

Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Program

Written by Susan Thomson

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SUSAN THOMSON, MAY 1 2014

This article is part of an E-IR series marking the twentieth commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide.

April 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. In 1994, at least 500,000 Rwandans were killed in just over 100 days.[i] Most of the dead were ethnic Tutsi, most of the killers were ethnic Hutu. The killing ended when the then-rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took Kigali, effectively stopping 100 days of systematic and well-planned violence. In his speech to commemorate the day, President Kagame noted that his government's approach to post-genocide governance is rooted in the idea that "never again" will acts of genocide befall Rwanda. He further stressed that, "Behind the words 'Never Again', there is a story whose truth must be told in full, no matter how uncomfortable." [ii] Speaking in English to an audience largely comprised of foreign diplomats and dignitaries, Kagame once again reminded the international community of its failure to stop the genocide, and of the hero status of his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in stopping it. The President used the opportunity to affirm his government's version of the "truth" of what caused the genocide: a combination of a docile and obedient rural population, a legacy of authoritarian governance, and colonial policies of ethnic divisionism that introduced differences to the historically-unified Tutsi and Hutu. Kagame further stressed the importance of national unity for continued peace and security in Rwanda. Lastly, he highlighted his government's many accomplishments since the end of the genocide, not least of which is the country's miraculous post-genocide economic growth and development.[iii]

The shining star of Rwanda's post-genocide renewal is Kigali, the capital city. With its low crime rate, clean streets, shiny new buildings, and civic order, Kigali's clean exterior masks the harsh realities of daily life in this tiny central African country. Rwanda is a largely agrarian society, with some 85% of the population living in rural areas on less than an average of US\$1.50 per day.[iv] These Rwandans are least likely to have benefitted from Rwanda's impressive post-genocide economic growth. Rural folks are largely powerless to rebuild their lives and reconcile with one another in meaningful ways. Instead, they must find public ways to reconcile in state-sanctioned settings like *ingando* citizenship reeducation camps, the neo-traditional *gacaca* local justice courts, or during genocide mourning week (every April 7-14). In the process of controlling the spaces where unity and reconciliation can officially occur, the government has neutralized or eliminated non-state spaces, thereby rendering these spaces suspect, which in turn constrains the ability of many ordinary Rwandans to reconcile in personally meaningful ways. Under the RPF, individual acts of reconciliation that occur outside the gaze of the state do not officially count, as there is no official present there to register and legitimate the encounter. Practices like learning the "truth" about what caused the genocide in *ingando* camps or officially forgiving the perpetrator who killed one's family members at a *gacaca* trial both "reveal both the power and the limitations of the regime's project by announcing the gap between enforcing participation and commanding belief." [v]

The government can seek to impose national unity and reconciliation activities on Rwandans because of the deep structures of authority that characterise the apparatus of the state. In Rwanda, political power is firmly held by those who control the state in a system where sociopolitical domination is commonplace and accepted by ruler and ruled alike. When the power of the state is exercised at the local level, as it currently is through the program of national unity and reconciliation, it takes the form of directives from "on high" (the regime in Kigali) and of strict monitoring of the ability and the willingness to implement government orders effectively and efficiently. RPF-appointed local leaders in turn keep an eye on the activities and speech of individuals within their bailiwick. Local government officials constantly and consistently remind Rwandans of the need to "unify and reconcile" in order to consolidate

Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Program

Written by Susan Thomson

present and future security. The density of the Rwandan “state” saturates everyday life with its strong administrative, surveillance, and information-gathering systems, resulting in minute individual forms of resistance when confronted with its various practices of control and coercion.[vi] Rwandans from all walks of life—rural and urban, young and old, men and women—are subject to the exercise of power granted to appointed local leaders, and must perform the prescribed rituals of national unity and reconciliation, regardless of their private realities.

In 1999, the RPF introduced the program of national unity and reconciliation: an ambitious top-down social reengineering project designed to forge a unified Rwandan identity while fostering reconciliation between Tutsi survivors of the genocide and its Hutu perpetrators. Government leaders discussed the creation of a South Africa-inspired Truth and Reconciliation Commission as part of a series of conversations among government officials that ultimately lead to the creation of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC).[vii] The NURC is managed on a daily basis by the executive secretary, who is responsible to its deputy chairperson. The deputy, in turn, reports to the chairperson of the NURC, who is accountable to Parliament for all its activities and publications. There is also a Council of Commissioners, which acts as an advisory body under the guidance of the chairperson. There are twelve commissioners, all of whom “are directly appointed by President Kagame.”[viii] There are two substantive NURC programs—Civic Education and Conflict Management and Peace Building—both of which are staffed by young Anglophones who returned to Rwanda after the genocide. All staff are based in Kigali and travel to the “hills [rural areas] to check in on how unity and reconciliation activities are faring once every month” since it is “a non-negotiable option for Rwandese.”[ix] It is within this top-down institutional framework that Rwandans must reconcile with one another.

