, "L'état, c'est moi" ("I am the state") – the Rwandan state has the opposite declaratory ethos, that "the citizen is first". It is with the citizen as individual that the process of statebuilding, of reconstruction, of becoming resilient, begins. In today's Rwanda, political, ethnic and regional identities are held to be replaced by that of resilience, where being a good citizen means there is little distinction between one's own agential development and the good of the nation. At the workshop a

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number of participants argued that they did not distinguish between their own interests and those of the Rwandan state.

Central to resilience as a governance regime is the break-down of barriers between the political and legal sphere (of formal equality) and the social and economic sphere (where there is the free play of difference). Often this breakdown is understood merely in the language of neoliberalism; in terms of the political responsabilisation of poorer or marginal sections of the population to bear the burdens of economic inequities. This is not really the case in Rwanda although self-help is certainly central to the Rwandan state, often encapsulated in the concept of *agaciro* ("dignity"). Will Jones argues: '*agaciro* entails that every Rwandan should be an active agent in their own, as well as the nation's, development, rather than a passive or helpless recipient. People and communities are regularly asked to solve their own problems, including implementing major parts of the government's development programme.'

However, the 'neoliberalisation' of the state goes further in Rwanda than elsewhere. Making it clear that resilience governance is not essentially about the withdrawal of the state from the social and economic sphere but rather its insertion into it. This is clear in Rwanda via the development of *imihigo* ("public vow") as a form of performance contract, initially used to centralise control over local authorities, and then extended to civil servants and institutions and then extended further down to the level of individual households, required to make vows and to be held to account for their personal and family performance targets at the village level. At our workshop, participants gave examples of performance requirements that included amounts produced on family plots, antisocial behaviour, school attendance and tax payments.

As important as these modes of blurring the public and the private are, it is in the reworking of the political sphere that Rwanda's "home grown" resilience governance is probably most innovative. Democracy is widely seen as being divisive in the post-genocide state, where elections could lead to ethnic rivalries being rekindled and the majority Hutu population potentially voting against the Tutsi-led regime. Resilience works to postpone or to displace democratic mechanisms of fact-finding and consensus-building. At the most basic level, resilience governance is about engagement, measurement and feedback, the Rwandan state has spearheaded mass consultation exercises, an annual National Dialogue, and a considerable infrastructure of data collection and consultation, to monitor its own performance and to seek citizen and other stakeholder feedback.

To this end, the community-based participatory framework for the assessment of resilience led by the Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE), is revelatory of the level of state engagement in building resilience at all levels from the individual household upwards. The assessment itself was a mass exercise in participatory research, involving over 2,000 individuals in focus groups as well as 4,500 surveyed individuals, asked to assess their own resilience across a number of key indicators, including 'humility', 'emotional awareness', 'hope', 'self-management and responsibility' and 'here and now focus'. The survey concludes that 'the averaged national scores reveal a society that has notable strengths in collaboration, empathy, and certain cognitive skills, but which could improve its spiritual well-being, humility, emotional expression, and ability to cope with psychological trauma.' Resilience is held to hold back Rwandan development but is also seen as a fundamental strength of the governing regime's approach.

Once resilience provides the framework in which government efficiency, social stability and economic progress is discussed there is little space for "Western" ideas of liberal rights and freedoms, which are seen to only lead to social division and economic and political conflict. The interesting aspect of Rwanda's "home grown" resilience governance is that it is not imposed by Western institutions and NGOs but nevertheless has a similar outcome to the resilience programmes discussed in other contexts such as Ghana and South Sudan, where external projects of resilience-building tended to see liberal constructions of political subjectivity as ill-suited to divided societies or to those recovering from conflict.

In this context, resilience, as a mode of "post-political" societal mobilisation and engagement, enables a relatively open discussion of problems, from issues of social support for good parenting to those of corruption in government agencies and, indeed, facilitates governing awareness and responsiveness. It may well be that rather than merely seeing resilience as a neo-colonial mechanism maintaining international hierarchies, new modes of political

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experimentation in African states may have important lessons (both positive and negative) for those seeking to find ways to address the “democratic malaise” within Western societies.

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