

Rwanda Is Not Polarizing; It Tolerates Fringe discourse

Most societies have parameters of acceptable discourse. Almost all societies have fringe elements that operate from the gutter. However, these are often ignored, subjected to ridicule and social shaming or stigma. They are unlikely to appear in mainstream forums; often they have their fellow weirdos they speak to in some dark alleys. But it is clear that their views are unacceptable and are socially unbecoming. Society has rejected such individuals. Rwanda has not done a good job marking such parameters of acceptable discourse. But even when it has, they have been ignored or dismissed as an infringement on freedom of speech. Consequently, the gutter operators continue to roam in and out of mainstream forums, helping to create the perception that it is Rwanda – rather than them – that is polarizing.

I still get amused that reasonable people are willing to engage in discussions with the likes of Filip Reyntjens, Judi Rever, Peter Verlinden. The same people would find it unacceptable to engage Ferdinand Nahimana, Leon Mugesera, and Hassan Ngeze. But what is the difference between Reyntjens, Rever, and Verlinden on the one hand and Nahimana, Mugesera, and Ngeze on the other? Other than race, efforts to separate these two categories would be futile. (The utility of racial privilege is discussed at the end of this article).

For those who don't know, during the genocide, RTLM (**Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines**) was a weapon of mass killings. Journalists Kantano Habimana and Valerie Bemeriki were inciting and supervising killings on airwaves. But Nahimana and Ngeze had prepared killers long before.

Nahimana was an intellectual, a mastermind of the genocidal

media. He is accompanied in this cause by Leon Mugesera. They are the generals in the genocide ideology formation. But in terms of genocide propaganda, Ngeze Hassan was more devastating. Ngeze's Kangura Magazine was key before the genocide. He is the first among the millions of foot soldiers who took part in the genocide implementation.

Those who were present during court proceedings in Arusha testify that Ngeze was restless, panicky and animated by gestures in the public gallery. These reactions would hardly be associated with Nahimana.

This difference between Ngeze and Nahimana (in posture and presentation) is the same difference between Ngeze and Reyntjens; it is also the similarity (in sophistication) between Nahimana and Reyntjens.

In practice, it's the power of the ideology to synergize the activities of an intellectual and a street guy and to get them to work together in a shared cause. In other words, you can have the same ideology and package it differently; ultimately the difference between Ngeze (Rever) and Nahimana (Reyntjens) is of form rather than substance.

The professional fields of Reyntjens, Nahimana, and Mugesera – they are all professors – provides them the tools to package the same ideology differently than Ngeze, Kantano, Bemeriki, and Verlinden – all journalists.

As noted above, Ngeze and Nahimana worked together on the same genocide project; however, the way they presented themselves in the courtroom in Arusha – in terms of their demeanor – was obvious to those who were present that one was an intellectual, measured, and sophisticated. Significantly, the way Nahimana was measured in court cannot be separated from the way his actions were regarded prior to – and during – the genocide. Without this sophistication, the ability to become measured and to reflect on the consequences, Ngeze became

“more devastating” in preparing millions to kill others.

Nahimana’s sophistication and exposure seem to have afforded him a better grasp of the consequences of his actions, hence the measured predisposition. For this reason, no case has been pursued against Filip Reyntjens despite his role in imbibing the 1978 constitution with the spirit of genocide upon which Nahimana, Ngeze, Kantano, and Bemmeriki drew inspiration. Reyntjens is also famed for the thesis that Tutsi victims benefitted from “genocide credit,” an assertion that can only make sense in the context of gutter analysis. Or Rever’s assertion that RPF infiltrated Interahamwe and encouraged them to massacre the Tutsis.

Ngeze, Nahimana, and Mugesera on the one hand and Rever, Verlinden, and Reyntjens on the other are two sides of the same coin. They are working together, saying the same thing but using different formats of presentation; and when it comes to consequences, it becomes easier for Reyntjens and Nahimana – the measured – than it is for Ngeze and Rever. It is the same difference between a commander and the foot soldiers; the crudeness of execution exposes the foot soldiers to greater punishment. Ngeze and Nahimana can do the same thing but face different consequences than Rever and Reyntjens. Here’s why.