For many Rwandans, the expectations of the program of national unity and reconciliation are a burden in their already emotionally fragile and economically vulnerable post-genocide lives. Rather than addressing the traumatic realities of the violence of the genocide, the ruling RPF has instituted a program of national unity and reconciliation that reinforces its political authority, instead of introducing a series of reconciliation activities aimed at alleviating Rwandans' post-genocide feelings of fear, anger, and despair as they struggle to rebuild their lives and reconcile with themselves and one another.[x] The program has successfully rebuilt the institutions of state; it has been less successful in rebuilding the broken hearts of Rwandans, or of alleviating their crushing poverty, despite sweeping government claims to the contrary.[xi] As Jeanne, a poor peasant widow of the genocide told me, “There can be no peace in the heart if there is no peace in the stomach.”[xii]

From the perspective of many ordinary Rwandans, some 60% of which are poor peasant farmers, the official version of how the genocide happened does not recognize the continuum of everyday violence that they experienced, albeit to varying degrees of intensity, before, during, and after the genocide.[xiii] There is a sizeable gap between the RPF's noble rhetoric and actual lived realities. The official government narrative of who did what to whom is clear-cut and unequivocal: Hutu killed Tutsi because of ethnic divisions that were introduced during the colonial period (1890-1962) and hardened to the point of individual action during the postcolonial period (1962-1994). But the reality is that, irrespective of ethnic category, ordinary Rwandans were caught up in the violence beyond the official rhetoric that Hutu killed Tutsi because of a deep-seated yet latent ethnic hatred.

Framing the violence of the genocide in such stark terms makes it difficult for Rwandans to reconcile with their hearts. Government officials stage-manage the apologies of Hutu perpetrators to prompt the forgiveness of Tutsi survivors. The official position is that reconciliation between these two groups is ongoing and successful—Rwanda is both peaceful and safe. Survivors can speak of their experiences in sanctioned settings, such as during the April mourning period or at the *gacaca* justice trials. Perpetrators can hang their head in shame and ask for forgiveness once they have told the truth about what they did. It is these two narrow and essentialist categories of “survivor” and “perpetrator” that are the protagonist of national unity and reconciliation, to the exclusion of other actors and experiences of violence.

Missing from the official narrative are stories of survival, of friends and family who took extraordinary risks in protecting their Tutsi kith and kin.[xiv] There are stories of Tutsi who put their own lives on the line to protect Hutu family and friends from the coercion and intimidation tactics that the killing squads used to goad ordinary Hutu into killing. Notorious killers protected Tutsi they knew personally, ushering them safely through roadblocks, warning

Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Program

Written by Susan Thomson

them of the whereabouts of marauding groups, and even hiding them at their homes. Some individuals killed during the day, only to shelter Tutsi friends and relatives at night. Many Tutsi survived because of the aid and succor of a Hutu family member, friend, colleague, neighbor, or stranger.[xv] There are stories about ethnic Twa and ethnic Hutu who were killed in the genocide because of their stereotypical Tutsi features.[xvi]

The program of national unity and reconciliation provides no official recognition of different lived experiences of the 1994 genocide beyond the official assertion that only Tutsi were victims of violence during the genocide and only Hutu killed. The program also does not allow for public discussion of the physical violence that individual Rwandans experienced before and after the genocide, particularly the violence they experienced at the hands of RPF soldiers during Rwanda's civil war (1990-1994), during the 100 days of the genocide, and in the post-genocide period (July 1994-present). Instead, Rwandans must make sense of the violence they experienced or witnessed, including human rights abuses suffered at the hands of the current government before, during, and after 1994.[xvii] The revised 2003 Constitution made illegal public references to ethnic identity (article 33), and criminalized "ethnic divisionism" and "trivializing the genocide" (article 13). These constitutional provisions reinforce a 2001 criminal law on divisionism and sectarianism that punishes public incitement to ethnic discrimination or divisionism by up to five years in prison, heavy fines, or both. Rwandans cannot sincerely reconcile with one another, as they are unable to talk about the violence they experienced if those experiences fall afoul of the official script of Hutu perpetrators of violence and Tutsi survivors. To suggest, for example, that ethnic Hutu may have died before, during, or after the genocide is to risk being accused of either genocide denialism or revisionism, and is certainly not part of the official "truth" that President Kagame referred to in his April 7 commemoration speech.

