

Pax Kigali: Reconciliation and Peace in Contemporary Rwanda

Written by Reon van der Merwe

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REON VAN DER MERWE, OCT 28 2020

The invasion of Rwanda by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1994 ended one of the most tragic acts of genocide in contemporary African history in which more than 800,000 Tutsi's and moderate Hutu were murdered over the span of 100 days. Since then the RPF has remained the ruling party in the country and made reconciliation and the restoration of peace one of its primary objectives. In an attempt to secure peace and break the cycle of violence between Tutsi and Hutu, the RPF-led government has taken several political, social and legal measures over the last 26 years aimed at rooting out the causes of past violence in the country. While there have been no new outbreaks of mass ethnic violence in Rwanda since 1994, critics have argued that the RPF government's approach has failed to bring sustainable peace to the nation. Some have argued that increasingly authoritarian tactics and the rewriting of history to favour a state-sanctioned narrative has merely succeeded in suppressing dissent and underlying tensions.

The result has been what Samset (2011) refers to as a "repressive peace" based on systemic state-led oppression and exclusion that heightens rather than abates the risk of future violence (Samset, 2011). In more recent news the arrest of well-known Hutu Human Rights activist, Paul Rusesabagina, by the Rwandan government on charges of aiding anti-government groups, has once again brought the question of reconciliation in Rwanda into the spotlight. Mr Rusesabagina, is well-known for his attempts to save Tutsis during the genocide, as portrayed in the 2004 Hollywood film *Hotel Rwanda*. In recent years he has grown increasingly critical of the Kigali government and the ruling RPF (Aljazeera, 2020). This essay will seek to assess the debate on the state of post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda by considering the evolving role of the RPF in Rwandan politics, the measures that were undertaken to reshape public memory of the genocide and promote peace, and whether these steps have effectively secured a sustainable peace in the county. By doing so this essay hopes to add to a more nuanced view of peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda.

The RPF in post-genocide Rwandan politics

In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, it was widely recognised that sectarian versions of history which portrayed Tutsi as settlers in contrast to native Hutu, were used to justify the killing of the former by the latter (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). The RPF-led government thus passed strict laws against the ideology of ethnic divisionism. These laws were used to prosecute political parties and figures that had promoted, supported or participated in the genocide in an attempt to provide justice for victims and the nation. Yet several scholars (Beswick, 2011; Silva-Leander, 2008; Niesen, 2010) have argued that the broad manner in which divisionism was initially defined has allowed it the aforementioned laws to evolve into a political tool for the RPF to legitimise the silencing of any entity that could potentially oppose the state including civil society, the press and moderate opposition parties and politicians. Records show that as early as 1995 key political figures within the RPF-led Government of National Unity began resigning and going into exile due to their discontent with the government's policies (Niesen, 2010). The government, in turn, continued to argue that its actions were in the interest of sustaining peace and order by preventing sectarianism and ethnic particularism from once again gaining a foothold in Rwandan politics and society (Niesen, 2010). Yet, scholars such as Reyntjens (2014) argue that by the time the first the country had once again stabilised and the first democratic elections took place in 2003, the RPF had used its campaign against divisionism to eliminate any viable opposition or dissent in the Rwandan political landscape, resulting in a landslide victory for the

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party and a small elite of former RPF generals (Reyntjens, 2014). However, beyond the political arena, the victory of the RPF was also facilitated by a state-sanctioned shift in public consciousness and sentiments about the genocide.

Wilful amnesia and state legitimacy

When the killing stopped in 1994 communal life in Rwanda had been completely upended. Neighbour had turned on neighbour and the social fabric of society had been torn asunder. In an attempt to normalise relations within communities the RPF-led government embarked on several initiatives to rebuild social cohesion and establish a new Rwandan identity by reshaping society's collective memory. Re-education programs and youth solidarity camps, locally known as *Ingando*, became a common tool used to entrench a state-sanctioned narrative of the genocide and Rwandan history (Blackie & Hitchcott, 2018). This narrative suppressed any reference to pre-genocide Hutu-Tutsi conflict and difference. By replacing one version of history with another the government was also able to eliminate all mention of pre-genocide tensions between Hutu and Tutsi or the conflict between the pre-genocide Hutu government and RPF militias, rather choosing to focus on the colonial causes of these constructed identities (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). Yet, contrary to the idea that that the Rwandan citizens had no agency in assuming these narratives evidence fertile ground in the post-genocide public imagination.

