

“Thinking Big”: Rwanda’s Post-Genocide Politics

Written by Lars Waldorf

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LARS WALDORF, APR 30 2014

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

Commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide on April 7, President Paul Kagame praised his country for “thinking big” when it came to meeting development goals, attracting foreign businesses, investing in information technology, and contributing troops to peacekeeping missions.[1] That same day, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair listed Rwanda’s impressive accomplishments in economic growth, private investment, poverty reduction, health care, and education.[2] Blair’s African Governance Initiative has been working in Rwanda since 2008. During that time, some of Rwanda’s key governance indicators on accountability, free speech, human rights, and participation have flat-lined or declined.[3] There are worries that Kagame’s growing authoritarianism threatens to undermine Rwanda’s development successes.[4]

At the end of his 2008 hagiography of President Kagame, Steven Kinzer wrote,

If Kagame can achieve half of what he has set out to do, he will go down in African history. If he can achieve it all, leaders of every poor country on earth will look to Rwanda for lessons, and bands of angels will sing in heaven.[5]

Just three years later, Kinzer was writing very differently:

[Kagame] still has the chance to enter history as one of the greatest modern African leaders. There is also the chance, however, that he will be remembered as another failed African big-man, a tragic figure who built the foundations of a spectacular future for his country, but saw his achievements collapse because he could not take his country from one-man rule toward democracy.[6]

Kinzer’s change in tone was prompted by Kagame’s verbal and legal attacks on four former comrades-in-arms from his army and ruling party (the Rwandan Patriotic Front, or RPF). In January 2014, one of them – the former head of Rwanda’s external intelligence – was assassinated in South Africa. Kagame denied any involvement while, at the same time, threatening other opponents: “Whoever betrays the country will pay the price. I assure you... Whoever it is, it is a matter of time.”[7] Two months later, there was an attack on the South African home of Kagame’s former army chief of staff who had nearly been assassinated in Johannesburg in 2010. At that point, the South African government had had enough: it expelled three Rwandan diplomats for “sustained and organized efforts to kill some of the refugees living in the Republic.”[8]

Kinzer worried that Kagame’s big-man politics threaten his big thinking. In fact, the two are linked: Kagame is betting that repression at home and abroad will give him enough time and resources to turn the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi into de-ethnicized Rwandans. This linkage was brought home when the Rwandan defense minister commented on Karegeya’s assassination at an “I am Rwandan” campaign event, saying “When you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog... Actually such consequences are faced by those who have chosen such a path.”[9]

Context

The most decisive factor in shaping post-genocide Rwanda is that the 1990-1994 civil war and 1994 genocide

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terminated with Kagame’s military victory. His defeat of the genocidal forces gave him the moral authority, political power, and military means to refashion Rwanda. Many of the political parties, civil society organizations, and religious institutions that might have stood in his way were devastated or compromised by the genocide. Kagame’s victory also owed nothing to the international community which had failed to halt the genocide.

The second key factor is that Kagame and his rebel troops – mostly Tutsi who had grown up in exile in Uganda – were occupying “a mostly hostile, mostly Hutu country” they barely knew or understood.[10] Kagame could not possibly hope to win support from the Hutu majority in free and fair elections, particularly not after killing tens of thousands of Hutu civilians both in Rwanda and in neighboring Congo. This dictated a strategy of repression, re-education, and faked elections.

The final, related factor is that Kagame and his inner circle are almost all military and intelligence men who were schooled in Uganda’s revolutionary vanguard, Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM).[11] A recent, tell-all memoir by a former secretary-general of the ruling party (turned opponent) describes how Kagame’s power rests first and foremost on an informal intelligence network, then the intelligence services, next the army, and only then the party.[12] This mix of military and revolutionary influences explains the use of a coercive, security state to achieve nation-building.

