

Rwanda: Ethnic amnesia as a cover for ethnocracy, and why this is dangerous

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Introduction

In July 1994, at the end of the civil war and after the genocide against the Tutsi, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) seized power. By attacking the country from Uganda in 1990, the organisation aimed at the return to Rwanda of Tutsi refugees, hundreds of thousands of whom had fled the country in several waves since the 1959 “Hutu revolution”, which overthrew a centuries-old Tutsi-dominated monarchy. Since independence in 1962, the country had been ruled by elites of the Hutu ethnic majority (85–90% of the population), while the Tutsi (10–15%), whose elites had previously ruled the country, were politically marginalised.

After the takeover, the RPF erased references to ethnic belonging. Rwandans are no longer Hutu, Tutsi or Twa but Rwandan, as underscored in the campaign *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (“I am Rwandan”). This choice of ethnic amnesia (Lemarchand, 1992) was understandable in light of the fact that being identified as Tutsi during the genocide meant near-certain death. However, this policy also hides less benign purposes that bear a resemblance to pre-1959 Rwanda and Burundi in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Rwanda, before the revolution, the royal court and nearly all functions in the “indigenous” political, administrative and judicial system were occupied by Tutsi; for instance, all 45 chiefs and 549 out of 559 sub-chiefs were Tutsi. When this situation was increasingly challenged by emerging Hutu leaders from the mid-1950s, it became necessary for the Tutsi elites to stress Rwanda’s “centuries-old national unity” and deny the reality of ethnic discrimination. Ethnocratic rule attempted to hide itself under the guise of an absence of ethnicity, or at least its visible face. Likewise in Burundi, a country with a similar ethnic layout, references to ethnicity were outlawed, particularly under the rule of then president Jean-Baptiste Bagaza,

while Tutsi elites heavily dominated the public and private sectors. Proxies were used to identify ethnic belonging in schools, and Hutu were discriminated against in national exams (Iwacu, 2013; Dunlop, 2021).¹

The data

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Rwanda today. As will be seen later, this situation is rhetorically represented in exactly the same way as it was in the 1950s. While Tutsi represent 10-15% of the population, their elites occupy a disproportionate share of state and other functions. This paper demonstrates this empirically.

With the help of resource persons inside and outside the country, I have listed 199 major office holders with their ethnic identity. As ethnic profiling is considered highly subversive and contrary to a major tenet of the RPF's narrative, this search has not been without risk for the informants. I am therefore not in a position to identify the resource persons on whom this inventory relies. In a few cases it has been impossible to reliably establish ethnic identity, and therefore I have left these functions ethnically undefined. Also, as this exercise has taken several months to complete and turnover in public office functions tends to be frequent, this inventory does not represent a snapshot of the situation at any given moment. Rather it is the overall picture during 2021, but the numbers involved are high enough to claim that it is representative.

Given the difficulties involved in collecting this information in today's Rwanda, I'm aware that some errors are likely. I have no doubt that these will be exploited by the Rwandan regime and its defenders to discredit the entire exercise. However, even if 10% of the data were wrong, which I doubt, the pattern would remain valid. Finally, the regime will consider this paper guilty of "divisionism" and "genocide ideology", both punishable under Rwandan law. Relatedly, in light of Rwanda's recent history, I must anticipate the claim that publishing ethnic profiles is dangerous. Yet ethnic identities are generally well known; documenting them does not make any difference for the security of individuals. The data on which this presentation relies can be found here: <https://filipreyntjens.jimdofree.com/app/download/17995916296/Rwanda+functions+final+list.pdf?t=1684340040>.

¹ One of Dunlop's informants described some proxies as follows: "If you spoke French, or if your father survived the 1972 killings, [then] you were a Tutsi, but if you were a refugee who spent time in Tanzania or Zaire, spoke only Kirundi or your father had been killed, then in all likelihood you were a Hutu" (Dunlop, 2021, p. 158).

Of the 199 office holders whose ethnic identity was established, 164 are Tutsi and 35 Hutu, about an 82:18% ratio. In light of the demographic situation, this is telling in itself, but a breakdown is even more revealing. The government is the most (internationally) visible institution, and this is also where Tutsi dominance, although still strong, is less outspoken, with 19 Tutsi (63.3%) against 11 Hutu. I have also surveyed the ministries' permanent secretaries, as they "control" non-RPF non-Tutsi ministers: in all cases but one (the Foreign Ministry), if the minister is Hutu or non-RPF, the permanent secretary is a Tutsi of the RPF. Twelve of them are Tutsi (66.6%), six are Hutu.