The communal nature of Rwandan society meant that survivors and perpetrators often had to continue living side-by-side and even relying on one another for daily tasks to survive. To deal with this uneasy situation many chose to embrace a 'performative peace' and willful forgetfulness that was in line with the government's reconciliation narrative. When asked how the genocide started, both Hutu and Tutsi community members often blamed manipulative political elites, misinformation or said that they did not know (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). These responses align with the state-sanctioned narrative that sought to erase the history of pre-genocide tensions between Tutsi and Hutu. The genocide came to be seen as a tragic enigma that befell Rwandan society overnight, while the true history stayed hidden as an 'open secret'. Community tribunals, known as *Gacaca* courts, were also set up to help bring justice, closure and healing to communities. If perpetrators confessed their crimes, apologised and confessed who their co-conspirators they were given a lighter sentence.

Initiatives such as these aimed to incentivise buy-in from the community by providing survivors with a semblance of closure while allowing known perpetrators a path to redemption and reintegration into society (Zorbas, 2004). However, beyond desiring to merely 'forgive and forget', fear and ethnic antagonism still existed on both sides and sometimes manifested in cases of revenge killings after *Gacaca* court confessions. This underlying fear meant that the government, despite its increasing authoritarianism, was regarded by many Rwandans as the only legitimate 'custodian of security' that could keep communities from slipping back into full-blown violence (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). This unspoken compromise allowed the Rwandan government some freedom in its ability to make decisions relatively unopposed. Yet while the narrative of forgetting the past was used strategically by the RPF to promote national unity and secure a 'performative' peace in the years following the genocide, growing criticism in recent years shows that this narrative may be having the opposite effect today.

Cracks in the narrative

At an international level, the UN and human rights groups have frequently called for war crimes committed by RPF forces before, during and after the Rwandan genocide and the invasion of the country to be investigated and prosecuted. This includes the 1996-1998 extermination of Hutu refugee camps in Zaire (DRC) by Rwandan forces during the First Congo War, which the Rwandan government refuses to acknowledge (Silva-Leander, 2008). Admitting to such crimes would undoubtedly threaten to undermine the foundation of the RPF's legitimacy as custodian of reconciliation and its stance as a crusader against divisionism. The Rwandan government, therefore, continues to reject these appeals and insists that any attacks were done to defend Rwanda's peace against latent Hutu-power forces which threatened to throw the country back into chaos. Silva-Leander (2008) however points out that the blatant refusal of the RPF government to investigate or even acknowledge the past wrongdoing of its own forces has eroded the moral efficacy of the 'genocide-credit' the party used over the years to legitimate its rule both at home and abroad (Silva-Leander, 2008). Beswick (2011) also shows that dissenting voices grew louder over the years concerning the government's willful erasure of certain kinds of memories that were uncomfortable for the ruling

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party. While the experiences of the Tutsi survivors and to a lesser extent the moderate Hutu were emphasized in the national dialogue and sites of memorialisation after 1994, the suffering of Hutu refugees who fled the country, other ethnic minorities and individuals of mixed Hutu-Tutsi parentage were erased (King, 2010). This has led to increasing criticism that the RPF has used a state-sanctioned reconciliation narrative to maintain its own legitimacy and shield itself from past war crimes, while implicitly reinforcing a Tutsi 'monopoly over suffering' that prevents inclusive nation-building (Zorbas, 2004).

