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Re-Engaging with the Post-Genocide Government of Rwanda: Canada's Role

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Executive Summary

The brief outlines the political climate in post-genocide Rwanda. The present government has fostered a political environment that is designed to maintain its grip on power at the expense of both political and social rights. The international community should re-think its present engagement with Rwanda, lest it once again remain silent as the country moves towards a renewal of acute violence.

Canada, as one of the few of Rwanda's development partners that had a presence in-country before and after the 1994 genocide, and as Co-Chair of the Group of Friends to the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, has a role to play in ensuring that international donors tactfully and carefully begin to pressure the government to release its authoritarian control on state and society.

The brief recommends three policy initiatives:

1. Canada should initiate a dialogue among international donors in Rwanda with the purpose of convincing the government of Rwanda of the importance of promoting good governance, protecting human rights, and assuring the political and social rights of all Rwandans in building sustainable and inclusive peace.
2. Canada should work to assure a united front among the international donor community in Rwanda before engaging the Government on the issue of relinquishing its authoritarian grip on power and the promotion of democracy and good governance.
3. Canada should act as a spokesperson for the international community with the Government of Rwanda, mindful of Government's sensitivity to criticism.

The Problem

Almost thirteen years after the 1994 genocide, Rwanda is not experiencing democracy and reconciliation, despite the financial and moral support of the international donor community to those ends. Instead, Rwanda's post-genocide government is creating a political climate best characterised as authoritarian rule and social exclusion, which may again create the conditions for acute violence.

The Background

The Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government controls the political sphere in three ways:

- 1. Politicisation of National Unity:** The basis of the government's policy of reconstruction and reconciliation is national unity, which is captured in the slogan of "one Rwanda for all Rwandans". The policy of national unity is premised on the idea that if Rwandans can identify as Rwandans, and not on the basis of their ethnic identity as Tutsi, Hutu or Twa, then an inclusive citizenship, based on "Rwandan-ness" will be created. However, rather than promoting national unity as defined in the policy, the RPF has reserved access to power, wealth and information to RPF loyalists, who are overwhelmingly Tutsi in number. The concept of "Rwandan-ness" allows the government to silence opponents and critics with allegations of being un-Rwandan.
- 2. Authoritarian Control:** Through a reign of intimidation and fear, the RPF has sought to maintain total physical and psychological control over the political and social landscape. There is little to no room for dissent. The hold of the RPF on the instruments of local, provincial and national government, as well as its control of the institutions of the state – parliament, senate, and the judiciary – are virtually absolute. For example, all provincial governors and senior military officers are all RPF loyalists. Of the 74 seats in parliament, 61 are held by RPF party members.
- 3. Sensitivity to Criticism:** The RPF has been able to silence its opponents – real or perceived – through the flow of information into, out of, and about Rwanda. When any aspect of government policy is criticised, the RPF moves quickly to denounce such statements as "revisionist" or "negationist" of their role in stopping the genocide or of the colossal task it faced in rebuilding a society "torn asunder" by genocide. The international community is not immune to such treatment. The RPF continues to exploit the inability/unwillingness of the international community to stop the genocide. The use of "genocide guilt" to control the nature and scope of international donor support has been effectively managed by the RPF.

Relations with Rwanda

International aid to Rwanda has been limited to support for budget planning, poverty reduction, and the health and education sectors. The government of Rwanda has worked with international donors to seek support for the implementation of its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The priorities and targets of Rwanda's PRSP are summarised in the government's Vision 20/20 policy, a policy designed to promote economic development and halve poverty among Rwandans by the year 2020.

Support for the promotion and protection of human rights, for fostering political openness, and for overcoming the emotional trauma that hinders reconciliation efforts are funded by the international community but at the behest of government, and usually to government-sanctioned civil society

organisations. These areas are not a priority for government, and garner little attention in its PRSP.

Canada has been active in Rwanda since 1963, and has traditionally focused its aid on poverty reduction, and support to the education and justice sectors. Since the genocide, our partnership with Rwanda is based on Canada's perceived commitment of the government in building internal stability. Rwanda is currently one of CIDA's 25 priority development partners, and benefits from about CDN\$ 10 million in bi-lateral aid per year for the period 2005 to 2011. CIDA programming focuses on the fight against poverty, rural development, strengthening local governance, environmental protection, promoting gender equality, and support to HIV/AIDS education programmes. Rwanda also benefits from Canada's \$15 million contribution to the Demobilization and Reintegration Program of ex-combatants in the Great Lakes Region.

A Different Way Forward

The international community was, and remains, largely silent on the evolution of post-genocide Rwanda to authoritarian practices and the very real possibility of a return to violence. In the immediate post-genocide period (1994 -1996), worrying drifts of the RPF toward authoritarianism were identified by the international community. However, donors chose to remain silent, concluding that it was too soon to question the good faith and political will of a government that faced the monumental task of reconstructing Rwanda. The continued silence of the international community, Canada included, has allowed the 1994 genocide to become an ideological weapon allowing the RPF to acquire and maintain victim status and, as a perceived form of compensation, to enjoy immunity from criticism of any sort.

