

**Remembering to Forget:**  
**The Influence of Genocide on Foreign Aid in Rwanda**

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**Abstract**

*Even twenty years later, the memory of Rwanda's genocide continues to shape many aspects of the tiny East African nation's political present in myriad ways. While the dark shadows of tragedy have in some ways spurred on hope for a brighter future leading to great international support for economic development, the memories are also exploited by some to manipulate politics in Rwanda. Since assuming power in 1994, Paul Kagame and the RPF government have endeavored to use the narrative of genocide to their own advantage to illicit greater support, intimidate opposition forces and bully domestic and international critics into submission. This paper outlines the ways in which the narrative of genocide, as told by President Kagame and the RPF, has been used to divert scrutiny and justify widespread political and human rights violations throughout the country all while continuing to prosper under the auspices of unprecedented levels of international development aid.*

**(Key words: Rwanda, genocide, aid, development, narrative)**

When it comes to studies of Rwanda, the past is inescapable. Regardless of context, when discussing this tiny East African nation one must inevitably give proper acknowledgment to the events of 1994. Indeed, the brutal genocide left an indelible mark on the collective conscience of the international community, and even twenty years after the conflict it remains a subject of pivotal importance in the history, present and future of Rwanda. The events are now deeply rooted in the cultural identity of the country and inextricably tied to conceptions of this nation in the world's eyes. To understand Rwanda, therefore, one must understand the genocide. This is true in any context; however, the horrific tragedies of the civil war are particularly pertinent to the study of development in Rwanda. In many ways, the genocide has defined Rwanda's relationship to the international aid community, which has had a significant impact upon the developing nation's prosperity post-conflict. With this in mind, the present explication seeks to examine the ways in which the memory of genocide has influenced levels of foreign aid directed towards Rwanda. Taking a critical analysis of Paul Kagame's regime and numerous allegations of human rights abuses and authoritarianism, it will attempt to explain Rwanda's transformation since 2004 into a "donor darling," with the purpose of determining whether the country deserves its reputation as an African success story or if the memory of genocide has obscured the objectivity of the international aid community.

While the full depth and complexity of events leading up to Rwanda's civil war fall outside the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to briefly summarize a few important

factors that contributed to the outbreak of genocide, particularly the role of the West in inadvertently fomenting conflict. Rwanda's colonial history and its influence upon ethnic divisionism has been exhaustively described by other scholars, but several points bear repeating. Though a great deal of scholarly debate ensued after 1994 in an effort to "explain" the genocide, many such causative arguments fall too far to the extremes. The Belgian colonialists did not manufacture ethnicity or genocide. Similarly, genocide was not an inevitable outcome of deep tribal divides. Rather the truth falls somewhere in the middle. The outbreak of genocide was the result of a culmination of increasing tensions, which though originating in part from a complex tribal and colonial history, were greatly fueled by modern political, social and economic factors. Although three distinct ethnic groups with different historical roots - Hutu, Tutsi and Twa - did exist in Rwanda before the German or Belgian colonial periods and even differentiated themselves to some degree based upon lifestyles,<sup>1</sup> it was not until the racist policies of the Belgian colonial authorities that these divides were cemented along political and socio-economic lines (Uvin, 2001: 78). In an attempt to maintain exploitative control in Rwanda, the Belgian imperialists sought to establish the Tutsi minority as a ruling elite, not only by promoting a myth of "natural superiority," but also by giving preferential access to political offices, education and land-ownership rights (Jefremovas, 1997: 97). Such colonially imposed privileges over nearly half a century resulted in the relatively rapid increase in socio-economic inequality, which left the Hutu majority and Twa people notably disadvantaged and impoverished. Moreover, the colonial discourse, which distinguished rulers and ruled by ethnic identities, left a legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> The Tutsi were traditionally cattle herders, while the Hutu were primarily small scale farmers. These different modes of production contributed not only to a differentiation in lifestyle, culture, and relative prosperity, but also may have been a factor in deepening physiological dissimilarities (e.g. the cattle herding Tutsi diet consisted largely of protein rich milk products, which may have allowed them to tend towards a taller stature, while the agrarian Hutu diet consisted of relatively protein deficient root crops).

