Part I

Creating What You Are Afraid of: The Rwandan Patriotic Front’s Transitional Justice Program

There is a group of leaders who have their own project for society, and they want you to join into this project. If you fall outside, they are afraid that you will go in a different direction. There is also a visceral reaction that if you leave these lines that they have set, it could lead us into what happened before. … But you create what you are afraid of.

– Rwandan Civil Society Leader, 2002

Introduction to Part I: The RPF as a Janus-Faced Movement

Two widely divergent images have emerged of post-genocide Rwanda and the party that has dominated Rwandan politics since 1994. Development experts praise the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s efficiency, resistance to corruption, and commitment to economic growth. Many diplomats praise the RPF for promoting national unity, advocating reconciliation rather than revenge, and seeking to eliminate the ethnic differences that have divided the country. The seriousness of purpose of leaders impresses outside observers. For much of the world, the RPF represents a model of good governance in the aftermath of a terrible disaster, not only bringing order and economic development but also altruistically promoting forgiveness and reconciliation in the face of horrific violence. Journalist


Stephen Kinzer, for example, contrasts Rwanda with Somalia and contends that against expectations, Rwanda has become peaceful and unified:

Rwanda … rebelled against its destiny. It has recovered from civil war and genocide more fully than anyone imagined possible and is united, stable, and at peace. Its leaders are boundlessly ambitious. Rwandans are bubbling over with a sense of unlimited possibility. Outsiders, drawn by the chance to help transform a resurgent nation, are streaming in … Rwanda is not being torn apart by civil war, like Somalia, or by criminal violence, like Kenya. Instead, it is stable, its people groping their way toward modernity and liberation.  

Paul Farmer, whose organization Partners in Health has worked closely with the government to implement health sector reforms, is a particularly strong defender of the regime:

Today Rwanda has been transformed. Mass violence has not recurred within the country’s borders, and its gross domestic product has more than tripled over the past decade. Growth has been less uneven than in other countries in the region, partly because both local and national governments have made equity and human development guiding principles of recovery. Recent studies suggest that more than one million Rwandans were lifted out of poverty between 2005 and 2010, as the proportion of the population living below the poverty line dropped from 77.8% in 1994 to 58.9% in 2000 and 44.9% in 2010. Life expectancy climbed from 28 years in 1994 to 56 years in 2012. It is the only country in sub-Saharan Africa on track to meet most of the millennium development goals by 2015. Although metrics for equity are disputed, it is an increasingly well known fact that Rwanda today has the highest proportion of female civil servants in the world.  

For Kinzer, Farmer, and many others, the RPF’s success at building peace and stability is due largely to the influence of the RPF leader, President Paul Kagame. Kinzer writes that, “President Kagame … has accomplished something truly remarkable. The contrast between where Rwanda is today and where most people would have guessed it would be today in the wake of the 1994 genocide is astonishing.”

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5 Ibid, p. 337.
Kagame as a moderate leader who has embraced former adversaries and promoted forgiveness and reconciliation. He cites a genocide survivor referring to her génocidaire neighbors, “It’s because of the President that they don’t kill. Forgiveness came from a Presidential order. If he were not there, we would all be killed.” 6 Both Kinzer and Gourevitch praise Kagame’s deft management of the economy, having attracted considerable foreign investment, aggressively fought corruption, and brought about impressive economic growth. Kinzer writes that, “Kagame has set out to do something that has never been done before: pull an African country from misery to prosperity in the space of a generation.” 7

In contrast, among human rights activists and many scholars of Rwanda, a much less sanguine perspective on post-genocide Rwanda prevails. 8 Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, who raised the alarm early about the 1994 genocide, also denounced human rights abuses perpetrated by the RPF as it fought its way to power and sought to establish authority, and both organizations have remained consistent critics of the post-genocide regime. 9 A growing body of academic publications based on recent fieldwork conducted in Rwanda portrays a heavy-handed state that uses fines, arrests, and other forms of intimidation to force the population into mobilizing for government programs and implementing far-reaching plans to restructure social relations, economic activity, political engagement, and even personal hygiene. 10 Long-time Rwanda observer Filip Reyntjens argues that, “The [RPF] regime

seeks full control over people and space: Rwanda is an army with a state, rather than a state with an army.”  

