



# France and Rwanda Sacrifice Truth at the Altar of Reconciliation

Filip Reyntjens | Wednesday, June 9, 2021

In late May, French President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Rwanda with the aim of turning the page on three decades of tortured relations with the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front, or RPF, over France's role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The door to Macron's visit was opened after a French government-sponsored commission found that the country bore "serious and overwhelming" responsibility for the genocide, though it also found that France was not complicit in this crime.

The highlight of Macron's visit was a speech he gave at the genocide memorial in the capital, Kigali, in which he spoke of the need for France to "recognize its part of the suffering it inflicted on the Rwandan people." But ultimately, the visit papered over significant gaps between France and Rwanda in their understanding of this painful historical chapter. It thus missed an opportunity to pursue historical truth and accountability in both countries.

The complicated relationship between France and Rwanda dates back many decades, to decolonization. When Rwanda and two of its neighbors, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, became independent in the early 1960s, France quickly signed cooperation pacts with them. Although these three African countries had been Belgian colonies or trust territories, the agreements they signed with France were similar to the ones Paris established with its own former colonies, including pledges for development aid and military assistance.

Despite being small countries without much economic potential, Rwanda and Burundi were seen by France as interesting partners from a geopolitical point of view, as they bordered Anglophone East Africa. By deepening ties with these countries, France aimed to expand its political and cultural influence in the region.

Relations between France and Rwanda remained mostly uneventful until 1990, when the RPF—at the time a rebel group under the command of current President Paul Kagame, mainly comprising ethnic Tutsi refugees who had fled the country beginning in the 1960s—launched an attack on Rwanda from neighboring Uganda, marking the beginning of the Rwandan civil war. In early October of that year, and on several later occasions, France sent troops to the country to help then-President Juvenal Habyarimana's government halt the RPF's military advance.



*French President Emmanuel Macron, right, welcomes Rwandan President Paul Kagame, left, at the Elysee Palace, Paris, May 17, 2021 (AP photo by Thibault Camus).*

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A shaky peace agreement was signed in August 1993, but fighting resumed the following April, when a plane carrying Habyarimana and his Burundian counterpart, Cyprien Ntaryamira, was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali, killing all 12 people on board. The assassination touched off the Rwandan genocide, in which members of the majority Hutu ethnic group slaughtered over half a million Tutsis.

Throughout, France continued to support Rwanda's Hutu-led regime with recognition and diplomatic cover. In mid-June, France launched the controversial Operation Turquoise, a military intervention conducted with the approval of the United Nations Security Council. Although the operation's official mission was exclusively humanitarian, it may also have aimed at halting the RPF advance. The RPF nevertheless captured Kigali in July, and it occupied the entire country after French troops left at the end of August.

As France had sided with the RPF's adversary during the civil war, it is not surprising that relations with the new Rwandan regime were less than cordial. The simmering tensions boiled over in 2006, when a French investigating judge, Jean-Louis Bruguiere, accused Kagame of masterminding the 1994 attack (<https://www.lanuitrwandaise.org/IMG/pdf/ordonnance-bruguiere.pdf>) on Habyarimana's plane and issued international arrest warrants against nine senior RPF figures. Rwanda immediately broke off diplomatic relations with France and created two of its own "independent commissions of inquiry," which released reports in 2008 and 2010, the first claiming that France had been actively complicit in the genocide and the second that Habyarimana's plane was not taken down by the RPF, as claimed by Bruguiere, but by Hutu extremists close to Habyarimana.

In 2010, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Kigali. He acknowledged that France had committed "mistakes" in 1994 (<https://www.france24.com/en/20100225-sarkozy-admits-french-%E2%80%98mistakes%E2%80%99-1994-genocide>), but stopped short of apologizing. The visit came on the heels of a decision to restore diplomatic relations, but ties between the two countries remained tense. In 2015, Rwanda refused to accredit a new French ambassador in protest against new steps taken by the French judicial inquiry on the 1994 plane attack.

***The gap between what Macron declared in Kigali and what the Rwandan regime expected him to say shows that there is still no common reading of the genocide in Rwanda.***

There was some progress in 2018, when the French investigating judges who succeeded Bruguiere decided not to indict the RPF suspects of the plane attack, a decision confirmed in 2020 by the Court of Appeal of Paris. The court's decision, taken because of a "lack of sufficiently compelling evidence," was met with relief in Kigali. In the meantime, Macron, elected president in 2017, was keen to normalize relations with Rwanda, as the ongoing tensions stood in the way of making France relevant again in Africa's Great Lakes region. Solving this issue would also allow him to mark a break with France's old approach there and elsewhere in Africa.

