

How can one best explain the Rwandan genocide?

Written by anon

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The Rwandan genocide began on the dawn of 7th April 1994 after a plane crash which killed both the Rwandan and Burundian Presidents. It lasted for a hundred days in which many people were slaughtered by fellow Rwandans (Power 2001). The world media has often portrayed the genocide as an ancient tribal conflict between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi, implying that it is a phenomenon more specific to African people (Lemarchand 1995). This idea is in line with theories of conflict such as the Huntington's (1993) Clash of Civilizations, which in brief predicts that after the Cold War a new era of ethnic clashes would emerge. This however, is a weak and damaging understanding of the genocide which took place in Rwanda. By dismissing the conflict as "tribal", one not only makes offensive assumptions of people within Rwanda, but it also enables analysts to dismiss a range of factors that shed the genocide in a new light.

Some academics, such as Prunier (1995), take a more primordial explanation of the genocide, claiming that it unfolded as a result of pre-colonial and colonial history, leading to built up ethnic tensions that eventually broke out in 1994. However, this interpretation does not place enough emphasis on the more recent political motives of the Habyarimana regime.

It is evident that the genocide is extremely complicated and that many factors need to be considered. Many academics have reached a consensus that the central cause of the genocide is clear: it was the result of an over-powerful government and regional elite attempting to maintain their hold on power by creating ethnic tensions (Uvin 1997; Newsbury 1995). We can see that in the early 1990s the government faced three key threats to its power; a growing regional internal discontent, the 1990 Rwandan Patriotic Front invasion, and finally growing international pressure for power sharing (Lemarchand 1995). These pressures were in the context of a severe economic crisis (Hintjens 1999). As a reaction to this challenge the government took significant steps to intensify ethnic hatred and was overtly involved in provoking and carrying out the genocide (Uvin 1997; Newsbury 1995).

Although this factor is central to its explanation, alone it cannot explain the genocide. The government's plot was only able to be carried out because of other complementary factors such as the impact of events in Burundi (Hintjens; Lemarchand 1998); and the remarkable failure of the international community (Power 2001).

The influence of pre-colonial and colonial periods on the genocide has been questionable. In Rwanda there are believed to be three ethnic groups, the majority Hutu, and minorities Tutsi and Twa. These three groups are very closely intertwined and their exact roots are not factually clear. It is believed that in pre-colonial era there was a Tutsi monarchy. Later the German and Belgium colonizers intensified ethnic identity through policies (Hintjens 1999). These tensions of ethnic divide and colonial domination resulted in the 1959 revolution where power was taken by those of a Hutu ethnicity, followed by killings of many Tutsi's, which provoked a mass flow of Tutsi refugees to neighbouring countries (Hintjens 1999).

Primordial interpretations would claim the importance of the process of history building these ongoing identities and leading up to the genocide (Prunier 1995). However, whilst these historical events are important, they cannot be seen as an explanation in themselves (Newsbury 1995). What is more important is looking at the interpretation of these events, asking why they were maintained and how they were revived and manipulated to justify the dominance of a small northern elite (Lemarchand 1995). It is important not to overemphasise that the conflict was "ethnic", as this will

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distract from the fact that there were important inter-Hutu tensions (Newsbury 1995).

Since the 1973 coup d'état which brought President Juvenal Habyarimana into power, efforts were made to take power away from central Hutu (previously represented by Gregoire Kayibanda under the First Republic), and concentrate it further into the north western area. Under both republics southern Hutu were discriminated against along with the Tutsi, then under the second republic the central Hutu were also discriminated. The Habyarimana regime often carried out political assassinations to prevent opposition from other regions (Newsbury 1995), positions in office were reserved for the northern elite and significant investments were made in northern regions, whilst little investment was put into central and southern regions (Uvin 1997). In this context, a strong group emerged; akazu ("little house" included key figures such as Habyarimana's wife and her relatives), which had a strong hold on the president's power of patronage (Hintjens 1999).