At less visible levels, the Tutsi domination is very strong, and in some sectors is close to a monopoly. Thus, 31 out of 36 ambassadors are Tutsi (86%). This dominance is particularly clear as regards the staffing of a number of strategic bodies. At the top level, all senior staff in the Office of the President are Tutsi; in addition they are all former refugees (see below). Among the leading functions in the army and security services, 13 are Tutsi (86.6%) against only two Hutu. In the major parastatals and public agencies, the leading functions are occupied by 24 Tutsi (96%) and only one Hutu.

This phenomenon is also visible in non-state sectors. All major religious denominations are headed by Tutsi, as are all the main national sports federations and media houses. The RPF's strategy of co-opting civil society by forcing non-state entities to accept leaders of its choosing started right after it took power (Longman, 2011). This is an old characteristic of state-society relations in Rwanda. More particularly on state-church relations, Longman (2018) noted that a "cosy relation between church and state and a practice of playing ethnic politics" has characterised Rwanda since Christianity's arrival (p. 57).

This dominance is not only visible in central state, parastate and private institutions, but also at the local level, where it is more commonly experienced by ordinary Rwandans. Among the 29 ethnically identified district mayors, 20 are Tutsi (68.9%) and nine are Hutu. It must be noted that in practice, much of the effective local power is exercised by military officers and intelligence personnel, most if not all Tutsi. These are not included in my statistics.

Ethnocratic rule is not unique to this 2021 snapshot; it has been in the making since the RPF seized power, and has become an increasingly clear feature of Rwandan politics. By mid-2000, according to one survey, of 169 of the most important office holders, 119 (or about 70%) were Tutsi (Reyntjens, 2004, p. 189). Another survey conducted independently from the previous one arrived at similar findings for 2002: of 401 major functions in the state machinery, 252 (about 63%)

were occupied by Tutsi (Gakuzi and Moser, 2003, pp. 27-29, 128-133). These data were confirmed again in 2008, when the US embassy in Kigali analysed 118 senior positions in ministries, parastatals, and regulatory bodies. The review showed that two-thirds of the positions were occupied by Tutsi (US, Kigali Embassy, 2008).

On a long timeline (1996-2016) but based on a more limited number of functions, a survey found Tutsi obtaining an increasing share of (and more powerful) executive positions, combined with an even larger percentage share in the military and police, the judiciary and the provincial level. The study concluded that “contrary to Burundi, one ethnic group controls all major branches of power in Rwanda” (De Roeck et al., 2016, p. 47).

Caveats

Up to now, this paper has calculated ethnic proportions in positions of power, but this binary approach requires some nuance. First, a relevant phenomenon must be noted within the Tutsi component: out of a total of 144 functions occupied by Tutsi whose geographic origins could be established, 106 or 73.6% are former refugees and only 38 are genocide survivors. This would seem to confirm a strong bias in favour of ex-refugees at the expense of survivors, a reality the latter themselves acknowledge and are complaining about.

Second, it is a simplification to talk in terms of “the Tutsi”. Indeed, members of the Tutsi elite who are not considered loyal to the regime have been excluded from power and jailed, assassinated, dumped into poverty, or forced into exile. “The Tutsi” are not a monolithic entity. Intra-elite struggle is an old feature of Rwandan politics, already present in precolonial days. In that sense, there is continuity with previous “Hutu” regimes, when many Hutu were excluded from power and wealth on account of regional favouritism, kinship bonds, mercantile interests, or political considerations.

It must also be noted that the pro-Tutsi bias is not necessarily or exclusively the consequence of ethnic favouritism, but may also be due to nepotism, as was the case under previous regimes. As the RPF leadership is mainly composed of Tutsi former refugees particularly from Uganda, this strong bias may at least in part be explained by this reality. This may also explain the strong presence of ex-refugees having returned from Uganda, but this study has not compiled sufficient data on countries of asylum to arrive at any clear findings on this issue.

A final caveat is that the representational inequality is not necessarily reflected in broader policies that disadvantage Hutu relative to Tutsi. There is no reliable evidence on discrimination against Hutu in areas of more technocratic governance,

such as health and education. On the contrary, it is in the regime's interest, and even necessary for its long-term survival, to extend technocratic development to every Rwandan irrespective of their ethnic belonging.

