Rwanda’s soul searching journey at a critical juncture

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi imposed conditions of soul searching on the nation. The luxury of business as usual in state management was not going to rebuild a state burnt to the ashes. Neither was outsourcing agency by copy and paste from elsewhere going to do. A traumatized society had to heal and those who found themselves in the difficult task of leadership had to think creatively and make good choices where there were none. But even the darkest cloud has a silver lining: introspection became a condition for Rwanda’s leadership and potentially a standard that Rwandans have come accustomed to from their leaders, those capable of crafting solutions to society’s problems from soul searching and introspection. The recent decision to create the ministry of national unity and civic engagement is pitstop in this soul-searching journey and comes to respond to specific challenges that contemporary society faces.

In October 2018, President Kagame tried to reflect on the national psyche that was prevailing in the aftermath of the genocide, the soul searching it activated, and the practical choices that had to be made:

“There was a huge puzzle after the genocide. How do you pursue justice when the crime is so great? You can’t lose one million people in one hundred days without an equal number of perpetrators. But we also can’t imprison an entire nation. So forgiveness was the only path forward. Survivors were asked to forgive and forget. The death penalty was abolished. We focused our justice on the organizers of the genocide. Hundreds of thousands of perpetrators were rehabilitated and released back into their communities. These decisions were
agonizing. I constantly questioned myself. But each time I decided that Rwanda’s future was more important than justice. It was a huge burden to place on the survivors. And perhaps the burden was too great. One day during a memorial service, I was approached by a survivor. He was very emotional. ‘Why are you asking us to forgive?’ he asked me. ‘Haven’t we suffered enough? We weren’t the cause of this problem. Why must we provide the solution?’ These were very challenging questions. So I paused for a long time. Then I told him: ‘I’m very sorry. You are correct. I am asking too much of you. But I don’t know what to ask the perpetrators. ‘Sorry’ won’t bring back any lives. Only forgiveness can heal this nation. The burden rests with the survivors because they are the only ones with something to give,” Kagame told Brandon Stanton, the renowned Humans of New York blogger.

Because Rwanda’s future was more important than any other consideration, unity became the most significant pursuit in post genocide Rwanda: nothing was worth it, if it compromised unity. Even as Kagame would later say that post genocide society was built around three fundamental aspirations – unity, accountability, and thinking big – it was understood that the latter two were subordinate to the first non-negotiable and irreducible aspiration.

In other words, it was not just justice that was sacrificed for unity. Society was asked to sacrifice everything for unity. For instance, for much of the early post genocide period it seemed like the use of the terminology “Rwandan genocide” was fine because it signalled unity of Rwandans. However, this could only be acceptable on the basis that there was no ambiguity of distortion of who the victims of the genocide were.

In other words, it is an understating that is predicated on the goodwill and civility of global society. But as much as the authorities in Rwanda sought to build unity within Rwandan society, those opposing it understood that dismantling unity
is the shortest path to achieving their goals. The first target was to bastardize the concept of “Rwandan genocide” by implying that it is an acceptance that a double genocide took place. They pushed this denialist conspiracy as a means of pulling the rag from under the unity project.

Moreover, they would use the double genocide conspiracy theory to build a moral equivalence of “both sides” killed whose aim was a backdoor re-entry into politics for genocidaires and Hutu Power proponents. If genocidaires were no worse, they too had the right and legitimacy to political participation and leadership, they would argue. Jean Kambanda, Prime Minister during genocide in 1994 and ICTR convict, appeared in BBC and ITV, both British media outlets, interviews from a prison in Mali where he is serving his conviction, urging the people in Rwanda to be patient that soon they will return to power in Kigali. It didn’t dawn on the BBC what it would mean if it gave its platform to a Nazi criminal to threaten the remaining Jews in Germany of the extremists’ return to power. As if to prove that it was not an oversight, the BBC soon aired a documentary whose aim was to “prove” the double genocide theory.

Soon after, the ICTR Residual Mechanism (MICT) began releasing convicts for “good behavior.” In December 2016, the judge ruled that Ferdinand Nahimana had “demonstrated some signs of rehabilitation,” drawing outrage from survivors who perceived the pattern of behavior of the judges as a mockery of the pain of survivors and an affront to their hard earned justice. In short, a movement that had started on the fringe of society by convicts of the Arusha based ICTR initially disappeared only to gain resurgence in recent years.

