

KAGAME: A DISCOURSE ON STRONGMAN RULE IN AFRICAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The 1994 genocide in which an estimated eight hundred thousand Rwandans were killed within the space of three months appears to be all that Rwanda needed to rouse itself from the inertia of its pre-genocide decades (1962-1994); for since the genocide, the country has experienced a lot of “positive disruptions.” For example, ethnicity which was the major cause of the genocide has been banished from the front row of state organization, with the result that Rwandans no longer identify themselves as Hutu or Tutsi or Twa. Similarly, the genius for autogenic development has been unshackled, with the result that the country has become one of Africa’s fastest growing economies. Using Paul Kagame as referent, this paper discusses the need or otherwise for strong man rule in African politics. It concludes that, since strong institutions are not among the free gifts of nature, the continent needs strong men who can build the strong institutions it needs. Such strong men, however, should not be allowed to over stay in power or to rule without checks and balances.

Key words: Genocide, Rwanda, Kagame, African politics, strongman rule.

INTRODUCTION

Rwanda, “Africa’s poster child for progress” (Mwai, 2021) and Africa’s “biggest success story” (Zakaria, 2009), was tucked away in one of the world’s obscurest corners until 1994 when some eight



hundred Rwandans were killed in a genocide over a period of three months. Before the genocide this land locked, mountainous, resource-poor country, like most other countries in Africa, was groaning under the weight of misgovernment, corruption and ethnic politics. After the genocide the international community watched with bated breath as it struggled to pick up its broken pieces. Everyone is astounded not only at the speed of its recovery from the genocide, they are also astounded at the fact that it has defied the prediction that, like many other post-conflict states, it would sooner rather than later relapse into conflict. As Zakaria (2009) put it, “By the time [the genocide] ended, one tenth of the country's population was dead. Most people assumed that Rwanda was broken and, like Somalia, another country wracked by violence, would become a poster child for Africa's failed states. It's now a poster child for success.”

The genocide out of whose ashes this mesmeric national rebirth emerged started on April 6 1994 following the assassination, in a plane crash, of Hutu Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, Juvenal Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira. It is not yet known who shot down the plane (Shaw, 2012), but “the prime suspects were members of the *akazu* clique [the northern extremists around his wife, Agathe] determined to wreck any prospect that the Arusha Accords might be implemented, ending their hold on power” (Meredith, 2006, p. 507). The genocide started in the cities and then spread to the countryside. Hutu supremacist militias killed Tutsi and moderate Hutu with machetes, spears, clubs and guns. Those Hutu who refrained from participating in the genocide had to convince the militias that they were not *ibytso* (saboteurs; accomplices of RPF). Thousands of Tutsi fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire), Tanzania and Uganda in their numbers, swelling up Tutsi refugee populations in those countries. After the RPF (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) rebels who had crossed into the country from Uganda where they were based seized Kigali thousands of Hutu fled to DRC. The international community watched anxiously as they seized the capital, fearing a reprisal genocide; but to the relief



of everyone Kagame contrived to restrain his men from reprisal genocide.

The major cause of the genocide was the centuries-old animosity between the country's two major ethnic groups, namely the Hutu and the Tutsi. The Twa (who constituted 1% of the population) were the first to arrive, while the Tutsi (who constituted 14% of the population) were the last to arrive. In the precolonial economy in which land was the major determinant of socioeconomic status, the Twa were fruit gatherers, the Hutu farmers, and the Tutsi pastoralists. While the Hutu needed land for agriculture, the Tutsi needed it for grazing. But because the landmass was mountainous and, therefore, too small to support these two competing needs, the two groups perennially fought over the little available land. Like all other pastoralist groups, the Tutsi were warlike and used to rustling and pillaging. As Magnarella (2005) described them, "Typically of cattle pastoralists, [they] were armed and accustomed to fighting to protect their herds against raiders and to raid for cattle and pillage goods themselves" (p. 802). Although they were the last among the ethnic groups to arrive in the country, it was not long before, through the seizure and pillage of Hutu and Twa lands, they "built a permanent system of economic and political relations with the Hutu whereby they established themselves definitely as masters and exploiters" (Maquet, 1961, p. 170).

