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From ethnic amnesia to ethnocracy: 80% of Rwanda's top officials are Tutsi

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Despite the state's policy of ignoring ethnicity, most people know their leaders are mostly Tutsi. This research examines the extent of this trend.



President Paul Kagame meeting with opinion leaders in Huye, Rwanda, in February 2019. Credit: Paul Kagame.

After the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in 1994, it erased references to ethnic belonging. People ceased to be Hutu, Tutsi or Twa but became [Rwandan](#), as underscored by the campaign *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (“I am Rwandan”). This policy of ethnic amnesia was understandable. During the genocide, being identified as Tutsi meant near certain death. The new government therefore sought to resolve inter-communal animosity by simply removing references to ethnicity.

Whether or not this worked, one effect of this practice is that it has obscured the disproportionate representation of Tutsi in positions of power today. While Tutsi represent 10-15% of the population, their elites occupy the vast majority of high-level functions. Despite the outlawing of references to ethnicity, this fact is well-known in Rwanda. We recently conducted some research that puts specific figures on the phenomenon.

Before the findings, I should go over some caveats. Firstly, pointing out people’s ethnicities is considered highly subversive in Rwanda and could be considered guilty of “divisionism” or promoting “genocide ideology”, both punishable by law. For this reason, the Rwandan informants involved in this investigation must remain anonymous.

Secondly, there may be some errors in our findings. Despite our best efforts and cautious approach, the dangers involved in collecting information related to ethnicity mean there may be occasional inaccuracies. We did not list four individuals whose backgrounds we were unable to determine confidently, but we cannot rule out that some errors crept in elsewhere. If these exist, the Rwandan government will no doubt point to them to discredit the entire exercise, but even if 10% or 20% of the data were wrong – which we strongly doubt – the overall findings would still be valid.

Finally, this exercise took several months to complete, in which time there would have been some turnover in the personnel we were analysing. This means that the findings represent an overall picture of the situation in 2021 rather than a necessarily fully up-to-date inventory at any particular moment.

The findings

For the [investigation](#), we listed 209 office holders we deemed to be among the most senior in the country. We then attempted to determine their ethnic identities which, in Rwanda, is passed down through the father. Of the 205 senior figures whose backgrounds we could confidently ascertain, 166 were Tutsi and 38 were Hutu.

This is a ratio of 81:19 overall, but different areas revealed variations. 19 (66%) of the 29 members of the national government analysed were Tutsi. But at less visible levels, this trend was more marked. 31 (86%) of 36 ambassadors were Tutsi, as were 13 (86%) of 15 major office holders in the army and security services, and 26 (96%) of 27 top positions in major parastatals and public agencies. All the positions in the senior staff in the Office of the President, the heads of the major religions, and the top roles in the national sports federations and main media houses were held by Tutsi. These trends are found at the local level too, with 20 (70%) of 29 identified district mayors being members of the same ethnic minority.

While the over-representation of Tutsi is clearly significant, it is important not to over-interpret the data. For instance, the ethnic minority is not a monolith. Many Tutsi not considered loyal to the regime have not just been excluded from power, but jailed, assassinated or forced into exile.

It may also be the case that the disproportionate presence of Tutsi in power is a result not merely of ethnic favouritism but nepotism. The RPF leadership is mainly composed of former refugees and most Tutsi in positions of power come from similar backgrounds. Our research found that of 147 Tutsi office holders whose origins we could determine, 106 (72%) are former refugees while 41 (28%) are genocide survivors. This is a meaningful difference and one members of the latter group have acknowledged and complained about.

The dangers

According to the [2020 Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer](#), the levels of “reconciliation” in Rwanda are very high. The government survey suggests that feelings of unity are widespread and that 98.2% of people see themselves as Rwandan before any other identities.

Most available field [research](#), however, suggests the contrary. These findings emphasise that despite the official elimination of ethnic categories, most people know very well that positions of power in Rwanda are dominated by Tutsi office holders. Though banned from the public discourse, ethnicity remains a central factor in Rwandan social identity. Political elites may claim to not see ethnic differences, but most people know better in private.

Together with other factors, this awareness of ethnic favouritism contributes to the structural violence prevailing in the country today. This concern is not new. Already in 2001, Mahmood Mamdani [underlined](#) the regime’s conviction that “Tutsi Power is the minimum condition for Tutsi survival”. In 2008, the US embassy in Kigali found that two-thirds of 118 senior positions were occupied by Tutsi. The [leaked cable](#) warned that “for all the government’s exhortations to Rwandans to abandon ethnic identities...the political reality is self-evidently otherwise”. It continued 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”. If anything, this divide appears to have become more, not less, extreme.

The ruling RPF may believe 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, Anuradha Chakravarty [warned](#) of how feelings of discrimination increased the risk of radicalisation among “those who otherwise navigate the middle ground and are not initially radically inclined”.

This is potentially dangerous. In the 1950s, Rwanda’s Tutsi elites denied ethnic discrimination and stressed the country’s “centuries old national unity” when criticised for dominating positions of power. In neighbouring Burundi in the 1970s and 1980s, those in power similarly [outlawed](#) references to ethnicity in a bid to refute accusations of discrimination. In both instances, elites then opted to cover up and deny ethnic inequalities rather than address them, as Rwanda’s government is doing today. Neither ended well.

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