Scholars like Mamdani (2002) warned early on that in the long-term the RPF sanctioned narrative of the genocide threatened to replace old ethnic labels with new labels of Tutsi-victim versus Hutu-perpetrator that could hinder reconciliation between the groups (Mamdani, 2002). In 2013, the government hosted a Youth Connect conference in Kigali to support its 'I am Rwandan' campaign and promote a spirit of national unity among Hutu and Tutsi youth. During this event, a nation-wide call was launched encouraging Hutu youth to apologise for the participation of their relatives and parents in the genocide. While done in the spirit of reconciliation, some prominent figures criticised this initiative. They argued that Hutu identity was being stigmatised by extending guilt across generations and having children pay for the sins of their relatives (Blackie & Hitchcott, 2018). Interview evidence does highlight cases where Hutu youth still experience fear of discrimination and social exclusion in everyday life for the actions of their family members, with some reporting that they are mocked with phrases like "look, the Interahamwe (Hutu-power group responsible for most of the killings) just passed by" if they are Hutu with known relatives who participated in the genocide (Blackie & Hitchcott, 2018).

It could therefore be argued that while a new generation of Rwandans is growing up with no memory of the events of '94, a measure of fear still underpins reconciliation in Rwanda and supports Mamdani's concerns. On a larger scale, the RPF's failure to address accusations that it refuses to embrace a more inclusive view of Rwandan history beyond the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, which also acknowledges its own past wrong-doing, has created a moral vacuum in which anti-government insurgency groups have propagated their own alternative narratives and anti-government rhetoric that undermine peace and cohesion in Rwandan society (Silva-Leander, 2008). Ethnic Hutu rebel groups such as the National Liberation Front (FNL) and Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), are prime examples of groups that justify their attacks against what they perceive to be an illegitimate 'Tutsi dictatorship' led by Paul Kagame. These cases of lingering fear and antagonism thus show that full ethnic reconciliation in Rwanda has yet to be achieved more than two decades after the genocide. As a result, the threat of violence still hangs over Rwandan society.

A new direction?

Evidence does show that in recent years the Rwandan government has attempted to shift the national dialogue beyond the genocide, seeking alternative narratives of legitimacy to support its project of nation-building. One of these narratives has been its state-led rapid economic development. Rwanda has remained one of the fastest growing economies relative to the rest of the continent under an RPF-led developmental state bringing tangible economic dividends to Rwandan citizens such as poverty alleviation, improved living standards and reduced child/birth mortality rates (Takeuchi, 2019). This new developmentalist strategy has very likely found favour among those whose livelihoods have improved. This sentiment is evidenced by the one survivor who is reported as saying, "When a country has peace and food and water to drink, then people will not murder each other" (Blackie & Hitchcott, 2018). An example of this development legitimacy approach can be found in a country like China, which has become a pioneer in constructing a narrative around its economic achievements to counter Western criticism over its lack of democracy and political freedoms. Much like China, Rwandan stability and growth has been centred around its ruling party, but more specifically around the towering figure of President Paul Kagame which remains the driving personality of Rwandan politics. Thinking about the future of peace and stability in Rwanda is intrinsically linked to the question of who will succeed President Kagame and whether the peace he has dedicated his political career to is a resilient one.

Conclusion

The measures taken by the RPF-led government since the Rwandan genocide to bring peace and reconciliation to

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the country ensured an initial pragmatic peace in post-genocide Rwanda. Furthermore, the RPF's monopoly over Rwandan politics allowed this dynamic to persist. Yet this peace remains uneasy. Increasingly authoritarian methods used by the government to enforce its version of Rwandan history has harmed its legitimacy as a custodian of reconciliation in the country. The production of alternative histories by anti-government groups poses a potential long-term threat to the nation's security, while the stigmatisation of Hutu youth threatens social cohesion. It is noteworthy to point out Rwanda's achievements in preventing outright ethnic conflict in a region so riddled with ethically driven tensions. It is also important to highlight that the strategy of wilful amnesia has not been exclusive to Rwanda, but parallels exist in other post-conflict societies eg. the Rainbow Nation narrative of the ANC government in post-Apartheid South Africa. However, unless the RPF government succeeds in forging an inclusive Rwandan identity beyond the dichotomous genocide narrative, that validates the history of all its people and acknowledges past injustices, the country will struggle to move from a repressive to a sustainable peace. As a result, its government may consistently need to resort to increasingly repressive measures to retain its legitimacy and silence dissent. The effectiveness of the current economic approach to moving beyond the country's past remains to be seen and its true efficacy may only become evident once a new generation of political actors takes the Rwandan stage.

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