The Tutsi, through those political-economic relations and advanced military science, built the caste-*cum*-feudal society which both the Hutu and the colonial rulers could not dismantle, and which inexorably led to the genocide. Just like the Fulani jihadists who, per force adopted, the Hausa language as lingua franca and language of officialdom after supplanting sarakuna (Hausa political rulers) with emirs (Fulani chiefs), the Tutsi were obliged to adopt the language of the Hutu they had conquered. The Hutu and the Twa resisted the seizure of their land by the Tutsi, but they were overpowered. Land was everything. Military training for Tutsi males was emphasized since it insured against Hutu nationalism. According to Shaw (2012),



By the time Rwanda emerged as a major state in the 1700s, rulers measured their might by the number of cattle they owned. Pastoralists were in charge. Yet, in the following century, cultivators, who were more adept at the conduct of war and able to mobilize large numbers of forces, rose to lead the state. By the end of the nineteenth century both sources of power—cattle and military capability—became consolidated in one group, the Tutsis (p. 17).

Furthermore, the Tutsi established Mwami, to whom they ascribed divine ownership of all land. According to Lemarch and (1970), “The king was the incarnation of the deity (Imana)... The theme of kingship was inextricably tied up with the theme of Tutsi supremacy. To rebel against the established order was no less sacrilegious than to rebel against the Mwami himself” (pp. 33-34). The caste system that emerged was arbitrarily determined by cattle ownership---the basis of Tutsi economic and political domination. As Mbanda (1997) explained, “...a Hutu who gained status through wealth or by becoming a chief could become a Tutsi through a ritual of *Kwihutura*---literally, a cleansing of one’s Hutuness...[I]f a Tutsi lost his cattle and turned to farming for a living and married into a Hutu family [Tutsi nobles could keep Hutu concubines], that person could become a Hutu”(p. 4). Land was increasingly used for grazing, which depreciated agriculture, the mainstay of the Hutu economy. As land availability shrank, more and more Hutu were forced to enter feudal patron-client relations with the Tutsi (Magnerella, 2005) or re-identify as Tutsi. Tutsi aristocrats, nonetheless, kept Hutu concubines (Maquet, 1961), which played a part in blurring physical differences between the two groups. However, for both the Hutu and the Tutsi, it was a taboo to marry a Twa (Magnerella, 2005). The caste system eroded ethnic identity among the Hutu and the Twa, for in time they felt no inhibitions to become Tutsi in order to enjoy the privileges that went with being a Tutsi.

Germany which colonized Rwanda, Burundi and Tanganyika (as German East Africa, GEA) from 1894 to 1919



bolstered the caste system (the basis of the Tutsi's domination) by ruling "indirectly through the existing Tutsi monarch (*mwami*) and his chiefs" (Magnerella, 2005, p. 806).

This policy of indirect rule bolstered centralization and annexation of Hutu principalities as well as increased Tutsi chiefly power (Prunier, 1997). The Belgians who took over the German colony following Germany's defeat in the First World War consolidated the policy of favouring the Tutsi, by leaving much of the administration of the state to extant institutions and people (Metz, 1994). That meant retaining the minority rule of the Tutsis who constituted about fourteen percent of the population (Shaw, 2012). Hutu chiefs were replaced with the Tutsi. By 1959 forty-three out of forty-five and five hundred and forty-nine out of five hundred and fifty-nine sub-chiefs were the Tutsi (Destexhe, 1995). The Belgians, like the Germans, knew that it was judicious to bolster the aristocratic system that rested upon cattle and land ownership and facilitated the economic exploitation of the colony. Thus, the Tutsi were romanticized and described as "being descendants of a 'Hamitic' people" (Meredith, 2006, p. 486). The new colonial rulers aggravated the divide-and-rule policy they inherited from the Germans by making Tutsi comprador bourgeoisie, task masters and tax collectors. The colonial policy of racial differentiation was formalized with the ID cards the 1933-34 census introduced. Certain scholars, however, have absolved the Europeans from creating the system that differentiated the Hutu and the Tutsi. For example, Mamdani (2001) contended that the Belgians only used the identification system (ID cards) to institutionalize and racialize an existing sociopolitical distinction.