establishing political grievances along ethnic lines; a factor that powerfully contributed to the rhetoric of genocide (Newbury, 2012: 51-2). Tribal divides were further institutionalized with the issuance of ethnic identity cards by Belgium's colonial government in 1933.<sup>2</sup>

After decades of rule by a Tutsi minority legitimated by Belgian authorities, the Hutu majority grew increasingly dissatisfied; in large part due to the poor socio-economic position resulting from the colonial system. A major factor in the increasingly unsatisfactory economic conditions was the forced transition from staples-based subsistence farming to cash crop agriculture under aggressive colonial influence. Utilizing the established Tutsi rulers as a means of enforcing policy, large swaths of arable land were transformed into coffee plantations beginning in 1927. Backed by colonial authorities, the Tutsi landholders and influential rulers imposed systems of peasant sharecropping, which forced the majority of Hutu into relationships of dependent cultivators and contributed to their decline into an impoverished agricultural class (Kamola, 2007: 578). By the 1980s, roughly 70% of rural households were dependent on coffee cultivation for their subsistence, while coffee comprised over 80% of the country's total income from exports (Chossudovsky, 1996: 939). Thus, when the global coffee prices declined sharply in the late 1980s, not only did it result in a devastating crash of the national economy, but also millions of primarily Hutu peasants lost a significant portion of their already paltry household incomes. The result was a sweeping rural famine in 1989 and a marked rise in the overall sense of social unrest and dissatisfaction throughout the country (Kamola, 2007: 582).

Even at the time, the international community realized that the situation in Rwanda was growing increasingly worse. In an effort to intervene and help stabilize the economy and political

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<sup>2</sup> When the genocide broke out, the ethnicity inscribed on these cards frequently meant the difference between life and death.

climate, donor countries and development organizations implemented several well-intentioned aid initiatives, which ultimately had negative effects. As global coffee prices continued to fall, Rwanda's export earnings decreased by 50% in a matter of only four years (1987-1991), creating an increasingly desperate economic situation (Andersen, 2000: 443). In an effort to halt this sharp decline and prevent economic collapse, the World Bank and IMF backed by the ardent support of the United States initiated a series of structural adjustment policies beginning in 1990 (Andersen, 2000: 448). The results of these policies were disastrous. Not only did the monetary policies result in a devaluation of the Rwandan Franc by 50%, but also the IMF-imposed austerity measures created extremely negative social consequences, such as drastic reductions in school enrollment following the imposition of school fees in an attempt to cut public spending (Chossudovsky, 1996: 939).<sup>3</sup> The result of such policies was an increasingly dire economic situation, coupled with rising rural poverty and unemployment as well as decreased school enrollment, creating a large number of restless and increasingly dissatisfied citizens.

In accordance, with most post-Cold War development policies the aid assistance offered to Rwanda - even at a time of great economic distress and social unrest - was highly conditional. Many donors used the offer of financial assistance as the metaphorical carrot to motivate compliance with conditionalities often heavy-handedly imposed by the donor. While democratization was a common condition in the development ideology of the time, in Rwanda this particular requisite contributed greatly to the political tension that eventually resulted in the outbreak of genocide. In 1990, under the threat of aid cessation, President Habyarimana begrudgingly allowed for the formation of a multi-party government in Rwanda; however, in

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, some money from the IMF and World Bank loans was directed towards the purchase of agricultural tools including machetes and axes, the surplus made what would soon become the implements of genocide readily available to the populace (Kamola, 2007: 586).

practice the new system did little to increase equal participation or give any appreciable political voice to the Tutsi minority (Andersen, 2000: 449). Instead, the multi-party government in effect gave political legitimacy and a pulpit to radical anti-Tutsi parties. The result was greater political factionalism, increased discord and even stronger institutionalized anti-Tutsi sentiment.

