

# Reflections on Post-Genocide Rwanda and What It Has Taught Me

Recently I spoke to a group of people about Rwanda. The conversation focused mainly on where Rwanda is right now, and where it may be headed. I did not find out how many people in the audience were visiting Rwanda for the first time and how many had visited before. Later on, I had one-on-one chats with two individuals who were visiting for the first time. They had been struck by some of the things I said in response to questions about how politics in Rwanda is organized and practiced, how sustainable the current dispensation is, and therefore what lay ahead for the country in terms of political direction. Why, one asked, should we be optimistic that Rwanda will continue to be politically stable and to prosper?

I live in Rwanda and try to observe and follow closely what is going on around me, and understand how and why 'things' happen, and why they happen the way they do. Occasionally I write about my observations and those of others with whom we exchange perspectives. As a result, I am usually asked these sorts of questions. Among the people who ask, some will have already arrived at their own answers. They ask because they want to test their conclusions against what people like me think. Some are disappointed by what I say, usually because, rather than confirm what they believe, it challenges their understanding. Others express surprise because they have heard things they have never before considered. Among the broad issues I was asked to discuss were: cohesion within Rwanda's ruling or leading party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front; whether given the RPF's dominance multi-party politics was of any relevance; and whether the non-RPF political actors should be expected to stay 'on board'.

The question about internal cohesion in the RPF is usually underlain by the belief that the flight into exile by some of the party members, among whom some senior ones who have gone on to set up opposition groups in exile, points to internal schisms that are bound to tear it apart. There are those who believe that this is inevitable and possibly imminent. The question about whether non-RPF actors can be kept in the fold or are likely to stay 'on board' is premised on the idea that they would rather they were part of a conventional or adversarial competitive multi-party system – what some call "real democracy" – and not one in which 'real competition' is somewhat stymied by the imperative to preserve political stability and intra-societal harmony. Taken together, these two lines of thinking lead to the question about Rwanda's future and whether the country is not "sitting on a powder keg" as some have asserted in the past, and others continue to assert. These issues are likely to elicit as many reflections as the number of people with whom they are raised. For whatever they are worth, here are my own reflections.

The RPF is often disregarded by outsiders who survey Rwanda's political landscape and see only President Kagame and then ask: what will happen when he goes? Many don't even begin to imagine that the RPF runs the country alongside the President, playing roles that enable him to do his job as well as he does. Its role may be underestimated, partly because it ordinarily operates behind the scenes with hardly any drama, but it is a highly organized political party. To my knowledge, no political party in this region, possibly on the African continent, wields as much power and influence over its members as does the RPF. There is no better indicator of this than the high level of discipline expected of and observed by its members, courtesy of a code of conduct that is enforced, and a set of values that are actually inculcated in members and which they are required to uphold.

The family (umuryango), as the RPF is popularly known, came

into existence as a 'broad tent', bringing together people of diverse political and ideological inclinations. Therefore, its members were never pre-ordained to see eye to eye on every matter. Thanks to a culture of consensus building, however, it continues to be held together by, first, the common aspiration of building a new Rwanda, different from the highly divided one they inherited and, second, a collective determination to not return to the ugly past in which some had been condemned to perpetual statelessness. These two considerations and the debt that returnees from exile feel they owe to the RPF for bringing them home, add up to something of a glue that holds the organization together, regardless of whatever internal challenges it may face from time to time.

Some critics dismiss rather too quickly the government's constitutionally-mandated power- and responsibility-sharing aspects as a façade erected by the RPF to ensure its own dominance and control. Of course, power-sharing has not created parity between the RPF, with its vast intellectual and other resources, and the other political organisations with which it runs the country. However, it has ensured that there is no repeat of the naked power monopoly and capacity to exclude potential competitors for power that past governments enjoyed, which played an important role in laying the ground for political instability. As the most endowed political organization in financial, human resources and military terms by the end of the civil war and genocide against the Tutsi, the RPF would have had little difficulty installing itself in power and locking other actors out in the same way its predecessors had done.

It would have been a risky choice and unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term. However, it was feasible in the short to medium term nonetheless, as experience elsewhere demonstrates. Not pursuing that particular route and instead seeking accommodation with the other parties represented something of bending over backwards. The other parties, all

significantly weaker than the RPF, recognize this and accept the current political dispensation and their roles in it as representing a 'good deal' in the circumstances, certainly better than what conventional, adversarial and potentially destabilising, winner-takes-all multi-party alternative, would offer. For these reasons it is hardly far-fetched to expect them to want to stay 'on board' for the foreseeable future. In other words, these arrangements will last until the different actors and Rwandans generally feel that they no longer serve their interests. Attempts by outsiders to accelerate their demise in the name of 'opening up political space' ignore the dictum: "if it ain't broken don't fix it".

And so what is the relevance of multi-party elections in Rwanda? Indeed, why does Rwanda have elections at all? These are valid questions. The first thing to point out is that it is inconceivable the RPF could be defeated at the ballot box in the near future by any of its current potential competitors. The other political parties are aware of this. Why do they participate in elections, more so the presidential elections, knowing from the start that they have no chance of winning? In Africa there is something important we disregard in our quest for democracy. Building a democracy entails a great deal of learning along the way. And we know that practice makes perfect. If the RPF was ever serious in its ambitions to build Rwanda into a democracy, holding regular elections was always going to be part of whatever efforts it makes towards achieving that objective. Equally important would be the preservation of existing political parties and allowing new ones to emerge, while also setting parameters for them to operate in. It has to be recalled that in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, popular opinion was against multi-party politics, the reason being that people blamed political parties for exacerbating the turmoil of the immediate pre-genocide period. The rural masses in particular saw political parties as vessels for the urban-based elite to export their divisions to the countryside.

As a post-genocide society with a history of elite fragmentation and polarisation and intra-society divisions which could be easily exacerbated by uncontrolled, free-for-all contestation, the democratisation process had to be controlled and the controls relaxed progressively as and when the situation warranted it. A good example of the relaxation of controls is that in the immediate years after the war and the genocide against the Tutsi, political parties were not permitted to open up offices outside the capital, Kigali. After some years, that rule was relaxed, upon which parties could open up and maintain offices in the countryside. All in all, the opening up of party offices, the recruitment of members strictly on non-sectarian bases, the holding of internal elections within parties as well as regular participation in national and local political campaigns and elections within a carefully managed atmosphere, are part and parcel of the necessary training for democracy. This is usually neglected with devastating consequences in contexts where the political elite are in hurry to embrace "international best practice" for which their societies are ill-prepared at best.

For Rwanda, daring to be unconventional in this way has not been cost-free. The costs include its usually flippant characterisation as a dictatorship by all manner of commentators, which has inflicted some reputational damage. There is also the subtle and not-so-subtle and constant pressure to 'open up political space' and embrace so-called 'international best practice' on democratisation. However, the government, led by the highly self-confident RPF has shown great resilience, insisting on following its own instincts and using approaches to political and other reform which are in line with Rwanda's peculiar circumstances. Its insistence on "best fit" and rejection of so-called "best practice" is emblematic of its quest for policy space in which Rwandans can be the best judges of the kind of future they want for their country and the route they believe will get them there. But

what if the driving force behind all this, the RPF, is wrong in its judgements, someone asked me. Well, among other consequences, it would present Rwanda with a great opportunity to learn from mistakes of its own making, rather than ones stemming from policy merchandising by external actors.