The Belgians who had favoured the Tutsi over the two other ethnic groups for decades, however, began to favour the Hutu when the Tutsi who had become their *Frankenstein Monster* began to demand independence. Decades of divisive colonial rule had given them advantages in the colonial scheme of things---in the military, economy, education, etc. Expectedly, their demand for independence "led to a cooling of relations with the Belgians" (van Haperen, n.d., p. 100).



Discomfited, the Belgians schemed to transfer power to the Hutu. Everywhere, colonialists made their best endeavours to disinherit those ethnic groups or individuals that championed nationalism in their respective colonies. To exemplify, in Nigeria the British ensured that a northerner, Tafawa-Balewa, rather than Azikiwe or Awolowo (a southerner), became prime minister when they left. Likewise, in Angola and Mozambique the Portuguese supported a civil war when their plan to transfer power to pliant groups and individuals failed. Through such monstrous designs, they mined Africa's post-colonial societies, programming them for the civil wars and other political crises that immediately followed independence in countries like Nigeria and the DRC). Foreseeing the inevitable dominance of the Hutu in the post-independence setting, the Belgians dumped the Tutsi and supported the Hutu (Magnerella, 2005); but as noted by Dowden (2009), "Too late [they] realized that independence meant democratic elections and democratic elections would put power in the hands of the Hutus"(p. 223).

Emboldened by the Belgian *volte-face*, the Hutu in 1957 launched the Party of Hutu Emancipation (MDR-Parmehutu) which issued the so-called Hutu Manifesto. That hate document paved the way for the 1994 genocide. The Manifesto "complained of the political, economic and educational monopoly of the Tutsi 'race' and characterized the Tutsi as foreign invaders" (Magnarella, 2005, p. 809). In 1959 Mwami Mutara III who ascended the throne in 1931 died. The so-called Social Revolution launched by MDR-Parmehutu immediately after Mutara's death continued until 1961 when, with the help of the Belgians, the Hutu abolished the monarchy in a referendum. Mwami Kingri V was toppled and forced to go into exile in the Congo. His dethronement which ended centuries of Tutsi domination demolished whatever doubt there were about the Hutu's resolve to avenge their subjugation and supplant Tutsi supremacy with Hutu supremacy. Parmehutu was dominated by Hutu from the northern and northwestern parts of the country. The divide between northern and southern Hutu, both of which groups "used Tutsi intimidation as a demonstration of their power and right to govern"(Shaw, 2012, p. 20)



“exacerbated Hutu-Tutsi conflict as both groups attempted to portray the other as Tutsi-influenced” (Metz, 1994, p. 10).

The Hutu who came to power in both Rwanda and Burundi in 1962 were determined to avenge the indignities they had suffered under the Tutsi and the Europeans. Thus they firmly pursued policies that only widened the ethnic fault lines. For example, throughout the pre-genocide decades, they took no measures to abrogate the identification system since it was evident proof of their numerical majority. The first two presidents of the country, Gregoire Kayibanda (1962-1973) and Juvenal Habyarimana (1973-1994), both of who came from the northern part of the country, pursued policies that marginalized not only the Tutsi but also fellow Hutu from the south. Southern Hutu were despised “for their less fervent commitment to Hutu nationalism” (Meredith, 2006, p. 490). As a result, the power struggle that emerged following independence pitted the Hutu against the Tutsi on the one hand and northern Hutu against southern Hutu on the other hand. Millions of Tutsi fled to neighbouring Tanzania, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) to escape persecution. From exile the Tutsi-dominated RPF, launched by leading exiles at a meeting in Kampala in 1987, carried out series of abortive coups against the Hutu government in Kigali. Hundreds of Tutsi were massacred in reprisal after each coup.