With the 1990 invasion of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) - an organized militant force intent on taking power and composed primarily of Tutsi refugees in Uganda who had fled persecution by the Hutu government in the 1960s - the anti-Tutsi rhetoric gained even more force. In order to build support for his regime and condemn any threats to his power, Habyarimana's regime capitalized on the RPF's ethnic make up to cast all Tutsis as enemies of the state (Jefremovas, 1997: 97).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, allegedly by the RPF, in April of 1994, the embers of anti-Tutsi sentiment quickly burst into genocidal flames. Beginning the following day and continuing for a span of three months, nearly 20% of the Rwandan population was murdered with unparalleled levels of brutality largely by civilian on civilian violence using primitive hand-held weapons such as machetes, axes, hoes and clubs (Olusanya, 2013: 845). While violence was chaotic and at times indiscriminate, occurring along economic and political as well as ethnic lines, Tutsis accounted for the majority of genocide victims, and Hutu primarily as perpetrators.

The unprecedented genocidal violence among citizens did not cease until July of 1994 when the RPF forces, led by Paul Kagame, successfully took control of Kigali and began efforts to restore order. Recovery and reconciliation from such devastating civil war and brutal ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that until 1990, ethnic violence and anti-Tutsi rhetoric did not factor heavily into Habyarimana's regime. It was not until the RPF invasions that the Hutu government began espousing such ethnocentric vitriol and fomenting anti-Tutsi sentiment to such a degree. The rise of anti-Tutsi sentiment in Rwanda, therefore, is an example of a "cumulative radicalization process" rather than simply historically based ethnic tensions reaching their breaking point (Olusanya, 2013: 850-1).

violence, took over ten years and in many ways the scars of conflict are still healing. Hundreds of thousands of Hutu fled the country in fear of retribution, creating refugee problems and contributing to conflicts in several neighboring countries; while nearly one million former refugee Tutsis poured back into Rwanda creating significant land scarcity issues (Hoyweghen, 1999: 354). Despite these seemingly insurmountable barriers, by 2004 the country showed surprising signs of stability, a feat for which the international community took notice and gave great credit to Paul Kagame and his newly established government for its apparent success.

Though in the aftermath of genocide the international community had already returned attention and resources to Rwanda in the guilt-laden hopes of contributing to reconciliation, it was not until relative stability returned in 2004 that donors greatly increased their foreign aid in light of the possibility that Kagame might be capable of maintaining order and even developing the war ravaged nation. Indeed, since 2004 Rwanda has shown great signs of economic progress and demonstrated positive growth among other development indicators. Since 2004 Rwanda's rate of % GDP growth has averaged nearly 8% - one of the highest in the region and indicative of significant overall economic growth (Ansoms, 2012: 428). In the same time period, foreign direct investment increased nearly 20 fold (World Bank, 2013). A testament to international perceptions of the country's stability and the cultivation of a favorable business climate.

Not only has the overall economic prosperity of Rwanda grown significantly in the past decade, but also health outcomes have improved greatly for the overall population. Both mortality rates for children under the age of five and the maternal mortality ratio have decreased by an impressive 50% in just ten years (World Bank, 2013). These enormous gains in health outcomes are in large part due to the government's prioritization of this sector for investment, as

public expenditures on health care (in % of GDP) have also doubled since 2004 (World Bank, 2013). For both the high rate of economic growth and notable improvements to the health system, the international community has embraced Kagame's government as a model for successful development initiatives and good governance in respect to economic progress. As such, increasingly large sums of aid have poured into Rwanda, doubling since 2004 with a high of \$1.2 billion in 2011 (World Bank, 2013). When one considers the relatively small population of the country this figure is quite remarkable. In fact, foreign development assistance accounts for nearly half of Rwanda's annual budget (Pflanz, 2010: 29).

Such substantial levels of foreign aid and the overall designation of Rwanda as a "donor darling" in the eyes of the international community, begs the question of why Rwanda has attained this status and whether or not Kagame's government deserves the praise it receives (Marysse, 2007: 437). While the relatively rapid economic development and health sector improvements are certainly laudable, these metrics tell only a fraction of the story. When it comes to democratization, the autonomy of civil society, human rights and personal freedoms, Paul Kagame's government has received a considerable amount of criticism.