The government-funded Fonds d'assistance aux rescapés du génocide (FARG – Assistance Fund for Genocide Survivors) offers assistance in areas like health, education and housing. It has helped 100,000 pupils to complete secondary school and 33,000 students graduate from university. It has also funded over two million medical treatments, and built 44,000 houses (Mbonyinshuti, 2020). Yet only Tutsi are considered genocide survivors, while many Hutu have also been victims of political violence, including at the hands of the RPF. They are not assisted, and see this as a form of structural discrimination. Many Hutu recognise ordinary Tutsi victimhood (Chakravarty, 2016, p. 108), but at the same time complain that this difference in treatment affects important aspects of their daily lives. Among ordinary Hutu, for example, Chakravarty (Idem, p. 95) finds “a pattern of fear and resentment toward elite Tutsi, alongside significant remorse and the desire to make amends with ordinary Tutsi”.

The dangers

History shows that ethnocracy by a small minority creates a dangerous situation (see for instance Newbury, 1988). In Rwanda, the intransigence of the Tutsi oligarchy led to the 1959 revolution, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of Tutsi fleeing the country. In the following years this led to the RPF's invasion in 1990, to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, and to disastrous regional wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Burundi, a similar situation caused hundreds of thousands to be killed in 1965, 1972, 1988 and 1993, and a decade-long civil war (1993-2003).

The latest Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (2020) claims that 94.7% of the population regards the country as reconciled (Rwandans like precise figures, as they appear trustworthy and scientific, and therefore “true”) (Republic of Rwanda, 2020). However, research shows that, though ethnicity has been banned from the public discourse, it has become an invisible variable that remains a central factor in Rwandan social identity, and even that the Hutu-Tutsi distinction is more rigid than ever. This reality shows in abundant field research data (see for instance Thomson, 2013).

At both the national and local levels, Hutu know very well that a small Tutsi elite exercises power, and in their mind, Rwanda has reverted to the pre-revolutionary era: “Ordinary Hutu understood the RPF regime as the return of Tutsi rule” (Chakravarty, 2016, p. 318). Political elites may claim to not see ethnic differences,

but most people know better in private. In reality, the previous regime's despised practice of ethnic quotas has been replaced by another de facto quota system that, because it is covert, is even more constraining and frustrating than the old one.

Together with other factors, the awareness of ethnic favouritism contributes to the structural violence prevailing in the country today. Everyday structural violence² – consisting of humiliation, exclusion, resentment and poverty – can act as a springboard for acute physical violence (Thomson, 2019). This concern is not new. Already in 2001, political scientist Mahmood Mamdani underlined the regime's conviction that "Tutsi power is the minimum condition for Tutsi survival". He warned that "the Tutsification of state institutions cannot be an effective guarantee against a repeat of genocidal violence in Rwandan society. If anything, it will keep alive the spectre of yet another round of genocidal violence" (Mamdani, 2001, pp. 271-272).

Likewise, another observer of Rwanda found that, for many of the exiled Tutsi who returned in 1994, "Hutu and Tutsi can't live together on equal terms because, unless the minority keeps the majority in check, Tutsi will always be humiliated or killed" (Smith, 2011). The dangers brought about by ethnocracy have also been observed by the diplomatic community. In 2008, the Kigali US embassy document mentioned earlier, which found that two-thirds of 118 senior positions surveyed were held by Tutsi, concluded that "for all the government's exhortations to Rwandans to abandon ethnic identities (...), the political reality is self-evidently otherwise" and that "if this government is ever to surmount the challenges and divides of Rwandan society, it must begin to share authority with Hutus to a much greater degree than it does now" (US, Kigali Embassy, 2008). If anything, the situation is worse today than it was in 2008. Not two-thirds but more than 80% of functions listed here are now occupied by Tutsi.

The ruling party may believe that its outlawing of ethnic categories has contributed to reconciliation and helped to reduce ethnic animosity. The reality, however, is that many Rwandans feel the government's policy serves to conceal a huge inequality within positions of power and thus adds to ethnic grievances and frustrations. Based on many interviews with ordinary Hutu villagers in 2014, Indian political scientist Anuradha Chakravarty warned of how feelings of discrimination increased the risk of radicalisation among "those (Hutu) who otherwise navigate the middle ground and are not initially radically inclined" (Chakravarty, 2014, p. 235). Likewise, for its part the RPF's approach to public participation is "informed by its distrust and dislike of ethnic Hutu" rooted in the belief that it has "inherited a mostly hostile, mostly

² On structural violence in the lead-up to the 1994 genocide, see Uvin (1998).