Strongmen in National Politics

Strong men have mostly emerged from national crises. For example, Napoleon Bonaparte emerged from the civil war that followed the overthrow of Louis XVI. Even in some advanced democracies the march of the rule by the consent of the majority (democracy) has been halted or slowed down by the emergence of strongmen, such as Francisco Franco in Spain, Adolf Hitler in Germany and Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey. Strong men are either military dictators (for example, Ghaddafi and Abacha) or democratically elected leaders (for example, Adolf Hitler and Lee Kuan Yew).



Strongman rule has been a feature of African politics since the continent's independence. At different times in the past the continent's political landscape was dominated by strongmen--- Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Haile Selassie, Julius Nyerere, Kenyatta, Kenneth Kaunda, Gamel Abdel Nasser, Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Idi Amin, Muammar Gaddafi, Dauda Jawara, Moussa Traore, Siad Barre, Mobutu Sesseko, etc. Those strongmen who took over from the colonial rulers suppressed opposition, because of their conviction that the newly independent countries needed some period of regimentation before their transition to full-fledged democracy. Kaunda (1966) advocated the establishment of one-party states on the continent because such states were the "the natural consequence" of the popular process that liberated the continent from colonial rule, guaranteed "continuity of government" and ensured quickness of decision. Even Nyerere, the first African head of state to leave office voluntarily (in 1985), supported one-party rule because "[W]here there is one party, and that party is identified with the nation as a whole, the foundations of democracy are firmer than there can ever be where you have two or more parties, each representing only a section of the community" (1969). According to Kissinger (2000) "Where the national common experience is colonial rule, especially when the state comprises diverse ethnic groups, political opposition is often considered an assault on the political validity of the state rather than of a particular government" (p.x).

Strongman rule on the continent reached its climax at the end of the Cold War. By then relevance decay stemming from factors such as corruption, cronyism and nepotism had eroded the credibility of the strongmen---all of them. With the end of the Cold War, the second phase of African independence started; this time, it was decolonization from the strongmen who had been derisively dubbed "dinosaurs". By that time the ubiquity of those men had vitiated the argument that colonial rule should be blamed for the continent's myriad sociopolitical and economic problems. As the West and the East pared back support for their respective client strongmen, the agitations for multiparty democracy intensified with the result that, one by one, the strongmen were removed



from office. Some of them (for example, Kaunda and Kerekou) lost elections; some (for example, Traore and Jawara) were removed in military coups; others (for example, Barre and Mobutu) were ousted by rebels. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been efforts to replace strongmen with strong institutions on the continent. Little wonder, President Obama warned in his speech at the Ghanaian parliament in 2009 that “Africa does not need strong men. It needs strong institutions” (2009).

Strongman Rule in Post-Genocide Rwanda

Rwanda’s post-genocide politics has so far revolved around one man, namely Paul Kagame. Kagame, who spent his childhood as a Tutsi refugee in Uganda, had become a senior officer in the Ugandan army after Yoweri Museveni who Rwandan rebels helped against both Idi Amin and Milton Obote became president. He took control of RPF in 1990 after its founder, Fred Rwigyema, died in that year’s abortive invasion of Rwanda. When the genocide broke out, he led RPF rebels to invade Rwanda. To his credit, he was able to restrain the rebels, the vast majority of who were Tutsi, from resorting to direct assaults and protracted artillery attacks on enemy strong holds, which would have maximized casualties (Britannica, n.d.). Also to his credit, he restrained the rebels from carrying out a reprisal genocide against the Hutu; and after toppling the interim president, Theodore Sindikubwabo (a Hutu), he did not seize power; instead, he chose another Hutu, Pasteur Bizimungu, to replace him. He only became president on 23 March 2000 when Bizimungu, in whose government he had served as vice-president as well as minister for defence for six years, was forced to resign following a misunderstanding over cabinet make-up. He abolished the office of vice-president that was purposely created to accommodate the Tutsi in Bizimungu’s Hutu-dominated government and has ruled without a vice-president ever since. (All his predecessors had also ruled without a vice president; thus, he remains the country’s only vice-president). He has also spearheaded the Tutsi factor in the Congolese civil wars, helping Laurent Kabila to overthrow Mobutu, then fighting Kabila, and later his son Joseph, for