The United States and the UK, symbols of global indifference that allowed genocide to happen despite their influence, decided to throw their weight behind this denialist movement. In the United Nations they took a position supporting the dubious claim that the terminology “Genocide against the
“Tutsi” was not inclusive enough to include “others” who were also victims of genocide in 1994, which essentially supports the double genocide theory of the Arusha convicts. This position by the two governments was perceived by the denialist movement as a diplomatic coup. Consequently, a small group made of offspring of the convicts of genocide took this as a signal that the world’s powerful countries are behind them and refashioned themselves to “human rights activists” and critics of the Rwandan government. Ironically, the Americans and the Brits, the latter still refusing to arrest and try or extradite genocide suspects on its soil, argued that their position was aimed at furthering unity, even as, in effect, it created a coalition with those who have conceived unity as a threat to their political, and genocidal, ambitions. However, if the two governments were, in fact, genuinely interested in unity, they would support those who had dedicated that unity would be the raison d’être of the state. It also became apparent that these governments saw the unity of Rwandans as an obstacle to their ambition to exert political control over Rwanda, an ambition they share with the denialist movement: in this unholy and repugnant alliance, a divided society is good for both, although the imperatives for control differ. Simply put, the US and the UK were after something else despite their public pronouncements.

And so, the objective has been to derail the unity of Rwandans. The anti-unity movement has been pouncing the Unity Club ever since it introduced the Ndi Umunyarwanda (I am a Rwandan) initiative whose aim was to urge Rwandans to embrace their shared Rwandan identity – Hutus, Tutsis, and Twa, speak the same language, culture, and live in the same geographic milieu, meaning that together they fit the definition of an ethnic group – rather than their ethnicity. They claimed that the initiative was a nefarious scheme whose disguised aim was to deny the existence of ethnic groups and that the platform aimed to ascribe vice on the Hutu and virtue on the Tutsi. For starters, the two are contradictory claims. Secondly, it is
not illegal to be Hutu or Tutsi. Third, Ndi Umunyarwanda was premised on the idea that the unity of Rwandans was in their shared identity and that genocide was possible because this identity had lost prominence; elevating it was the solution for unity. In other words, for as long as unity is the goal of the government, its enemies are equally committed to derail it, and to seek the support of those who wish to control and dictate to the authorities in Kigali the direction that Rwandan society should take.

**Chicken and egg**

As the denialist movement was picking up steam, and its unlikely friends distorting genocide and promoting ambiguity, it occurred to me that perhaps the efforts that had been put in building unity should have been placed in teaching about genocide. Genocide is the single most catastrophic event that contemporary Rwandan society has faced and there’s no going around it; is a subject to reckon with. The elephant in the room. It represents the greatest failure of our society and the sooner we recognise this and take collective ownership of this failure the better. Significantly, collective ownership means collective consciousness, itself being the surest and irreversible path to unity and genuine reconciliation. In other words, the goal should always have been to nurture a critical mass of Rwandans, especially the youth, who recognise this monumental failure of society and who, as a result, develop the appropriate sensibilities, mutual solidarity, and commitment to a shared future in which the recurrence of genocide is impossible. This collective consciousness is the value system around which unity is substantiated – why are we uniting and what are we uniting to do? It is also the basis for genuine reconciliation that isn’t subject to reversal. It is also the greatest weapon against those for whom the unity of Rwandans poses a threat. Precisely, the mission of each generation of Rwandans ought to be to grow the critical mass as a means of **driving these elements to the fringe of society**.
where they belong.

If the collective failure of society was genocide, the collective consciousness around it is society’s collective redemption. There’s no better way to build unity and reconciliation. It therefore appears that unity was a solution for a problem that was presumed self-evident and warranting no further articulation. However, the lesson from the resurgent denialist movement, ambiguity around genocide is a key weapon for reversing the gains of unity in Rwandan society. In other words, having unity and understanding the value of unity are not the same thing: the pursuit of unity does not necessarily nurture a critical mass that is informed about the greatest modern tragedy that Rwandan society has faced and therefore to imagine that a critical mass with the appropriate sensibilities around it would emerge to forge genuine reconciliation on its own is presumptuous. On the contrary, to nurture a critical mass with clarity around genocide is to develop the appropriate sensibilities for reconciliation and unity. One is the prerequisite of the other.

Accordingly, nurturing clarity of genocide within the Rwandan society is the greatest fear of the enemies of unity and, as a result, they are ready to accommodate any other efforts geared at promoting unity as long as these efforts don’t build collective consciousness around the genocide. This is precisely why the clarity around genocide should be the main preoccupation for those who seek lasting unity and reconciliation in Rwanda.

The pursuit of unity in a vacuum has sent the wrong message and emboldened the enemies of unity and their shameless allies. But they mistakenly thought that soul searching was a moment rather than a lifestyle.

The new ministry will have to prove that it’s worth its salt. And fast. Because the denialist movement is ready to eat its lunch before it’s even served.