Winning Big

Kagame likes to win big. He was elected President with 95 percent of the vote in 2003 and with a hardly less subtle 93 percent in 2010. What’s the point of holding elections when the outcome is a foregone conclusion? As two prominent political scientists state, “Elections are intended to show that the dictatorship can make the dog perform tricks, that it can intimidate a substantial part of the population, so that any opposition is futile.”[13] So why win by such margins? As another political scientist explains, “Manipulating elections excessively and blatantly [i.e. beyond what is necessary to win] can make the manipulating party appear stronger.”[14]

Kagame’s party wins legislative elections with slightly more credible margins: 76 percent in 2003, 78 percent in 2008, and 76 percent in 2013. In fact, the RPF won 96 to 98 percent in 2008, but then “reverse-rigged” the result to lower its count to 78 percent, giving a handful of parliamentary seats to two “competing” parties in order to preserve the fiction of power-sharing.[15]

Several factors account for these out-sized electoral wins. All the other political parties have been co-opted, undermined, or banned. These parties rely heavily on state funding whereas the ruling party has a shadowy network of financial holdings.[16] Serious political competitors have been killed, disappeared, imprisoned, or exiled. The former Speaker of Parliament (a Tutsi genocide survivor) has written a fascinating account of how Kagame forced him to resign and undermined his party.[17] There is little left in the way of independent media or civil society organizations. Finally, local officials practice widespread intimidation and fraud to ensure large margins for Kagame and his party.[18]

Staying Big

Writing just before Kagame’s inevitable re-election in 2010, one academic urged international actors to engage

more closely with the many reformist members of the RPF who share their concerns over the current state of Rwandan politics. RPF moderates have substantial clout within the government and have scored major political successes in the past.[19]

That analysis was flawed on three counts. It wrongly assumed the locus of power is the ruling party rather than Kagame and his narrow clique of military and intelligence figures. It also played “a commonly trumpeted myth that the main intra-RPF fault-line runs between ‘reformers’ and ‘security hawks’; in reality, generals and business interests agree on most substantive issues.”[20] In addition, it dramatically overstated the influence of the so-called reformists: all the “moderates” named in the article have since been purged, arrested, or moved on.

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When, in 2013, one of those alleged “reformists,” the Justice Minister, called on Kagame to observe constitutional term limits by stepping down in 2017, Kagame told a Western journalist, “Why don’t you tell him to step down himself? All those years he’s been there, he’s not the only one who can be the justice minister... In the end we should come to a view that serves us all.”[21] The following week, Kagame fired the Justice Minister, thereby contradicting the confident assertion that “Kagame does not always get his way.”[22]

Thinking Big

The RPF’s long-term strategy is to win over the Hutu majority’s hearts and minds, focusing on the younger generations. This highly ambitious strategy has two prongs. The first is delivering social goods, particularly in health and education.[23] The results in the health sector have been particularly impressive. The maternal mortality rate declined dramatically helped by an impressive increase in births at health facilities. This success owes much to threats and coercion. Researchers found that “Women repeatedly cited fines as the main reason for choosing to give birth at the health centre.” They also documented how, in one sensitization session, local officials told women they would be considered “enemies of the country” if they gave birth at home.[24]

The second prong is a bold experiment in social engineering: an attempt to eliminate ethnic identity through mass re-education of the population. As a high-ranking party leader once put it, “the ordinary citizens are like babies” who “will need to be completely educated if we want to move towards democracy.”[25] This re-education seeks to transform Hutu and Tutsi into Rwandans who will no longer think, act, or vote along ethnic lines. As Kagame has declared, “We are inculcating a new outlook that is Rwandan, and not ethnic.”[26] This ideology of “national unity and reconciliation” harkens back to an invented past of Rwandan unity before colonialism and Christianity.

Re-education takes several forms. Ethnic discourse has been largely criminalized under laws prohibiting “divisionism” and “genocide ideology.”[27] The RPF’s version of history is taught in primary and secondary schools, while large segments of the population (including university-bound youth and teachers) are required to attend political indoctrination in *ingando* (solidarity camps) or *intorero* (civic education trainings).[28] The RPF launched a public education campaign in 2013 called *Ndi Umuyarwanda* (“I Am Rwandan”).