Hutu underclass of potential enemies”, though it cannot openly acknowledge this reality (Thomson, 2018, p. 132).

In addition to preparing the ground for new violence, this situation renders the introduction of a democratic polity difficult if not impossible, as free and fair elections on a level playing field would challenge the current ethnic power constellation. Just a couple of years after the RPF’s seizure of power, Mamdani opined that the new political leadership was faced by two options: “The first is the continuation of the civil war, as those defeated in the last round prepare for battle in the next; the second is its termination through a political reconciliation that rejects both victory and defeat and looks for a third and more viable possibility” (Mamdani, 2001, p. 270).

The Rwandan regime has clearly not made this choice. To quote Mamdani again: “Where there is an uneasy coexistence between guilty majorities and fearful minorities, the possibility of a democratic transition is likely to appear more as a threat than a promise to the minorities concerned – why vulnerable minorities tend to fear rather than welcome democracy” (Idem, p. 280). These were also the opposing views at the end of the 1950s. The Tutsi elites wanted immediate independence from Belgium, which would have allowed them to run the country on their terms, while the Hutu revolutionaries claimed “democracy first, independence later”. After its victory, the RPF runs the country on its own terms, and is in a position to resist democratic change and maintain the status quo of ethnocratic rule.

Conclusion

The RPF vigorously and categorically denies the existence of ethnic identity. This denial is an essential element of the hegemonic strategies of small Tutsi elites. Early on, political analysts Jean-Hervé Bradol and Anne Guibert insisted that “to stress the absence of ethnic identities has become a means of masking the monopoly by Tutsi military of political power. In this case, political discourse opposed to ethnicism attempts to hide the domination of society by the self-proclaimed representatives of the Tutsi community” (Bradol and Guibert, 1997, p. 119).

The discourse developed by the RPF is not new. Through a detailed comparison of pre-independence and post-genocide Rwanda, Meghan Laws reveals striking continuities in the rhetoric and ideology of the Tutsi monarchy, chiefs and “indigenous” authorities during the late colonial period and the official discourse of the RPF today. These rhetorical appeals to unity and ethnicity denial serve to conceal power concentration by a small Tutsi elite, and are used in a strategic way to shape regime relations with domestic and international audiences in ways that

reinforce power. Based on revisionist references to Rwanda's precolonial dynastic heritage, they aim at suppressing counter-narratives about the relationship between ethnicity, nationhood and power (Laws, 2021).

While these rhetorical strategies failed to save the Tutsi ethnocracy in the 1950s, more recently, after the genocide, they have contributed to safeguarding authoritarian resilience. The main reason why a similar strategy led to different outcomes in the two cases was the presence in the 1950s of a colonial power that protected the Hutu revolutionaries (Laws, 2021, p. 176). Both Hutu and Tutsi are well aware that no outside force is in place to challenge the current ethnocratic regime. The Tutsi may see their disguised ethnic authoritarianism as a way to avert the risk of a new genocide, but for many Hutu it creates frustration and resentment. Moreover, unlike in the late 1950s, these feelings cannot be vented.

Rwandans are familiar with the official line and can perfectly reproduce it in everyday discourse; they are fully aware of the risks involved in visibly challenging it. But that doesn't mean they believe the rhetoric. In opposition to the public transcript of the powerful, the powerless – most Hutu and even many Tutsi – develop a hidden transcript (Scott, 1992). That hidden transcript, which is kept alive even among mainstream, moderate Hutu, is the opposite of the RPF's rhetoric.³

In light of the country's demographics, in the longer run, ethnic amnesia and ethnocracy are not in the Tutsis' interests. Undercutting Hutu and Tutsi as political identities will not happen so long as the minority monopolises power. On the contrary, what will be needed is a pact where the minority cede full power, and where the majority do not claim full power, and guarantee the minority's political and physical survival. In other words, a democracy that respects every Rwandan's political and civil rights.

The alternative is the creeping continuation of the civil war. Though visible political violence has been relatively absent during the last 20 years, structural violence has remained pervasive in Rwanda. Therefore, the country is just "seeing like a post-conflict state" (Strauss and Waldorf, 2011). Rwandans are often perceived as quiet and resilient people, but they have also in the past shown their capacity for rage. It is anyone's guess how long the lid can be kept on the volcano.

³ Numerous examples of this gap between transcripts can be found in Chakravarty (2016, pp. 110-128).

Biographical Details

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