

BOOK REVIEW

The path to genocide in Rwanda: security, opportunity, and authority in an ethnocratic state, by Omar Shahabudin McDoom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, African Studies Book no. 152, 434 pp., hardback, £75.00, US\$99.99, ISBN 9781108491464; e-book: £56.92, US\$80.00, ISBN 9781108870696.

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda has understandably been a widely researched subject. The genocide itself and its judicial aftermath have given rise to scholarship of increased quality and quantity. Under these circumstances one would expect this area of study to fall prey to the law of diminishing returns, but this book proves the opposite.

McDoom addresses two central questions: (i) what are the circumstances that gave rise to the genocide?, and (ii) how did these affect individuals and motivate some, but not others, to kill? On the first question, the book outlines a highly unusual baseline: several socio-demographic and historical peculiarities set Rwanda apart from other African countries. Three macro-political events then set the stage for a ‘perfect storm’: the civil war and the political transition that started in 1990, and the killing of President Juvénal Habyarimana on 6 April 1994. Among the country’s distinctive demographic features, ethnic bipolarity and the shift in ethnic dominance toward the Hutu were a crucial background. Security (the civil war and democratisation), opportunity (democratisation and the assassination of the president) and authority (a strong state) each mattered to make the genocide possible, even though it was not inevitable.

With regard to the question of why people killed, McDoom finds both dispositional (intrinsic to perpetrators) and situational (extrinsic) factors, noting dispositional heterogeneity among perpetrators, the changing over time of individual motivations, the relevance of the diversity of situations, and the importance of social ties. In summary, participation was the result of a mobilisation continuum in which dispositional, situational, and relational factors each mattered. Contrary to what has often been claimed, McDoom believes that the role of the extremist radio station RTLM (‘Radio Machete’) has been overstated, and that local situations mattered more. In terms of numbers, he estimates that around 400,000 – or nearly one in four Hutu males aged 15 to 54 – participated in the genocide, and that between 491,000 and 522,000 Tutsi were murdered.

These observations are based on various and wide-ranging sets of data: a survey of 294 perpetrators, non-perpetrators and survivors, in addition to 44 more detailed interviews; quantitative data of all Rwandan *communes* based on several sources probed for reliability; a census conducted by the author in one administrative sector; demographic data of 160 individuals identified as organisers and leaders during the genocide; a content analysis of RTLM; and other data from sources like the transitional justice mechanisms of the neo-traditional *gacaca* jurisdictions and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, as well as archives. McDoom has achieved a very sophisticated, wide-ranging and complex data collection at the micro, meso and macro levels. These data are exceptionally diverse, often difficult to gather and manage, and their treatment is carefully triangulated.

In the conclusion, McDoom discerns a ‘broader scholarly consensus’ on the following points. (i) Although the colonial legacy was consequential, ethnic stratification already

existed in the precolonial period; (ii) the civil war was a crucial factor, and indeed a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the genocide; (iii) the unusual power of the Rwandan state was an exceptionally strong instrument; and (iv) individual motivation for Rwandans' participation was heterogeneous. While some may disagree that this represents a consensus, McDoom also notes that scholarly disagreement persists on some of his findings. These relate to the importance of Habyarimana's death and the linked issue of advance planning of the genocide; the feasibility of international action to first prevent and later stop the genocide; the impact of the democratisation process; the role of the media; and the number of perpetrators and victims.

In the polarised debate on Rwanda, the author realises the risk of proposing a reading that may not be considered politically correct by some: 'Accusations of genocide denial, minimization, and trivialization are an occupational hazard for researchers in this field' (388). This is true, but McDoom's contribution to understanding the genocide against the Tutsi is seminal, and future scholars of Rwanda, and more broadly of comparative genocide studies, will ignore it at their peril.

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