Joseph, a poor Tutsi survivor of the genocide, sums up the reality of the program of national unity and reconciliation from the perspective of those subject to its many demands:

They talk about national unity and reconciliation. But they don't know what it means. I know I am a Tutsi, how can I not? I ran and hid because of being a Tutsi. Now I have to forget that in the name of unity and reconciliation. Unity for whom? Reconciliation for whom? It is a political game that is the responsibility of local officials. Reconciliation is not an administrative matter; it is an affair of the heart, of accepting the wrong and then forgiving the ones who harmed you.[xviii]

As Rwanda marks the 20th anniversary of the 1994 genocide, national unity and reconciliation are not yet a reality for many who lived through the violence. Hearts remain broken as many Rwandans recognize the government-led national unity and reconciliation program as the product of a distorted and self-interested history that legitimizes its own grip on power. This one-sided public narrative of the genocide is increasing social tensions, and could lay the groundwork for politicizing the population.

[i] Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 15-16.

[ii] Paul Kagame, "Speech by President Paul Kagame at the 20th Commemoration of the Genocide against Tutsi," April 7, 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.kwibuka.rw/speech> (April 15, 2014).

[iii] World Bank, "Rwanda." Accessed at: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/rwanda> (April 15, 2014).

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999),22.

[vi] On the reach and influence of the Rwandan state in the lives of its citizens, see, for example, Timothy Longman, "Rwanda: Chaos from Above," *The African State at a Critical Juncture: between Disintegration and Reconfiguration*

Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Program

Written by Susan Thomson

(Boulder: Lynne Rienner), 75–91; and, Andrea “Purdeková, “Even if I Am Not Here, There Are So Many Eyes’: Surveillance and State Reach in Rwanda,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49 (2011), 475–97. On peasant resistance to the demands of the program of national unity and reconciliation, see Susan Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Rwanda* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press).

[vii] Office of the President of the Republic, *Report of the Reflection Meetings held in the Office of the President of the Republic from May 1998 to March 1999*, (Kigali: Office of the President, 1999).

[viii] NURC official speaking to the author in 2006, quoted in Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*, 119.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Research undertaken by Rwandan psychologists estimates that some 95% of Rwandans who were in the country at the time of the genocide have traumatic memories. Jean Damascène Ndayambajwe, *Le génocide au Rwanda: Un analyse psychologique*. (Butare: Université nationale du Rwanda/Centre universitaire de santé mentale, 2001). See also, Déogratus Bagilishya, “Mourning and Recovery from Trauma: In Rwanda, Tears Flow Within.” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 37 (2000), 337–53.

[xi] National Institute of Statistics, *The Evolution of Poverty in Rwanda from 2000 to 2011: Results from the Household Surveys (EICV)* (Kigali: National Institute of Statistics).

[xii] Quoted in Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*, 149.

[xiii] Gerard Howe and Andrew McKay. “Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Assessing Chronic Poverty: The Case of Rwanda,” *World Development* 35 (2007), 200.

[xiv] See, for example, African Rights, *Nyange* (Kigali: African Rights, 2003); Marie Béatrice Umutesi, *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

[xv] See Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Villia Jefremovas, “Acts of Human Kindness: Tutsi, Hutu and the Genocide,” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23 (1995), 28–31.

[xvi] Christiane Adamczyk, “‘Today, I Am No Mutwa Anymore’: Facets of National Unity Discourse in Present-Day Rwanda,” *Social Anthropology* 19 (2011), 175–88.

[xvii] On human rights abuses committed by the RPF, see, for example, United Nations Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC Submitted in Accordance with Paragraph 4 of Security Council Resolution 2021* (2011). Accessed at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1533/egroup.shtml> (April 19, 2014); and Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp

[xviii] Quoted in Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*, 114.

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Susan Thomson is Assistant Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Colgate University (Hamilton, NY, USA). She received her B.A. from Saint’s Mary University, her LL.B from University College London, and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Dalhousie University. Susan Thomson is the author of *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Postgenocide Rwanda* (UW Press, 2013). Her second book, under contract with Yale University

Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Program

Written by Susan Thomson

Press, analyzes the longer-term effects of Rwanda's reconstruction and reconciliation model. Her research and teaching interests are in state-society relations in contemporary Africa, individual agency in and after conflict, and qualitative research methods, with particular focus on research ethics and doing research in difficult environments.