

Review – Do Not Disturb

Written by Cliff (Ubba) Kodero

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CLIFF (UBBA) KODERO, APR 21 2022

***Do Not Disturb: A Story of Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* By Michela Wrong Public Affairs, 2021**

Michela Wrong's *Do Not Disturb: A Story of Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad*, published in 2021 by Public Affairs, documents a scathing attack on Rwanda's ruling party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). RPF has governed the country since they defeated the extremist Hutu nationalist party that engineered the genocide in 1994. Wrong tells the story of the founding of RPF and its morph into a complex and organized military organization that defeated the highly formidable and French-backed Rwanda army under Juvenal Habyarimana. It is also a story of betrayal, curtailed ambitions, unfulfilled dreams, sadism, and nationalism. A political and social account of the politics of the Great Lakes region, Wrong offers an incisive analysis of why the Great Lakes region, particularly Rwanda, is troubled. Wrong writes, "Rwandans are liars, and it is part of their culture" (p.1). She warns us that her sources, the protagonists in her story, were former loyalists of the Rwandan ruling regime. As a result, it is hard to trust their narrative. It is even plausible to question their honesty, but we must trust them because they have nothing to lose (p.13). They have been ostracized from a party they helped form, estranged from Rwanda, and are on the verge of losing their lives. Truth is the only thing left that is of currency. Wrong, a former reporter with British publications such as BBC, *Reuters*, and *Financial Times*, was admittedly swept off her feet by the charisma and beauty of the RPF fighters. Tangled and complicit in their narrative, she had to do their bidding. They had ended the genocide and were about to save Rwanda from a moral and literal abyss. *Do Not Disturb* unearths the feelings and experiences of Kagame's former allies turned dissenters. She writes, "But given the extraordinary attrition rate among members of the RPF elite, I feared by that stage, there might be few left to comment" (p.13).

Who are the RPF fighters?

At its foundation, RPF is a union of rebel fighters disgruntled by a Ugandan regime that took them for granted, united by a sense of exclusion in refugee camps, and committed to recreating a Rwandan society in which the Tutsis would reclaim their privileged position. The RPF is primarily an organization led and created by young men called the Fifty-Niners (p.121). They had been forced out of their lands through acts of ethnic cleansing committed by Hutu nationalists at the dusk of Belgian colonial rule. It was an organization led by a charismatic leader and military strategist for Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda named Fred Rwigyema. Rwigyema was killed on the first campaign across the Ugandan border in 1990. Paul Kagame, a scrawny, lanky, aloof, and socially awkward military intelligence officer, controversially took over the RPF and forced Habyarimana's regime to the negotiation table in the Tanzanian city of Arusha. In April 1994, after the tumultuous peace agreements in Tanzania, a presidential plane was shot down carrying two Hutu presidents: Rwandan Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian Cyprien Ntaryamira. Soon after, Rwanda descended into genocide, and over 800,000 Tutsis and other Hutu moderates were killed in such savagery that the country has never recovered. In July of the same year, the Kagame led-RPF marched into Kigali and took over the remains of an empty and morally defunct republic. The book focuses on what leads to this eventuality and how it shapes the individuals whose stories form the narrative.

Personal friendship and betrayal

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The book is a cinematic portrayal of a murder most foul. It follows the life of Patrick Karegeya, a childhood friend, ally, master of public relations glib, chief of staff, and later, a political adversary of Kagame. Karegeya was murdered in 2013 in South Africa at Hotel Michelangelo during the Christmas season. The murder, one of the many carried out by Kigali operatives in foreign lands, disturbed diplomatic relations between Kigali and Pretoria. The title “Do not Disturb” is symbolic of the sign on a hotel room door as the murder of Karegeya went on. The label also signifies that the actions of the Rwandan regime are beyond reproach from outside – mostly western powers. While the Rwandan government denied responsibility for the murder, Kagame ungallantly said at a National Prayer Breakfast, “You can run, but you can’t hide.” He further went on to say, “Whoever is against our country will not escape our wrath. The person will face the consequences. Even those who are still alive, they face them.” (p.30).

Patrick Karegeya’s story marries and contradicts many characters’ family histories in the book. Patrick’s family moved from Ruanda/Urundi three generations ago to the Ankole region in Western Uganda. He identified as a Ugandan first and spoke Kinyarwanda, the language of the Banyarwanda in the Great Lakes, with an accent. Most of the RPF insiders, including Fred Rwigyema, were children of Rwandan refugees. They had been ethnically cleansed from Rwanda in the pogroms of 1959 as Belgian colonial administrators about-faced from their historical allies, who were Tutsi monarchists. They embraced majority rule, which inherently favored the Hutu commoners. Tutsis became the immediate target of violence, and many immigrated helter-skelter to other areas in the Great Lakes, but mainly to Uganda. A majority lived in Western Uganda as refugees among the Ankole people. They assimilated with the Bahima, the pastoralist class of the Ankole, similar to the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi. Many Ugandans, with a long history of settled lives and sophisticated civilization peppered with western education, considered the new Rwandan immigrants uncouth and uncivilized (p.130). Idi Amin and Milton Obote’s anti-immigrant policies made Banyarwanda easy targets for xenophobic attacks. As Museveni marshaled an army to rebel against Obote, the Banyarwanda youth quickly enlisted to fight to support their Ankole cousins and topple Obote’s regime. Museveni’s NRM became a haven of Banyarwanda fighters who easily set themselves apart as formidable in the battleground.