antagonizing the Tutsi and expelling the Rwandan and Ugandan soldiers who had helped Kabila against Mobutu. A strong-willed and single-minded leader, he heads a virtual one-party dictatorship, which accounts for his poor human rights standing. The Chatham House (2016) described him as one “who is not open to a large amount of negotiation that could change his political position and ideology.” In 2015 he forced a constitutional amendment that could keep him in office until 2034. For his mixed style of leadership, he has been commended and condemned alike. While he has been hailed for not only preventing the country from relapsing into conflict but also putting it on the path of sustainable nationhood, he has been equally denounced for his streak of violence against political opponents, journalists and human rights activists.

One of the conundrums in African politics concerns itself with the relationship that should exist between development and democracy. For Kagame, it is development first; democracy second. After all, Singapore and South Korea which he, according to BBC (2017), sees as model states have passed through their own periods of strong man rule. About this predilection for mutual exclusion, Friedman (2012) wrote:

The past decade has seen the rise of Rwanda as a regional economic powerhouse...While a great deal of scholarly and policy debate has focused on the constant connection between economic growth and democracy, Rwanda has thrived despite an authoritarian government that is devoid of respect for human and political rights and the opposition. In fact, the authoritarian nature of the government has played an important role in the country's economic emergence (p. 276).

Political opponents, journalists and human rights activists have disappeared, murdered, exiled or barred from elections; and he has come quite close to condoning such monstrous use of violence in his public speeches with statements like the one he made after Colonel Patrick Karegeya (a prominent critic) was found dead in



his hotel room in Johannesburg on January 1, 2014: "You can't betray Rwanda and not get punished for it. Anyone, even those still alive, will reap the consequences. Anyone. It is a matter of time"(BBC, 2017) or the other one he made after he released two thousand political prisoners in September 2018: "These people I graced who were in prison, now they shout out... Leave them, they can go die elsewhere... They shouldn't slow down our development..." (Dusabumuremyi, 2019). His sociopolitical reengineering targets both the past and future. With regard to the past, it tries to re-orientate the national politics away from the vestiges of colonial rule. One such vestige is that phantom that divided Rwandans into Twa, Hutu and Tutsi. The re-orientation effort endeavours "to develop a political system that radically differs from those of the first and second Republics, led by Grégoire Kayibanda (1964-1973) and Juvénal Habyarimana (1973-1994)" (ICG, 2001, p. 2). Ethnicity, the major cause of the genocide, has been severely weakened, with the result that most Rwandans today do not self-identify as Twa or Hutu or Tutsi. During the 2003 election, Kagame identified himself as Rwandan, not Tutsi. In his praise of him, Dowden (2009) said, "Just when you think the devil has conquered the earth, Africa throws up a Job, a savior, one just man who redeems all" (p. 223).The country's key performance indicators (KPI) under him have been generally impressive. For example, in the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), it has been moving up the rung, ranking among Africa's three-cleanest countries in the past five years.

2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
Country	Ranking	Country	Ranking	Country	Ranking	Country	Ranking	Country	Ranking
Botswana	29	Botswana	35	Botswana	34	Botswana	34		
Seychelles ; Cape Verde	40	Cape Verde	38	Seychelles	36	Cape Verde	48		
Rwanda	43	Mauritius;	50	Rwanda	48	Rwanda	48		



Rwanda

In 2013 Kagame was praised by Mo Ibrahim, founder of the Ibrahim Index on African Governance (IIAG), for being “one of the great success stories [in Africa].” In its 2013 report, IIAG which measures and monitors governance performance in African countries noted that “Rwanda has recorded the ‘best progress’ since the year 2000 – making it the “most successful” among all the post-conflict countries.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS OF HISTORY