For instance, many scholars and human rights organizations are skeptical of the democratic legitimacy of Paul Kagame's regime, given the shady electoral practices bordering upon those of a dictator (Reyntjens, 2011: 2). Since the second stage of Rwanda's post-genocide political transition and the re-establishment of regular elections, there has been a notable lack of genuine debate or political opposition, and the incumbent government has used coercion, threats, and even violence to help ensure its continued supremacy (Gready, 2010: 639). In both the 2003 and 2008 elections, EU observer missions reported various forms of fraud, including ballot-box



stuffing and intimidation, as well as an overall lack of transparency in the electoral process (Reyntjens, 2011: 11). At times, the RPF government has dealt with political opposition by refusing to acknowledge or legitimate competing parties by denying them entry into the formal political space (Gready, 2010: 639). Although three opposition candidates appeared on the ballot in 2010, there is evidence that they were essentially put forward by the RPF as dummy candidates, a possibility further strengthened by the fact that Paul Kagame attained an improbable 93% of the vote (Reyntjens, 2011: 12 & Pflanz, 2010: 30).

In addition to influencing the electoral process by the aforementioned means, the RPF government also asserts influence over Rwanda's political environment through the strict control of information and by limiting the participation of civil society in the political sphere. The RPF has few qualms about systematically removing journalists, NGOs, and even UN missions that criticize or raise questions about the government and is quick to vehemently reject any negative reports as politicized and subversive (Reyntjens, 2011: 3-5). For instance, in 2005 the Rwandan government responded to a World Bank study focusing on basic rights and the strength of democratic institutions, by seizing and destroying the research data collected over a period of six months on the charge that the study perpetuated "genocide ideology" (Ingelaere, 2010: 50). Similarly, the RPF quickly dismissed a 2006 statement issued by the World Food Programme (WFP) proclaiming a regional famine and requesting urgent humanitarian assistance for 300,000 rural Rwandans, and asserted that the WFP's claims were not only false but also subversive. (Reyntjens, 2011: 22). The willingness of the RPF to deny the existence of a famine and reject offers for humanitarian assistance that would have benefited hundreds of thousands of citizens is

indicative of the extent to which the Rwandan government attempts to maintain control over the image of stability, even at the expense of its own people.

The examples of informational restrictions and manipulation do not stop there. At the national level, the RPF government maintains tight control over news media and public opposition to the regime. During the 2010 presidential elections, Kagame mandated that the only two remaining independent newspapers in Rwanda suspend publication six months and oversaw the arrest of two presidential hopefuls on charges of crimes against the state (Pflanz, 2010: 30).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the RPF government actively inhibits political organizing, particularly for ethnic Hutus, and has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to meet public opposition or criticism to the regime with threats, disappearances, imprisonment or “re-education” in the *ingando* camps, which though meant to be a tool for integrating genocidaires back into society has become a tool for intimidation and political control (Thomson, 2011: 443 & 455).

On an international scale as well, Kagame’s government endeavors to control the representation and image of Rwanda. Despite a perfunctory agreement to undergo “peer review” of its national governmental performance as part of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development in 2003, Rwanda’s self-assessment denied even minor political shortcomings and painted an unabashedly positive image of both governance and human rights (Jordaan, 2006: 336-7). Counter to the self-assessment, the Country Review Mission raised a number of concerns and concluded that Rwanda’s performance in both freedom of expression and democratic

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to forcing both newspapers to cease publication during the election, a prominent reporter for one of the banned publications was murdered shortly after publishing a story online implicating the RPF government’s participation in a political assassination attempt earlier that year. Similarly, the vice-president of one of the few viable opposition parties was murdered during the election year. In both cases, there is considerable suspicion that the killings were politically motivated and that the incumbent RPF government played a significant role in the murders (Pflanz, 2010: 30).

participation were less than satisfactory (Killander, 2008: 59-63). In response, Kagame publicly criticized the review methodology and rejected the findings. Similarly, following the release of the UNDP's 2007 Human Development Report, which called for increased democratization and improved quality of governance in Rwanda, the RPF not only rejected the claims as unfounded, but also responded so violently to the report that they successfully pressured the UNDP into blacklisting their own researcher and withdrawing their findings (Ingelaere, 2010: 48).