Racial privilege

The reason people persist in debating Reyntjens, Rever, and Verlinden when they are unwilling to debate Nahimana and Ngeze is not because the latter is in prison. Otherwise, Nahimana has written a book that no one is willing to engage it. The reason of engaging the former is racial privilege.

Privilege that doesn’t attach whiteness to tribal, atavistic and primordial sentiments is the only difference between Filip Reyntjens, Peter Verlinden, and Judi Rever on the one hand and Leon Mugesera, Ferdinand Nahimana and Hassan Ngeze on the other.

Much as Reyntjens and his colleagues perceive themselves – due to the conditioning of whiteness – as being beyond atavistic sentiments, the Rwandans who are willing to engage them are similarly conditioned to extend the benefit of whiteness that places the former above such sentiments. It becomes a mutually reinforcing conditioning.

Otherwise, Reyntjens and colleagues on the one hand and Nahimana *et al* on the other share the same ideology of ethnic extremism – if only we were willing to attach such tribalism to the former.

In this case, all are Hutu Power adherents. Nahimana and Reyntjens, and Ngeze and Verlinden as political intellectuals and journalists, respectively, are unable to conceive affairs in Rwanda outside the framework of ethnicity. They are in no worse moral and mental bind than is faced by Victoire Ingabire. The same way Ingabire has proven incapable of mobilizing politically beyond ethnic terms, Reyntjens, Rever, and Verlinden are unable to mobilize their intellect beyond similar terms.

Reyntjens, Verlinden, and Rever's obsession with tribe is no different from that of Ingabire. They are tribalists, truth be told. While we can easily conceive Ingabire as such, whiteness renders us incapable of conceiving the former as such. After all, we were told tribalism only applies to backward natives.

Indifference towards Africans

Rwanda's parameters for acceptable discourse have been treated with the kind of utter contempt that cannot, for instance, be extended to the discourse around the Holocaust. Gutter academics and journalists have been able to air their revisionism with impunity. In turn, those they speak for the genocidaires or Hutu power ideologues feel empowered to act the same way.

That's the real tragedy. If Africans could be protected from

their influence, what they say wouldn't make any difference. However, African intellectuals and media houses have also followed suit in portraying their vile views as acceptable and hence describe Rwanda as "polarized."

Even the African court of justice condemned Rwanda's decision to punish Ingabire for her trivializing comments on the genocide. Under normal circumstances, it would be a tragedy that a court would legitimize views with origins from the fringe elements.

Rather than attract shame and ridicule for their fringe views as would be the case in their societies, these individuals have acted as gatekeepers for others in the area of media and academia with interest in covering Rwanda. Citing them is the currency that opens the gates into a collective negative solidarity of indifference towards the humanity and sensibilities of the people they write about. This solidarity is the quickest way for little known individuals in these fields to claim expertise and authority and to be treated as such even when, like Reyntjens or Verlinden, they have no access to the country of their expertise.

Ironically, their peers with access to Rwanda and those dealing with similar subjects inside Africa rarely get to enjoy the benefits that the lunatic fringe is able to accrue from the collective negative solidarity, including access to the media and the frequent mutual citations. As such, they – like Ngeze and Nahimana – may have succeeded in misleading millions.

Seen this way, therefore, Reyntjens and colleagues are merely feeding into, and reaping from, the collective western attitude that rewards indifference towards Africans, whose reality is turned upside down as a result.

To be sure, there have been some voices from the West (more so in academia and less so in the media) that have attempted to

break this collective negative solidarity of Reyntjens and his fellow Hutu power adherents; however, they have not been as effective because they lack the tribalistic and ideological fever that drives the latter.

Until we understand this, Rwanda will remain "polarizing."