The contrast between these two perspectives of post-genocide Rwanda could hardly be more stark, yet ample evidence exists to support each. Any reasonable observer of Rwanda cannot ignore the numerous accomplishments of the post-genocide regime. The RPF-led government has consistently employed a discourse of national unity, justice, and reconciliation. Since the suppression of the uprising in northwestern Rwanda in 1998, the country has been free from large-scale violence. Strong promotion of women’s rights has given Rwanda the distinction of having the highest percentage of women in parliament of any country in the world, the first where women are a majority of members of parliament. The regime has placed considerable emphasis on education, leading to a proliferation of schools at all levels, raising the elementary school completion rate from 51.1 percent in 1991 to 79.0 percent in 2011 and the adult literacy rate from 58 percent in 1991 to 70 percent in 2008. Investments in healthcare have helped to lower child malnutrition from 24.3 percent in 1991 to 18.0 percent in 2008.

Shortly after Kagame became president in 2000, the government released Rwanda Vision 2020, an ambitious economic program “to raise the people of Rwanda out of poverty and transform the country into a middle-income economy” in twenty years. The government has since aggressively promoted policies to attract international investment, modernizing the rural economy and promoting industrial development. Numerous international organizations and corporations have contributed to Rwanda's economic growth, with foreign direct investment rising steadily in recent years. The government has also actively sought to extend its influence abroad, developing successful foreign policy strategies and engaging constructively in multilateral fora.


investment, and the economy has enjoyed annual gross domestic product growth rates as high as 11.2 percent. The government has thoroughly embraced neo-liberal economic reforms, privatizing numerous public assets and adopting extensive regulatory reforms to ease international investment. In 2010, the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report ranked Rwanda as having the third lowest burden of government regulation and the twelfth most efficient government overall.\(^{15}\) Rwanda’s ranking in Transparency International’s annual Corruption Perceptions Index was 44th in 2015, among the best in Africa and far ahead of any other East African state.\(^{16}\) Rwanda was welcomed into the East African Community in 2007 and the British Commonwealth in 2009.\(^{17}\)

Yet strong evidence also indicates that extensive human rights abuses have simultaneously occurred. The RPF used widespread violence to establish its initial authority, perpetrating massacres, summary executions, and numerous arbitrary arrests in its first years in power, and carrying out a bloody counter-insurgency operation in the northwest in 1997–1998.\(^{18}\) Since 2000, even as the RPF has gained an international reputation for competence and moderation, the leadership has used more subtle means to maintain its power, tightly constraining public space and tolerating little dissent, while coercing the general population to implement sweeping social changes.\(^{19}\) Security forces regularly harassed, arrested, and even killed civil society activists, journalists, and politicians who dared to criticize the government, while average Rwandans who objected to the apparently arbitrary imposition of onerous new regulations or resisted the regime’s constant mobilization programs (such as those for villagization, constitutional reform, elections, gacaca, public works, and land reform) also faced punishment. Beginning with the First Congo War in 1996, while the level of active violence declined inside Rwanda, the RPF carried out massive attacks on civilians in the


\(^{19}\) Chakravarty, Investing in Authoritarian Rule, contends that “Although its tight grip in the early transition years depended on the use of blatant force through killings and arbitrary arrests, the RPF has entrenched itself over the years, becoming thoroughly able to project power at the grassroots without over-reliance on these tools of repression” (p. 2).
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where violence and instability continue to reverberate.\(^{20}\)

In this first part of the book, I explore an aspect of public policy that reveals the Janus-faced nature of RPF rule – transitional justice. I review the government’s diverse programs to shape popular understandings of Rwanda’s past and thus promote a unified national identity. The regime has developed a narrative that emphasizes the historic unity of the Rwandan people, highlights the centrality of the 1994 genocide, and portrays the RPF in a favorable light. It has promoted these ideas through education and propaganda, trials, political reform, and memorialization and commemoration. While the RPF has created these programs in part to promote justice, accountability, and reconciliation, their implementation has also been influenced by the leadership’s suspicion of the Rwandan population and the belief in the absolute necessity that they stay in power. As I explore in the second section of the book, the contradictions in these motivations ultimately undermine their ability to transform Rwandan society.