Facilitating this silence is the fact that the RPF engaged with donor partners that were not active in Rwanda before the genocide. Donors like the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden are now the main partners of the government of Rwanda, collectively providing more than seventy percent of Rwanda's development assistance. Their knowledge base of Rwanda is low; the new friends of Rwanda are allowing for the re-creation of the conditions of social and political exclusion and authoritarian control that made the 1994 genocide possible.

Canada is one of only a handful of development partners that has been involved in Rwanda since before the genocide and is also Co-Chair of the Group of Friends to the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). This gives Canada an opportunity to quietly engage Rwanda's international partners to continue to support its development agenda while taking the necessary steps to tie continued aid to the protection of human rights, and policies that promote social and political inclusion and democracy.

Strategies for Engaging the International Community

Canada can begin to inform and educate other donors on the dangers, both within Rwanda, and regionally, of turning a blind eye to the present political climate in Rwanda in the following ways:

- 1. Initiate a dialogue among international donors to pressure the RPF on the importance of good governance and its relationship to building sustainable peace:** Engaging the government on the importance of good governance must be done with care, as sensitivity to criticism is a key characteristic of the RPF. Canada occupies a special place in the post-genocide donor community and, as such, is well-situated to initiate and oversee a process of

gently, yet firmly and consistently, critiquing the government's current commitment to good governance, protecting human rights, allowing for an active and vocal civil society, and promoting social and political rights for all Rwandans.

Challenges

International donors have differing levels of involvement in Rwanda. The United Nations, for example, maintains a skeleton staff with limited development programme support, while both the United States and the United Kingdom have increased their development aid to Rwanda. Canada will need to assess the nature of donor relations between the government of Rwanda and each of its international donors to assure the willingness and capacity of individual donors to commit to a concerted policy of action.

Canada may need to commit additional financial and human resources to its Rwanda office to facilitate the creation and maintenance of a network of international donors willing to begin to pressure government. A series of meetings will be necessary to develop the framework in which lobbying of the government of Rwanda can take place.

Canada must work to ensure that it focuses its criticism on why the promotion of good governance is in the long-term interests of the RPF. Certain key areas that are of interest and concern to donors are manipulated for political ends by the RPF but these should be of secondary concern until space is created for healthy and productive dialogue between the international community and the RPF. For example, criticism of the human rights record of the RPF, or of its unwillingness to try its soldiers on allegations of reprisal killings after the genocide must remain off the table.

2. Assure unity of purpose among donors before engaging the government of Rwanda:

There is behind closed doors realisation within the donor community that the government is instituting policies that are detrimental to Rwanda's long-term peace and security. Rather than have each concerned international actor critique government policy, it is preferred to present a unified front on the importance of creating a durable peace for all Rwandans.

Challenges

Allies of the government, including the international donor community, are expected to behave within boundaries of behaviour, as defined by the RPF. This may limit the involvement of some donors, particularly those that are new to Rwanda.

Canada, along with other international donors, must be sensitive to the timing and nature of its criticism. The government has in the past responded to negative criticism with tactics of fear and intimidation. For example, during the 2003 Presidential elections, there were allegations of ballot-box stuffing made by representatives of the European Union. The response of the government was to shut down the boxes in the district in question. Voting was suspended and an armed military presence was introduced. Canada must be aware that such extreme reactions are likely, and that ordinary Rwandan suffer most when such decisions are taken.

Government relations with individual members of the international donor community are carefully monitored. Criticism of government policy by an outsider is unlikely to be tolerated. The government is prepared to cut ties with countries that are critical of reconstruction policies and

programmes, which means that ordinary Rwandans have the most to lose with careless criticism of the government. For example, the government has severed diplomatic ties with France after a French court indicted senior Rwandan government officials, including President Paul Kagame, on allegations of inciting the genocide in downing the plane of then President Habyarimana.

3. Act as Spokesperson on behalf of the international community

Once Canada has laid the necessary groundwork among representatives of the international donor community, it should begin to quietly and cautiously engage the government of Rwanda on the importance of creating a durable peace for all Rwandans.

Challenges

Identification of which members of the Rwandan government would be open and receptive to considering a change of policy in favour of the political and social rights of all Rwandans will be difficult. A quiet lobby will be necessary as will an appropriately timed “pitch” to government on the importance of building a long-term and inclusive peace.

The government of Rwanda is likely to respond that it has introduced good governance, and that it is actively promoting the ideal of “one Rwanda for all Rwandans”. Canada should be prepared to critique both the policy of national unity and reconciliation, as well as Rwanda’s record on good governance as policies that promote the interests of RPF loyalists at the expense of all Rwandans and to highlight the weaknesses in both policies from the perspective of long-term peace and security.

Allegations of being “anti-Tutsi” could be levelled against Canada. As spokesperson for the international donor community, Canada should be prepared with arguments of why a critique of current policy is not anti-Tutsi but is instead a concerned commentary on why the promotion of good governance is in the long-term interests of all Rwandans, and by association, the RPF.

Next Steps

Canada should work with the Group of Friends as well as international donors active in Rwanda to create a non-partisan lobby about what the lack of political openness, and continued social exclusion based on a policy of national unity means for Rwanda’s present and future security.

Canada should focus its critique on the long-term interests of sustainable peace and security, rather than criticise current government practices that are contrary to the promotion of good governance and human rights in Rwanda.

Canada should commit the necessary financial and human resources to developing its role as spokesperson for the international community.