

Individual Lived Experience with Democratisation in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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In July 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) rolled into Kigali, effectively ending the Rwandan genocide of more than 1 million Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu. In assuming power, the political wing of the RPA, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) began the monumental task of rebuilding a society that was torn asunder by genocide. In addition, the genocide resulted in more than two million refugees, over 500,000 internally displaced and the imprisonment, on the charge of committing genocide and other crimes against humanity, of over 130,000.¹ Prospects for a return to normalcy where political, economic and social reconstruction could commence were dim. Even seasoned analysts of politics in Rwanda predicted “yet another cycle of ethnic violence.”² Pessimists saw Rwanda’s descent into genocide as an indicator of how nascent democratisation processes across the African continent could unfold.³

Today, ten years after the genocide, Rwanda is seen by the international community as a success story in Africa – the ability of the government to bring peace and security to a society shattered by genocide has been widely hailed.⁴ Yet Rwanda also illustrates how the language of democracy has been used, paradoxically, to consolidate the power of the ruling party.⁵ At first sight, a democratic system is in place and peace and security reign. The reality in fact is different: the success of the Rwandan government in achieving rapid institutional reconstruction has rested on its stranglehold on information.⁶ The international community engages in wishful thinking in assuming that its support of the government will secure Rwanda’s peace and security.

The Rwandan government is “selling” democracy, closely linked to the concept of national unity, to the Rwandan people as a way of preventing the recurrence of the

¹ Gérard Prunier (1998), *The Rwanda Crisis, 1959 - 1994: A History of a Genocide*, 2nd edition, (Kampala (Uganda): Broadview Press), chapter 1.

² René Lemarchand (1994), “Managing Transition Anarchies: Rwanda, Burundi and South Africa in Comparative Perspective”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(4), p. 583.

³ Robert Kaplan (1997), “Was democracy just a moment?”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 280 (6), pp. 55-80.

⁴ See, for example, Department for International Development (2003), “Rwanda Country Assistance Plan”, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk>, (accessed 19 June 2003); and, United States Agency for International Development (2004), *FY 2003 Annual Report for USAID Rwanda*, Kigali: USAID.

⁵ Filip Reyntjens (2004), “Rwanda, ten years on: From genocide to dictatorship”, *African Affairs*, 103(2), pp. 177-210.

⁶ Johan Pottier (2002), *Re-Imagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the late 20th Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

political, economic and social conditions that led to genocide.⁷ National unity is the official policy that aims to promote peace and security, denounce any written or declared ideas and materials seeking to "disunite" the Rwandan people, educate and assist in building a culture of peace, tolerance and respect for human rights, and monitor government organs, political parties, leaders, and the general population to gauge whether they respect and observe policies of unity and reconciliation. In essence, "national unity" involves the erasure of ethnic identity (Hutu or Tutsi) in a country where genocide was perpetrated on the basis of that identity. It is also a tool that silences any disagreement with the official policies of Rwandan government; in this respect, "national unity" is inherently anti-democratic.

The Rwandan state has capitalized on the international community's collective guilt over its failure to stop the genocide and has achieved virtually unconditional donor support. The Rwandan state is thus able to commandeer the democracy promotion support it receives from the international community. While a few studies explore the relationship between the Rwandan state and society in the context of democracy promotion, none takes the level of analysis down to the lived experience of the individual.⁸ The experience of those Rwandans who survived the genocide is very different from those who returned following years of exile; the experience of those who were left widowed or orphaned by the genocide is very different than those who are accused of acts of genocide and languish in prison more than a decade later. Unfortunately, however, these experiences are filtered through the national unity discourse. My research is building knowledge and general principles about international and national efforts to "promote" democracy in postconflict settings from the perspective of the lived experiences of individuals living in post-genocide Rwanda.

My research then adds a layer of nuanced and contextualised analysis to international democracy promotion efforts in postconflict settings in Africa. The additional dimension of genocide makes Rwanda a compelling case study to explore individual lived experience with democracy promotion. My research analyses the multiplicity of perceptions and identities that crowd the post-genocide landscape in Rwanda and assess the impact on international and national democracy promotion efforts in Rwanda.

⁷ See, for example, the speeches of Rwandan president Kagame: www.gov.rw/president/speeches.

⁸ See, for example, Emmanuel Gasana, Butera Jean-Bosco, Byanafashe Deo and Alice Karekezi, "Rwanda" in Adebayo Adedeji, (ed.) (1999), *Comprehending and Mastering African Conflicts: The Search for Sustainable Peace & Good Governance*, (London & New York: Zed Books), pp. 141-173; and, United States Agency for International Development, Rwanda Country Office, Democracy and Governance Office (2001), *Rwanda Integrated Civil Society Strengthening Project (ICSSOP): Scope of Work*, (Kigali: USAID).