History has a voluminous record of leaders like Kagame; and any dispassionate assessment of such leaders will show that the vast majority of them did not finish well. Only few of them (for example, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore) escaped the comeuppance of relevancy decay. Lee escaped it by leaving the stage when the ovation was the loudest. He had declined the call by Singaporeans to continue in office. Those at the other end of the spectrum were less sensitive and had to be removed from office through a military coup (for example, Haile Sellasie) or rebellion (for example, Ghaddafi) or election (for example, Kaunda). Believing that they were indispensable to their countries, this second category assumed that the whole weight of developing their countries had been placed on their shoulders. In most of those countries ruled by such strong men, a civil war or other form of political crisis have followed the death or removal of such rulers; and there is as yet no guarantee that Rwanda will escape a similar fate after Kagame who currently does not have any plan about his succession. He rules without a vice-president. He is building infrastructure, growing the economy and developing human resources, while stunting the political institutions and stifling human rights. Rwanda is still a developmental state; and should he die in office or become incapacitated, a civil war between Hutu and Tutsi could ensue.

State organization has been on the agenda of the discourse on governance in Africa since its independence. The colonial powers had imposed their own models upon their colonies when



they transferred power to the natives. Sadly, in most newly independent countries, the transition period (i.e. the first few years of independence) was turbulent. In some countries (for example, Nigeria and Ghana) democratic rule was suspended and replaced with military dictatorship. In other countries (for example, Tanzania and Kenya) the new rulers imposed one-party democracy and outlawed opposition. With his style, Kagame is only trying to undo the gains the continent has made in terms of democratic rule. He sees his heavy-handed rule as the only path to stability and development in Rwanda. He also believes the country needs time to recover and stabilize before it can talk about democracy. (Rwanda has never experienced democracy throughout its sixty years of independence, for all Kagame's predecessors were heavy-handed too). But it is an iron law of history that "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

It is believed that countries emerging from colonial rule or conflict needs a spell of benevolent dictatorship for self-evaluation and stability. During that period, minimal dissent should be tolerated. This argument derives from the axiom that, like human beings, countries have their stages of development. During infancy, parents/guardians should use tough love to mould their behaviour. After all, the Bible says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive far from him"(Proverbs 22: 15). President Obama's attention should have been drawn to the fact that the order which elicited his praise of Ghana is largely due to the benevolent military-cum-civilian dictatorship of Jerry Rawlings. Strong institutions do not fall from heavens; therefore, Africa needs strongmen to build the strong institutions it needs to develop. Perhaps, the major cause of the continent's problems (political crises, corruption, etc.) is that African countries skipped the most critical stage of their development, namely a period of benevolent strongman rule. The stage, however, should not last more than twenty years. Those years should be enough for every well-intentioned strongman to build strong institutions, groom his successors and prepare for his exit from office. There is no doubt that countries like China



(including Taiwan under Jiang Kaishek), Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia are where they are today because they experienced that critical stage of national development. Only few countries in Africa did not fight a civil war or experience some other life-threatening political crises during the first two decades of their independence.

Rwanda may go the way of Libya if Kagame should progress in his present course. Ghaddafi was once like Kagame. He built schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, airports, etc. but he neglected to build strong institutions or groom a corps of younger like-minded compatriots who would take over from him. He believed he was the only one who could guide the country through its development. Those who were sufficiently acquainted with history were not surprised that Libya imploded following his overthrow in the Arab Spring. As Kagame lengthens his stay in office, he will correspondingly, gradually begin to use cronyism, buy-off, state capture and other forms of soft instruments (rather than coercion) to keep himself in power. Leaders resort to these instruments in an effort to pacify opponents and thus keep themselves in power. When the Rwandese become tired of him, they will rise against him, like the Libyans rose against Ghaddafi when they became tired of him.



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