

# **Ethnic Politics – A Taboo and a Red Line in Europe, But A Crucial Right Deserving Political Space In Africa?**

The right to ethnic politics is often defined as one of the crucial rights to be recognized for Rwanda to be a democracy. Stopping people from organizing on ethnic lines and prohibiting tribal boundaries between “us” and “them”, is often portrayed as a dictatorial tactic seeking to reduce the possibility of opposition. This is part of arguments often referred to as the closing of political space in Rwanda.

There is a narrative that in countries where tribal politics is unrestricted, people enjoy freedom of speech, unrestricted political rights and all other benefits of democracy, consequently Rwanda lags behind in democracy because political space has restrictions.

This conception of how people ought to govern themselves and particularly to exercise their freedom to choose their leaders, puts it to Africans that the more bitter political rivalries and factional conflicts albeit with tribal feelings, the more mature and healthier that democracy is.

Additionally, democratic elections in Africa are expected at some point to pass power to the opposition. Basically, democracy taught to Africans ought to be a circle of tribes rotating on power, and the pattern is to give the other tribe an occasion to rule.

**Red lines and taboos: tribalism locked out of Germany political space**

On February 5th, 2020, a very peculiar incident happened in

German politics, but it seems to have gone unnoticed, yet it should particularly make Africans reflect on the version of democracy we are taught, and its nuances compared to democracy practiced in the West.

In brief, there were local elections for Thuringia State Governor (or Minister President); the coalition of Chancellor Merkel won, but immediately rejected the outcome of the election. The Governor-elect was forced to renounce his position, and Merkel's "Christian Democratic Union (CDU) called for new elections.

The reason for this unprecedented political crisis was the violation of a powerful national political taboo in German politics: all of Germany's democratic parties have ruled out cooperation with the Neo-Nazi far-right party "Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany Party" (AfD), but in that election, against the wishes of the federal leadership of Chancellor Merkel's CDU party, the regional branch of CDU solicited the support of the neo-Nazi AfD party, and this cooperation was considered a serious breach of a postwar taboo.

Chancellor Merkel called the vote "inexcusable" and "a bad day for democracy", and added that the role played by members of her party "broke with the values and convictions of the CDU."

Western media described the election with titles such as "The shock election", the results of the election were called "Thuringia State mess", politicians came out strongly and said that accepting votes from a far-right extremist party AfD broke a taboo and was unacceptable. Chancellor Merkel made a statement reiterating that her party will never work with the anti-Islam, anti-immigrant AfD, on a regional or national level.

Thousands took to the streets in cities across Germany to vent their dismay at the vote outcome, including in Berlin,

Frankfurt and Thuringia's capital Erfurt itself. Some protestors carried signs that read "Never again," while others recalled that it was in Thuringia in 1930 that a Nazi minister was first allowed into government.

A picture of the AfD leader shaking hands with the Governor-elect after the election was splashed across the front pages of several German newspapers. "The handshake of shame," titled the best-selling German daily Bild, criticizing Mr. Kemmerich for "letting himself be elected by a neo-Nazi."

The day after he was elected as Governor, Mr. Kemmerich announced that he planned to step down, and he later declared that: "We want new elections to remove the stain of the AfD's support from the office of the premiership."

The crisis was not about the transparency or credibility of the vote, but the values defended by Chancellor Merkel's party that considers undemocratic to work with neo-Nazi extremists of AfD. Extremism is deemed unacceptable in German democracy.

If the ostracization of AfD for its ethnic politics were to happen in Rwanda, the whole incident would have been caricatured on RFI's Maman Show or on BBC's The Resident Presidents show, and criticisms for lack of political space in the country would be severe.

### **The western version of democracy denies political space to tribal politics**

The declared ambition of the neo-Nazi AfD party, is "to take OUR people and OUR country back." As numbers in parliament demonstrate, in German politics, the AfD party is a political force particularly in the east. In the last 2017 general elections, AfD scored almost 13% nationwide and won 94 seats in the German Federal Legislature.

This was the first time in almost six decades an openly neo-Nazi nationalist party had won seats in the German federal

parliament, despite Chancellor Merkel's party commitment to keep it locked out of the corridors of power.

Chancellor Merkel castigated the CDU local leaders for "abandoning party values" and fired a top government official (who was cumulatively her Deputy Economy Minister and a Member of the Bundestag and CDU's Commissioner for the eastern States) over his message congratulating the election of the candidate of their coalition.

The scandal also finished off the political career of Merkel's hand-picked successor. Lacking the authority to enforce red lines within CDU, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer had little choice but to resign as leader of the Federal CDU, and announced that she will not run to replace Angela Merkel as Chancellor in Germany's coming federal elections.

### **Pressure to open political space for ethnic politics in Rwanda**

The lesson to draw from German recent events, is that true democratic leaders should refuse votes and support that come from tribal and divisive politics.

This is an essential part of democracy that is not taught to Africans. Fortunately, for more than 25 years, RPF has endeavored to reinforce unity and inclusion, and to rebuild Rwanda around ideas and values, and ostracized ethnic instincts and divisive politics.

Rwanda has resisted the pressure to grant political space to extremists worse than the AfD in Germany. For instance, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, there were calls to grant general amnesty to genocide perpetrators and to reintegrate them back into a power sharing arrangement; there are also suggestions that were made to negotiate with FDLR.

Rwanda government has also been criticized for failing to register FDU-Inkingi party of Ingabire Victoire who is a far worse option than Germany AfD leaders, due to her active

support of génocidaires and evidence of funding FDLR, in addition to her party's complicity with RNC of Kayumba Nyamwasa in perpetrating grenade attacks in Rwanda between 2010 and 2014.

While the version of democracy inherited from colonizers legitimizes ethnic politics, Rwandans have drawn lessons from divisive ethnic politics that existed from the 1950s. After the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, the new leadership endeavored to build and defend multiparty politics that promote a positive governance founded on national cohesion, power sharing, and consensus.

Rwanda's Forum of Political Parties is part of that effort, with the aim of creating a political space where each party's ideological concerns and its voters' anxieties are debated in the spirit of consensus. This permanent dialogue among political parties ensures that political differences are not taken to the streets or used to manipulate youth into violence.

For Rwanda, the appropriate response to ethnic politics and hate ideologies has consisted in reimagining democracy that not only denies political space to hate or extremist ideologies, but most importantly addresses the root causes, frustrations and concerns that make ethnic politics a weapon that politicians like Ingabire Victoire can use for cheap propaganda.

In essence, Rwandans learned from their history that democracy should never grant political space to ethnic politics anywhere in the world. Like in Germany, the commitment to lock ethnic politics out of the corridors of power in Rwanda is unnegotiable. Enforcement of taboos is the choice Rwandans made for themselves.

Indeed, without that combination of a clear definition of taboos and inclusive governance, the "civilized" nations

which glamorize tribal politics are likely to lose even the inadequate democracy they have.