In October 2018, Rwandan Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo was elected—with active French support—as

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Felicien Kabuga, a prominent genocide suspect, was arrested in France last year after a two-decade search, Macron again promised that France would not be a safe haven for those who carried out the genocide.

In April 2019, Macron established a fact-finding commission to study the French archives and report on the country's role in the genocide of the Tutsi. The commission, led by the historian Vincent Duclert, released its report in March this year, concluding that France carried “heavy and overwhelming responsibilities,” ([https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/279186\\_0.pdf](https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/279186_0.pdf)) but ruling out its complicity in the genocide. The Rwandan government again released its own dueling commission report, this time assembled by the American law firm Levy Firestone Muse LLP. The “Muse Report” asserted greater French culpability (<https://www.gov.rw/musereport>), stating that the Duclert Commission had erred in concluding that Paris “remained blind” to the looming genocide. Still, Kagame praised the Duclert report (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/rwandas-kagame-says-relations-are-mend-with-france-2021-05-17/>), calling it “a big step forward” during his own visit to France last month.

During Macron's speech at the Gisozi genocide memorial site in Kigali, he stuck to the script of the Duclert report, acknowledging France's political responsibility and expressing hope of forgiveness from the survivors. But he offered no apologies (<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/05/27/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-depuis-le-memorial-du-genocide-perpetre-contre-les-tutsis-en-1994>), denied any complicity in the genocide and defended the role of the French army, thus ignoring claims made for many years by the Rwandan regime.

In his public remarks, Kagame did not seem to mind, thanking Macron for “telling the truth.” Like Macron, Kagame has much to gain from burying the hatchet. Rwanda's relations with countries that had been solid allies in the past—the U.S. and the U.K. in particular—have soured in recent years, as they increasingly expressed concern over Rwanda's human rights record and democratic credentials, and publicly voiced disagreement with Kigali's official genocide narrative. Kagame also hoped better relations with France would finally lay to rest the thorny issue of the plane attack, while paving the way for the extradition to Rwanda or prosecution in France of genocide suspects living there.

However, the leader of the Rwandan genocide survivors' organization, Ibuka, expressed disappointment that Macron had not apologized. The French NGO *Survie*, which has been consistently critical of France's role in Rwanda, had a similar reaction. Francois Graner, a researcher with the group, praised the historic symbolism of the speech, but said Macron had used ([https://www.rtbef.be/info/monde/detail\\_emmanuel-macron-a-kigali-un-discours-puissant-avec-une-signification-particuliere-selon-le-president-rwandais-paul-kagame?id=10770337](https://www.rtbef.be/info/monde/detail_emmanuel-macron-a-kigali-un-discours-puissant-avec-une-signification-particuliere-selon-le-president-rwandais-paul-kagame?id=10770337)) “very calibrated words in order to whitewash French diplomacy, the army and French politics, refuted accusations of complicity and remained vague on France's unacceptable actions.”

On the other hand, Macron was also very careful not to contradict a single tenet of the RPF's narrative of the genocide and avoided uttering even a moderate note of criticism regarding Rwanda's brutal suppression of dissent and human rights abuses under Kagame. Quite to the contrary, during his visit, Macron expressed full support for Kagame. He may have thus unwittingly committed the same error that former President Francois Mitterrand has been blamed for before and during the genocide: supporting a violent dictatorship.

The genocide remains a very polarizing issue in both Rwanda and France, where opposing “camps” have dug in

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probably not satisfy either of these camps, although his position is understandable: He had to walk a fine line, given his desire to reconcile with Rwanda without tilting too heavily toward the RPF's narrative.

The gap between what Macron declared in Kigali and what the Rwandan regime expected him to say shows that there is still no common reading of the genocide in Rwanda and of the nature of bilateral relations. Widely diverging views on these issues are still being expressed in both countries. Historical debates around what actually happened in 1994 will thus continue to rage, and that ambiguity will remain in French-Rwandan relations for the foreseeable future. This is the price both Macron and Kagame appear willing to pay for their game of *realpolitik*, in which truth is sacrificed at the altar of reconciliation.

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