Fighting Big

Kagame has been fighting wars in the Great Lakes Region since 1978. He helped bring about regime change in three countries: first Uganda (1986), then Rwanda (1994), and finally Congo (1997). Since 1996, Rwanda has justified its interventions in Congo as self-defense against genocidal forces. Belgian academic Filip Reyntjens summarizes Rwanda’s motives as

a combination, changing over time, of genuine security concerns, economic interests, ethnic solidarity and even (selective) humanitarian concerns, the need to “buy” internal elite solidarity, (military) institution building and a feeling of entitlement coupled with a sense of invincibility against the background of the comfort offered by the collapse of its rich neighbor.[29]

Even after a 2003 peace agreement, Rwanda has continued arming and financing local, ethnic militias in Congo, which it uses as proxy forces to battle several thousand Hutu rebel fighters, some of whose leaders were implicated in the 1994 genocide. Rwanda also uses these militias to illegally exploit eastern Congo’s immense natural resources. In June 2012, the UN Group of Experts on Congo reported that Rwanda was providing weapons, recruits, and financing to the M23 rebel group in violation of a UN arms embargo. It also stated that the Rwandan military had intervened directly in support of those rebels.[30] Despite Rwandan denials, the US Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes warned Rwanda’s leaders they could be prosecuted for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity in the Congo.[31]

Wooing Big

Donor assistance, particularly in the form of budgetary support, has made Rwanda’s post-conflict recovery possible.

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Such assistance makes up almost half the national budget. Much of that comes from the United Kingdom, United States, European Union, and World Bank. Donors have been motivated by several factors, including guilt and shame over their inaction during the genocide, admiration for the RPF’s leadership, and eagerness for African success stories. Rwanda’s donors have largely avoided confrontation with the regime over human rights concerns. The only (limited) exception is when Rwanda overreaches in Congo, either by threatening to re-invade or by too blatantly supporting rebel warlords.[32]

Conclusion

Kagame will be just 60 years old in 2017, at which point he will have been leading Rwanda for 23 years. Many observers expect that he will either amend the Constitution’s term limits or do the Putin-Medvedev two-step to remain in power. If that happens, then the last of Bill Clinton’s “new generation” of African leaders will have gone the way of the previous generation.[33] If Blair and Clinton really want to do right by Rwanda, then they should promise to nominate Kagame in 2017 for the Ibrahim Award – a \$5 million prize to Africa’s “exceptional” leaders who actually leave office at the end of their terms. That would be a golden parachute for Kagame and a capstone to an extraordinary career. It also might just be the best guarantee for Rwanda’s future.

[1] Paul Kagame, “Speech at the 20th Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi” (Apr. 7, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.kwibuka.rw/speech>).

[2] Tony Blair, “Rwanda’s Healing,” *The Guardian* (Apr. 7, 2014).

[3] See, e.g., David L. Cingranelli, David L. Richards, and K. Chad Clay, *The Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset* (2013); Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2013* (2013); Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *The Ibrahim Index of African Governance* (2013); USAID, *IREX Media Sustainability Index* (2012); World Bank Institute, *Worldwide Governance Indicators* (2012).

[4] Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf (eds), *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Omar McDoom, “Rwanda’s Exit Pathway from Violence: A Strategic Assessment,” *World Development Report: Background Case Study* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011); Human Rights Watch, “Human Rights Watch Submission to International Development Committee” (May 2011).

[5] Stephen Kinzer, *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda’s Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 338.

[6] Stephen Kinzer, “Kagame’s Authoritarian Turn Risks Rwanda’s Future,” *The Guardian* (Jan. 27, 2011).

[7] Human Rights Watch, “Rwanda: Repression Across Borders” (Jan. 28, 2014), 4. For earlier statements by Kagame condoning attacks on his opponents, see Filip Reyntjens, *Political Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 90 n.157 & 93 n.176.

[8] Michaela Wrong, “Leave None to Tell the Other Story,” *Foreign Policy* (Apr. 1, 2014).

[9] News of Rwanda, “Gen Kabarebe on Karegeya: ‘When you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog’” (Jan. 11, 2014).

[10] Gerard Prunier, “The Rwandan Patriotic Front,” *African Guerrillas* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 133.

[11] Michael Dorsey, “Violence and Power-Building in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Politics of Identity and Economics of Conflict in the Great Lakes Region* (Brussels: VUB Press, 2000), 328-29.