In the face of criticism from national and international agencies, even well-respected third-party authorities, Paul Kagame and the government of this tiny East African nation have repeatedly denied the validity and questioned the legitimacy of any points in conflict with the image of stability, democracy, and development that they assert. Even more surprising than the vehemence with which the RPF government rejects claims counter to their preferred narrative, is that time and again the international aid community has capitulated and withdrawn, revised or apologized for statements and reports deemed inappropriate or untrue by Kagame's regime. How is it then, that despite ample evidence that the RPF government has tampered with elections; suppressed free press and free speech; systematically limited political participation; and eliminated opposition through violent means; that Rwanda remains a "donor darling," which receives nearly half of its annual budget from global aid money?

Though surely any number of political, economic and diplomatic factors contribute to the willingness of the international community to turn a blind eye to some aspects of the Rwandan government's questionable behavior, one of the most important aspects to this seemingly inexplicable tendency to look past the RPF's violations of democratic and personal freedoms is Paul Kagame's skillful and calculated manipulation of the memory of genocide. Since assuming

power in 1994, Kagame and the RPF have endeavored to use the historical narratives of genocide to their own advantage and at both the national and international level have been largely successful in dictating the dialogue around the genocide through a variety of means (Ingelaere, 2010: 45). For instance, in 2003 the government explicitly banned any public displays or promotion of “ethnic divisionism” and “genocide ideology” (Thomson, 2011: 442). Since that time, the RPF government has used these broad terms to indict countless individuals both citizens and foreign nationals and as a means of delegitimizing any form of political opposition.

Similarly, despite outlawing the mention of ethnicity among citizens - a policy that is enforced through monitoring and suppression of public speech - the Rwandan government maintains and imposes the official position that only Tutsi are legitimate victims of genocide and only Hutu are considered perpetrators (Thomson, 2011: 442). This narrative carries with it severe implications for ethnic Hutus in regard to their rights and opportunities for political participation. Moreover, by outlawing discussions of ethnicity, the law has removed any recourse for ethnic Hutu to discuss the means of oppression and system of structural violence that ensure their continued oppression. As evidence of the imbalanced treatment and political exclusion of ethnic Hutu in the post-genocide period, ethnic Tutsis hold as much as 70% of the most important political offices, despite accounting for only 10% of the overall population (Reyntjens, 2004: 188-9). It is also significant that these same political elites are primarily ex-refugee Tutsis who were born and raised in Uganda or other bordering countries, and as such constitute a demographic that is very different and relatively far removed from the majority of Rwandans (Ansoms, 2009: 296). The homogenization of political authority and suppression of internal

opposition has, therefore, allowed the RPF to construct a consistent and unified narrative of genocide, which it imposes upon both the national and international stage.

One of the most powerful voices in the dialogue of genocide is Paul Kagame himself. As the leader of the RPF forces that took power and effectively put an end to violence directed primarily against ethnic Tutsis, Paul Kagame's victory gave him the unique opportunity to lionize himself as both a victim and saviour of the genocide simultaneously (Glover, 2010: 98). Given the abject horror of the global community at the brutal events and the West's guilt-laden desire to atone for its failure to intervene, the power of this status should not be underestimated. In the eyes of the international community, Paul Kagame is uniquely positioned as the face of both the sympathetic victim of a tragedy the West would prefer to forget, and the messianic hero who brought hope and stability to a war torn and seemingly irreparable state. To his credit, Kagame plays both roles to their utmost effect and influence.

The result of Paul Kagame and his RPF government's skillful manipulation of global sentiments is a leniency granted towards few other countries in regards to authoritarian policies, a lack of democratic accountability, and human rights violations as considerations for development assistance. In this sense, many donor agencies and countries fail to critically evaluate the quality of Rwanda's leadership or question the wisdom of continued assistance (Reyntjens, 2011: 2). Though Kagame's government is widely praised for its success in stimulating economic growth and ensuring stability, a closer and more critical look would reveal that the development progress is not so uniformly positive.