This history of the concentration of power has been justified by both republics, by maintaining ethnic awareness. The first and second republic have justified its power by recalling on the "social revolution" (Uvin 1997 p96) or the "Bahima Conspiracy" (Hintjens p265), which reinforced the claim that Rwanda belonged to Hutu people, and the government was containing the once dominant Tutsi who are not true Africans but Ethiopian descendents and who would, if given the chance take power and dominate once again. A quota system was also put in place to discriminate against Tutsis, however evidently its concern was not to disadvantage Tutsi's (as it was only partially implemented and also discriminated southern Hutu) but to act as a reminder that Tutsi's are separate from Hutu. Similarly ID cards which were introduced by colonial powers were also maintained up until the 1994. As Benedict Anderson's (Uvin 1997) theory of "imagined communities" explains, racism "justifies...domestic repression and domination" (Uvin 1997 p99). Indeed the history of Rwanda's over powerful government highlights a pattern; in normal times ethnic awareness was simply maintained to justify a concentration of power, however in times of crisis it was intensified and used for scapegoating. This can be seen when the first republic faced a challenge to power in 1972-3, and it can also be seen in the years leading up to the 1994 genocide, as challenges to power emerged (Uvin 1997).

In the early 1990s, increasingly intense economic crisis, led to strong internal discontent, and the call for multi-party politics (Hintjens 1999). When the reforms of the 1991 were implemented opposition parties formed from the South and Central regions against the ruling Mouvement National pour la Revolution et le Developpement (MRND). Among these were Parti Liberal (PL), the Parti Social Democrate (PSD) and Mouvement Democratique Republicain (MDR) (Lemarchand 1995). In 1992 the Habyarimana regime was pressured to include major opposition parties in the government, including giving the role of prime minister to a member of the MDR (Newsbury 1995).

In October 1990 the RPF invaded Rwanda from Uganda beginning a civil war, although they were contained they continued to occupy as small region in the north east, making their threat to the government's power permanent (Newsbury 1995). The MRND and its associates also feared that the RPF could gain potential allies from the moderate Hutus (Lemarchand 1995). International pressure to democratise by implementing power-sharing led to the Arusha Accords of 1993, ending the civil war. The Arusha Accords installed a United Nations Peacekeeping force and the core of the agreement was compromise which would involve five cabinet seats, eleven transitional national assembly seats, forty percent of the army, and fifty percent of officer corps consisting of RPF members (Lemarchand 1995). These three pressures on government illustrate the true tensions in Rwanda, which were not based in ethnicity. The actions carried out by government to maintain power throw light on how ethnicity was used as a tool and later led to genocide.

The government's reaction to these challenges was to create a "warrant for genocide" (Hintjens 1999 p263); it carried out strategies to create fear of the RPF, and to justify severe action, as for "injustice to be acceptable evidently it must resemble justice" (Hintjens 1999 p263). First it did this by once again reviving the Bahima conspiracy idea, claiming that the RPF was the manifestation of the Tutsi's once again trying to dominate Hutu (Hintjens 1999). This served to associate the RPF with all Tutsis; it was then further extended to include Hutu moderates (Uvin 1997). The demonization of the RPF was a crucial tool in undermining the Arusha Peace Accords, as growing ethnic hatred would eliminate any basis for cooperation (Newsbury 1995).

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Strong extremist's political parties had also formed such as the Commite de Defense de la Revolution, and were openly able to incite hatred. This party was closely linked to the Habyarimana regime and worked to divide opposition parties into either extreme "Hutu party" wings or moderates (Uvin 1997). This contributes to the explanation that an elite group were attempting to maintain power.