Western guilt after a genocide debacle

Wrong’s book does not dissemble historical nuances critical of the RPF regime. Instead, it tries to help us understand why Rwanda and the Great Lakes are complex regions. On the political front, it questions the narrative that Kagame’s Rwanda is progressive and successful and an excellent example of good governance in Africa. Wrong argues that the special place of Rwanda among protestant countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, and the Netherlands is one of a new kind of racism. Western nations are fascinated by Kagame’s regime, whose blatantly rigged elections ensure he wins over 90 percent. Rwanda’s economic indicators often show admirable growth rates, but they are based on falsified data. Kagame’s regime systematically spies and kills his dissenters. His spy game is as sophisticated and has hallmarks of Israel’s Mossad. And his agents have infiltrated governments in the region, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. It acts with impunity in purging dissenters and former comrades in European capitals such as Brussels and London. For many western leaders, it is common knowledge that Kagame’s regime is oppressive, murderous, and disrespectful to fundamental ethics of foreign policy. Yet Kagame is still invited to Davos, Switzerland, where he hangs out with the one-percenters and other global elites with utmost chutzpah. He gets honorary degrees from elite schools, which is unusual for someone who struggled to graduate high school. He lectures at Harvard, celebrated as one of the most successful African leaders.

Despite overwhelming evidence that RPF committed reprisal killings against the Hutus, the files on these matters have been closed. Wrong writes that Kagame’s Rwanda fascinates the west because of unusual racism. She quotes French historian Gerard Prunier, whose work *Africa’s World War: Congo, The Rwandan Genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe* expounded on the idea of political control through terror. Prunier’s work focused on the spill-over and regionalization of the Rwandan genocide, turning it into “a war fought among foreigners in Congolese territory” (p. 274). Prunier tells Wrong that the charm is a “lingering form of racism in which violence by the international community as ‘normal for Africa.’” (p.390). Prunier also stated, “Yes, he can be rough on the natives. But can you expect anything else?” Prunier asks (p. 391). Kagame has masterfully crafted a guilt-tripping narrative about Western failure to intervene during the genocide against the Tutsi. His public relations officers have convinced the rest of the world that Rwanda is a prosperous developmental state. Rwanda is thriving, and poverty is reducing.

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Yet the reality on the ground is that no one can tell you the truth. Many Rwandans, especially Hutus, languish in poverty and disappear if they dissent. Nonconforming Tutsis are increasingly becoming the new targets for Kagame's murderous regime.

Regional elite interests at play

Wrong often reveals unstated complexities of nationhood and citizenship. First, while Banyarwanda refugees helped Museveni capture power from Milton Obote in 1986, they were never comfortable in Uganda. The invasion of Rwanda was a moment of hope. It was an attempt at nation-building anchored on the promise of a long dream of return that galvanized many Tutsis across the region. But at the same time, this attempt at nation-building from abroad sent shockwaves through Kigali. Hutu elites responded with extremist rhetoric, aware that their time as bonafide elites was limited. The tensions between these two citizenship conceptualizations culminated in genocide.

Great Lakes politics is a theater of individual ambitions and goals. Tanzania's founding leader Julius Nyerere is a crucial participant. Idi Amin and Obote, both Nilotic northerners in Uganda, had a fratricidal conflict that destabilized Uganda paving the way for Tanzania to occupy Uganda. Obote was ousted by Idi Amin. Obote regains power nine years later with the help of the Tanzanian army. In the fight against Amin, Museveni fought alongside Obote. After that, Museveni rebelled against Obote, formed an army, and recruited disillusioned Rwandan Tutsis stuck in refugee camps. After Museveni's victory, Tutsi soldiers plot to return to Rwanda. In the 1990s, RPF invaded Rwanda from the Ugandan border. They gain support with the implicit backing of Uganda. As the Rwandan genocide went on in 1994, two million refugees, or one-third of the Rwandan population, crossed over to the DRC, fleeing RPF soldiers. In pursuit of the remnants of the genocidal perpetrators, *Interahamwe*, Rwandan RPF, crossed over the border to DRC and joined Laurent Kabila's forces to remove Mobutu. They killed Hutus refugees and Congolese people in the process.

Why the book is divisive

Perhaps the most shocking revelation in the book is the confirmation of a controversial series of events. The first is the death of Fred Rwigyema. Kagame's hand is implied but not wholly revealed. Patrick Karegeya divulges that RPF soldiers downed the plane that sparked the genocide in April 1994 and that Rwanda engineered the murder of DRC president Laurent Kabila. Kagame's calm and collected public demeanor contrasts with his sadistic and violent behaviors in private. He flogs soldiers for losing a battle, kicks a woman foreign minister from behind, pushes her from the office, and slaps and physically assaults his military juniors. He kills or imprisons his opponents indiscriminately. These revelations make Michela Wrong's book contentious. While the book is intimate, well-researched, and easy to read, one can feel that it is a bit easy on the NRM regime, which also operates like the RPF. Possibly, the most challenging question to answer is: how can we trust Michela Wrong's sources? Patrick Karegeya was Kagame's henchman. How can we trust Karegeya's voice?

If there was a book that could change a regime, Michela Wrong's *Do not Disturb* would be a candidate. But instead, it is revelatory as it is a carpe diem on the negative press that RPF is increasingly getting. Yet what is remarkable is the volte-face of many global elites whose fragrant obsession with democratic ideals shreds down when it comes to the question of Kagame's Rwanda. Wrong warns us that celebrating Rwanda's pyrrhic gains is futile and that sooner or later, Rwanda will descend into the chaos that the world has tried very much to avoid. Wrong documents horrid accusations on Kagame's RPF. But these revelations are not new to many Rwandans and those who are knowledgeable about Great Lakes politics. Nonetheless they are powerful when they come from a journalist of global repute. However, they also reveal that journalistic accounts are not enough as the Britain-Rwandan refugee plan reveals.

About the author:

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