For example, despite an exceptionally high % GDP growth rate, absolute poverty and inequality has actually grown since 2002 (Ingelaere, 2010: 46).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the conviction of the RPF government to stimulate industrial growth and move away from small-scale agriculture has largely resulted in an imbalanced form of economic development, which concentrates the majority of gains in the hands of a small urban elite and leaves the majority of rural farmers far behind (Ansoms & Rostagno, 2012: 428). Similarly, environmental policies, such as a ban on baking mud bricks through traditional fuel intensive means gives preference to the small wealthy elite that can invest in capital for modern kilns while making a traditional means of rural livelihood illegal (Ansoms, 2009: 299 & 304). The results of such aggressive development policies is that overall growth as measured by % GDP and other aggregate metrics may continue to rise, but at the expense of increasing poverty and inequality for the rural majority.

In light of pro-growth policies that neglect its rural population as permissible casualties of progress; a political climate that excludes the ethnic majority; and a president that maintains his regime's hegemony through violence, oppression and coercion; how then does Rwanda continue to receive praise as an African success story and model for development? The present explication has shown that not only do the frequently referenced markers of developmental success fail to capture the full story of the past decade, but also that Paul Kagame's government has significant shortcomings in regard to quality of democracy and governance as well as individual freedoms and human rights. An objective look at the RPF's behaviors over the past decade indicate the actions of a government closer to authoritarianism than democracy. With offenses including election tinkering; political exclusion; violent oppression of opposition; and

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<sup>6</sup> Between 2001 and 2006, absolute poverty -- that is, the total number of people living below the national poverty line -- increased from 4.82 to 5.38 million. IN the same period, inequality as measured by the Gini Coefficient increased from .47 to .51 (Ansoms, 2009: 290).

strict control over information; there is little doubt that the RPF government has violated many of the commonly accepted tenets of good governance and basic principles of democracy.

The fact that Rwanda continues to receive such substantial levels of aid, indicates that either donor countries are ignorant of these flagrant violations or that these failures are somehow deemed permissible. The unique case of Rwanda's tragic history and the willingness of Paul Kagame to not only manipulate the narrative of events but also capitalize on the suffering of millions to strengthen his own political position suggests that the history of genocide significantly influences the sentiment of the global aid community. Indeed, while similar breaches in democracy and human rights could be enough to cease or decrease aid, Rwanda has seen few to no repercussions for its government's disregard for democratic principles (Reyntjens, 2011: 2-5). What relatively minor censure is lodged against the RPF, is quickly and aggressively rejected with such vehemence that even well-regarded multilateral aid agencies and much more politically powerful countries are quick to back down from conflict and even retract criticisms.

The most powerful and frequently utilized weapons of the RPF government against both international censure and national dissent are accusations of fomenting divisionism, promoting genocide ideology, and threatening the peace and stability of Rwanda (Reyntjens, 2011: 8-10). Indeed, through a system of vague laws and harsh punishments against activities that might destabilize the state, and a tight control over the legitimate political space, there is little opportunity for opposition at the national level. Moreover, elaborate emotional public performances memorializing the genocide according to a single state-mandated narrative, and frequent borderline combative public statements from President Kagame directed at the international community regarding the need for unquestioned state authority and the continued

necessity of suppressing free press and speech in the interest of stability, leaves little space for the global community to question the regime without facing accusations of threatening ethnic unity or disrespecting the tragedies of the past (Pflanz, 2010: 29-30 & Thomson, 2011: 442).

Few events of the modern era rival the gruesome and tragic story of the Rwandan genocide. While the memory of such violence should serve as a testament to the great suffering it can bring, living in the shadow of the past can prevent the development of a brighter future. Although Paul Kagame and the RPF government have a right to their cultural and national heritage, no single group owns the narrative of history or has the right to use the suffering of others as a tool for political gains. Given the undemocratic practices of Kagame's regime and repeated breaches of good governance, the international aid community should take a more objective look at the policies of the current administration and reconsider if it merits the continued provision of such high levels of foreign aid. If development assistance for Rwanda is to be based solely on merit, perhaps the international aid community must first remember that to move on, sometimes it is important to forget rather than dwell upon the past.



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