Propaganda was key to the government's plot and also revealed its close immediate connection with the genocide. The earlier forms of media propaganda were in 1990 through magazines such as Kangura which published the extremist article, the "ten commandments". The editor of this magazine was Hassan Ngeze, who was from the north western area, Gisenyi, where president Habyarimana was also from (Chalk 1999). However the more crucial propaganda tool of the government was the radio, which was able to reach rural areas of the country not just cities. The privately owned radio station Radio Television Libre dec Mille Collines (RTLM) is well known for its crucial role before, during, soon after the genocide. It contributed to creating the appearance of an ethnic conflict. For example in 1994 it claimed the RPF's ideology was "ethnic purification" and described the CDR as realistic as it "recognized the ethnic problem which had been eating away at Rwanda for centuries" (Chalk 1999 P97). It also used the technique of disinformation, which contributed to fear and confusion as they did not know if RPF were coming to attack them. During the genocide the radio station named those who were to be attacked, either Tutsis or those who were against the government, such as the human rights activist Monique Mujawamariya: "Monique should be crucified in her front yard and eaten by dogs" (Chalk 1999 p97). It also incited hatred against the UN troops. This radio station was strongly linked with the Habyarimana regime and the north western elite. It was founded with the assistance of members of the akazu and by Felicien Kabuga whose daughter was married of the president. It was aided by the staff and facilities of the government owned Radio Rwanda, its studios were connected to electric generators of the presidential palace, and many of its journalists were members of the CRD and the MRND. This close connection contributes significantly to the explanation of the government's role in creating the genocide (Chalk 1999).

As early as 1990 killings had already began to take place carried out by the interahamwe (linked to the CDR), the presidential guard and other authorities. Many Tutsis were killed in years leading up to the genocide (Uvin 1997), for example, in 1990 immediately after the RPF invasion three hundred Tutsi's were killed in Kibilira and in 1993 after the signing of a key power-sharing document three hundred Tutsis were killed in Gisenyi (Newsbury 1995). This state sponsored violence served the purpose of spreading fear, and to some extent normalizing violence, making genocide more possible.

As early as 1992, there was already an "institutional apparatus" (Lemarchand 1995 p10) in place to carry out the genocide. This involved the interlinked levels of the akazu, rural organisers, militia groups (interahamwe and impuzamugambi), and the presidential guard. (Lemarchand 1995). This has led some writers to question whether the MRND extremists were involved in the shooting down of the presidential plane as it would be in line with their motives; the killing of Habyarimana would further diminish the potential of the Arusha Accords, and blaming it on the RPF would be the perfect justification for mass violence, however this can only be speculated as there is no evidence (Lemarchand 1995).

What is a more explicit indication that the genocide was carried out by the government was the efficiency in which the killings began and were carried out. The killing began in Kigali soon after the crash of the plane, and it was apparent that there were pre-prepared lists of the victims. The first targets were Tutsis, moderates of the MDR from the south and central region and opposition leaders. Even the techniques carried out by the killers were done with brutal systematic efficiency (Lemarchand 1995). When explaining the genocide it is undeniable that it was provoked and carried out by the government. However there were other complementary factors.

When explaining the Rwandan genocide it is important to look at the regional context, and more specifically events in Burundi (Hintjens 1999). Both countries are composed of the same ethnic groups. Although its causes of tension are structurally different, to some extent it can be seen as an "inverted mirror" (Hintjens 1999 p276) from 1960-1990, Rwanda was dominated by Hutu elite, Burundi was dominated by Tutsi elite. Tensions in both countries have been closely intertwined, to the extent that discrimination and victimisation against Tutsi in Rwanda has been justified as avenging discrimination and victimization of Hutu by Tutsi in Burundi (Hintjens 1999). The most significant event that contributes to an explanation of the genocide in Rwanda is the killing of the first popularly elected Burundian Hutu

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President, Melchior Ndadaye, in 1993, who was assassinated by the majority Tutsi army. This had several consequences that contributed to the genocide in Rwanda. First, it further emphasized the ethnic divide, implying impossibility for peace and power-sharing under the Arusha Accords. Second the assassination coincidentally coincided with the second RPF invasion, creating an appearance of the confirmation of the Bahima conspiracy (Hentjins 1999). Thirdly, the assassination caused 200,000 panicking, politicised Hutu refugees to flow into Rwanda exactly where it would complement tensions, in the south and central regions, meaning that they were available for political mobilization (Lemarchand 1995).