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- [12] Theogene Rudasingwa, *Healing a Nation: A Testimony* (North Charleston, SC: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 431-37. Although the author has become an outspoken opponent of Kagame in exile, it is the only insider account by one of the Anglophone Tutsi elite. Other researchers confirm that securocrats are the key decision-makers. Harry Verhoeven, “Nurturing Democracy or into the Danger Zone? The Rwandan Patriotic Front, Elite Fragmentation, and Post-Liberation Politics,” *Rwanda Fast Forward* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 265.
- [13] Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Cooperation, Cooptation and Rebellion under Dictatorships,” *Economics & Politics* 18:3 (2006), 21.
- [14] Alberto Simpser, *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xv.
- [15] Personal interviews, Rwanda, Sep. 2008. See Filip Reyntjens, “Rwanda: A Fake Report on Fake Elections.” Accessed at <http://hungryoftruth.blogspot.com/2009/01/rwanda-fake-report-on-fake-elections.html>. By contrast, Golooba-Mutebi and Booth emphasize the “robust inclusiveness” of the political settlement (elite bargain) that has existed since 2003. Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and David Booth, *Bilateral Cooperation and Local Power Dynamics: The Case of Rwanda* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013), 13. That claim, which is at sharp odds with all the existing literature, is based on confidential interviews with members of the ruling party and other parties.
- [16] See David Booth and Frederick Golooba-Mutebi “Developmental Patrimonialism? The Case of Rwanda,” *African Affairs* 111:444 (2012).
- [17] Joseph Sebarenzi, *God Sleeps in Rwanda* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 137-89.
- [18] For a comprehensive survey of these techniques, see Reyntjens, *Political Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda*.
- [19] Phil Clark, “Rwanda: Kagame’s Power Struggle,” *The Guardian* (Aug. 5, 2010).
- [20] Verhoeven, “Nurturing Democracy or into the Danger Zone?” 266.
- [21] Chris McGreal, “Is Kagame Africa’s Lincoln or a Tyrant Exploiting Rwanda’s Tragic History?” *The Observer* (May 19, 2013).
- [22] Clark, “Rwanda: Kagame’s Power Struggle.” Despite these recent developments, two scholars continue to insist on “collective leadership” within the ruling party. Golooba-Mutebi and David Booth, *Bilateral Cooperation and Local Power Dynamics: The Case of Rwanda*. That ignores the crucial distinction between contested and established autocrats: “Contested autocrats can be credibly threatened with a removal; established autocrats have effectively monopolized power.” Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 55.
- [23] See Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, “Developmental Patrimonialism? The Case of Rwanda,” 391.
- [24] Vicki Chambers and Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, *Is the Bride Too Beautiful? Safe Motherhood in Rural Rwanda* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012), 41.
- [25] Aloysia Inyumba (2002) quoted in Reyntjens, *Political Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda*, 82.
- [26] Paul Kagame, “Speech by His Excellency President Paul Kagame at the University of Washington” (Apr. 22, 2004).
- [27] See, e.g., Amnesty International, *Safer to Stay Silent: The Chilling Effect of Rwanda’s Laws on ‘Genocide*

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Ideology’ and ‘Sectarianism’ (2010); Lars Waldorf, “Instrumentalizing Genocide: The RPF’s Campaign against ‘Genocide Ideology,’” *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, 48-66.

[28] See, e.g., Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Nation, Narration, Unification? The Politics of History Teaching after the Rwandan Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11:1 (2009); Chi Mgbako, “Ingando Solidarity Camps: Reconciliation and Political Indoctrination in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 18 (2005).

[29] Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2. See also Danielle Beswick, “Unpacking Rwanda’s Involvement in DR Congo and the International Response,” E-IR (Dec. 19, 2002).

[30] United Nations, Addendum to the Interim Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Concerning Violations of the Arms Embargo and Sanctions Regime by the Government of Rwanda, UN Doc. S/2012/348 /Add. 1, Jun. 27. 2012.

[31] Chris McGreal, “Rwanda’s Paul Kagame Warned He May Be Charged with Aiding War Crimes,” *The Guardian*, Jul. 25, 2012.

[32] See Eugenia Zorbas, “Aid Dependence and Policy Independence” and Rachel Hayman, “Funding Fraud? Donors and Democracy in Rwanda,” *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, 103-17 and 118-31; Liz Ford, “UK Withholds Aid to Rwanda in Light of DRC Congo Allegations,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 30, 2012.

[33] See Murithi Mutiga, “Uganda’s Stubborn Autocrat,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 24, 2014).

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