

THE CONVERSATION

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A look back in history provides fresh insights into Rwanda today

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Except during the relatively brief period of colonial rule, Rwanda was, and is, a violent society.

EPA/Olivier Matthys

At first sight, three fundamental ruptures occurred in modern Rwandan history: colonisation, starting at the end of the 19th century; the revolution of 1959-1961 followed by independence in 1962; and the 1994 genocide followed by the seizure of power by the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Of course, these are breaks with the past. But I argue that there are also striking continuities spanning the entire period, from the mid-19th century to the 2010s. These include the concentration of power, intra-regime conflict, the salience of ethnicity, and the nature of the state.

Another characteristic – the pervasiveness of the military institution and of military ethics – disappeared during colonial days and the first two republics. But it resurfaced from 1994 onwards, resuming continuity after a century-long interval.

This *longue durée* view is very illuminating. It offers a better understanding of crucial characteristics of governance in Rwanda today, at home and in the region.

Concentration of power

A first continuity throughout the four periods (precolonial, colonial, post-revolution and post-genocide) is the concentration of power. The precolonial kingdom became increasingly centralised, particularly from the latter part of the 18th century.

In a structure like a pyramid, regional authorities were dependents of the mwami (king). Below them were hill chiefs who tightly controlled the population.

Authoritarian centralisation continued in colonial days in two ways. On the one hand, indirect rule reinforced and stabilised the power of the court and the chiefs. On the other, the Belgian administration was authoritarian and, like the indigenous one, ignored principles like the separation of powers and the rule of law.

The elective principle and checks and balances were introduced less than two years before independence. It's therefore not surprising that, in Rwanda as elsewhere in Africa, the new political elites continued colonial modes of governance. In this respect, there is not much of a break between colonial rule, the *de facto* single-party first republic, the *de jure* single-party second republic and *de facto* single-party regime in post-genocide Rwanda.

Internal strife

Intra-regime conflict is a second continuity. Internal strife within the royal court and among ruling elites was common in precolonial days. Most successions to the throne were contested and led to bitter and often violent infighting, and even to civil war. Regime infighting resumed after independence. The gradual narrowing of the ruling party's power base through the elimination of important constituencies eventually led to the downfall of the first republic.

A similar phenomenon occurred under the second republic. A number of regime leaders were arrested in 1980. Fearing a similar fate, others fled the country.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front has also fallen prey to intense struggle. This pitted factions against each other from the first days of the invasion. This evolution became more pronounced after 2000 and

took a radical turn in 2010 when four leading figures who fled published a long diatribe against the regime.

Ethnicity

A third major continuity is the importance of ethnicity, although it has had different political implications depending on the period.

Political ethnicity emerged clearly in the 19th century. The distinction between ethnic groups that earlier referred to political positions and economic and military occupations became institutionalised.

From the 1870s, the awareness of ethnic distinction spread all over the country and led to several revolts. The 1897 insurrection showed that the population was conscious of a great divide between the two ethnic groups.

Colonial rule further institutionalised and rigidified ethnicity. Belgium first entrenched Tutsi rule. However, in the 1950s it switched sides when democratisation and independence came to the fore.

Although there were underlying social, political and economic grievances, the revolution of 1959-1961 took place under an almost exclusively ethnic banner. On assuming power, the Rwandan Patriotic Front set out to pursue a policy of de-ethnicisation. But the denial of ethnicity is an essential element of the hegemonic strategies of the party-dominated elite. The claim that “there are no Hutu or Tutsi, we are all Rwandans now” allows them to hide a Tutsi ethnocracy.

The regime’s narrative merely reflects the public transcript. But the hidden transcript – that of oppressed Hutu and Tutsi – is very different.

The state

A fourth strong continuity lies in the nature of the state which, unlike in much of Africa, is strong and well internalised by citizens.

Rwanda is not a colonial creation, and an ancient state tradition plays an undeniable role in the maintenance of an efficient pyramid-like structure. The Rwandan Leviathan is highly centralised and hierarchical – it reaches every inch of the territory and every citizen.

Echoing the situation in earlier days, a mere two years after the extreme human and material destruction of 1994, the state had been rebuilt, and Rwanda was again administered from top to bottom. Before – as after the genocide – the regimes displayed a strong belief in managing, monitoring, controlling, and mobilising the population. Both showed a strong belief in using the state in projects of economic and social engineering implemented under the stewardship of forward-looking and enlightened leaders.

A final determining continuity is the pervasiveness of the military institution and of warrior ethics and values. What is particularly striking is the re-emergence of this in 1994, after it had virtually

disappeared during colonial days and the two Hutu republics. After that century-long gap, it reappeared almost seamlessly. Beyond the army as an institution, military values are disseminated throughout the entire society by the widespread use of means like *ingando* and *itorero* (re-)education practices.

History as a reference point

Clearly the continuities outweigh the ruptures. Except during the relatively brief period of colonial rule, Rwanda was, and is, a violent society. Throughout the entire period, central political power has been almost absolute. In today's Rwanda, constant references to history, whether factually true or not, are used as a tool of legitimation. The idealised glorification of the precolonial era supports the political objectives and strategies of the current rulers.

Rwanda's history matters in a concrete way. Hence efforts by the Rwandan Patriotic Front to impose and tightly police its narrative. The problem is that the public and the hidden transcripts often don't tally.



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