When explaining how the genocide occurred and continued in Rwanda, a crucial factor is the remarkable failure of the international community to prevent it. Firstly, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was severely limited (Power 2001). The mission itself had a lack of institutional support as Rwanda was not a high international priority. The commander, Romeo Dallaire, had initially requested 5,000 troops, but only received 2,500, the mission only received second hand vehicles the Cambodia mission, troops were badly equipped and medical supplies eventually ran out. Significantly the mission had a very limited mandate which became apparent when the genocide broke out, and it was instructed to "remain neutral" (Power 2001 p12).

The international community had received many warnings that genocide may occur. In January 1994, Dallaire received a warning from an anonymous Hutu official who claimed that Hutu extremists "had been ordered to register all Tutsi in Kigali. He suspects for their extermination" (Power 2001 p6), he even revealed that militia groups were planning to attack Belgium soldiers to ensure their removal. Dallaire requested that his force be allowed to raid Hutu arms caches, but he was forbidden to do so, warned that the UN must avoid another Somalia and ordered to inform president Habyarimana (Power 2001).

The most significant failure of the international community was its withdrawal. First there was the controversial policy of "foreigners first" (Power 2001 p11) which involved countries rescuing their own citizens and no one else. This had a significant impact as victims were sheltering where international citizens were, such as the Ecole Technique Officielle, meaning that when the troops or foreigners had left many were left trapped and were slaughtered. European troops had been sent to collect their citizens, notably "Mass slaughter was happening, and suddenly in Kigali we had the forces we needed to contain it, and maybe even stop it...yet they picked up their people and turned and walked away" (Power 2001 p10).

After the catalyst brutal killing of ten Belgium troops, the international community played into the killer's hands, and left. Initially Belgium had initiated the withdrawal, and lobbied other countries to do the same. The Security Council voted to withdraw and minimize troops to a mere 270, to "show the will of the international community" (Power 2001). On the security council was the United States who had already taken significant steps to avoid being pulled into action (Power 2001), the French who had links with the Habyarimana government and had also supplied weapons (Prunier 1999), and most controversially Rwanda occupied a rotating seat when the decision was made. It is clear there was a strong possibility that the genocide could have been prevented by international intervention, but there was no political will (Power 2001). The inaction of the international community meant that the killers could act with impunity (Lemarchand 1995).

In conclusion, whilst historical legacies and existing prejudices are important, they are not an explanation in and of themselves for the genocide. A more accurate way to explain the genocide is to look at why ethnic tensions were maintained, and how historical events were manipulated. It is clear that the government and the north western elite's aim to keep power are central to the explanation of the genocide. This is evident in the reaction of the government to challenges it faced. Typically the government began to use ethnicity as a political tool (Newsbury 1995). First it demonized the RPF and associated it with all Tutsi and Hutu moderates. This served to create ethnic tension, which would distract people for the real tensions, it also served to lessen any support for the RPF, as well as destroying any base for the Arusha Accords. The government had also allied itself with extremist anti-Tutsi groups such as the CDR (Lemarchand 1995). Propaganda was used as a political tool, and also highlighted this Hutu elite's direct involvement in the genocide (Chalk 1999). This is further emphasised by the role of authorities in killings between 1990-3, leading up to the genocide (Uvin 1997). Some have highlighted how Hutu extremists could have been behind the shooting down of the president's plane (Lemarchand 1995). Indications that the killing had been organized by the

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government can be seen in the fact that the killing happened so efficiently, and opposition figures were some of the first to be killed (Hintjens 1999). All this illustrates how the aim of the government and north western elite to maintain power led to the genocide. However, alone it does not explain it; complementary factors included events in neighbouring Burundi (Hintjens 1999), and the remarkable failure of the international community (Power 2001).

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