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OPINIONISTA

## Rwanda's hidden ethnic hatred is again coming out into the open



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By Filip Reyntjens

(<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/filip-reyntjens/>)

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Prof Filip Reyntjens is an emeritus professor of law and politics at the Institute of Development Policy at the University of Antwerp. For more than 45 years, he has specialised in the law and politics of sub-Saharan Africa, and the Great Lakes Region in particular, on which he has published several books and hundreds of scholarly articles.

Something strange and deeply worrying is happening in Rwanda. While there was anecdotal evidence of ethnic hate speech by both Tutsis and Hutus occurring in the private sphere, this has recently come out in the open.

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In an X (formerly Twitter) Space hosted at the end of August by Rwandan public television news anchor Egidie Bibio Ingabire, one of the interveners, Marie-Grâce Umurerwa, a Tutsi woman living in Canada, used explicitly racist language insulting the Hutu ethnic group. She was not contradicted by host Ingabire.

Some extracts of her intervention are telling: “You cannot transform a puppy dog [reference to Hutu] into a calf [reference to Tutsi]. They [Hutu] spent four hundred years living as dogs. When the Belgians gave power to a serf [reference to the 1959 revolution which overthrew the Tutsi-dominated monarchy and heralded a Hutu-dominated republic], these are the results that you get.

“Let them [Hutu] come, we [Tutsi] have children, we have handsome young people, physically fit. Let them try again [to overthrow a Tutsi regime]. Come and we shall show you what our youth who have grown drinking milk for 30 years can do. Go

and tell your people: bark there outside like dogs. You only know insults, you herdboys, scoundrels. Come and we confront each other.”

This kind of aggressive and debasing language is reminiscent of that used by Tutsi elites in the late 1950s. For instance, in 1958 12 conservative Tutsi court notables, calling themselves *Bagaragu b'ibwami bakuru* (Great chiefs of the royal court), published a particularly provocative text stating, “The relations between us [Batutsi] and them [Bahutu] have always been and remain based on serfdom; therefore between them and us there is not a single foundation of brotherhood... [A]s our kings have conquered the land of the Bahutu by killing their kinglets and thus turning them into serfs, how can they now pretend that they are our brothers?”

The monarchy was overthrown two years later.

During the years preceding the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Hutu extremists developed a radical and violent anti-Tutsi discourse. One of the first expressions of this was the “Hutu 10 Commandments” published in December 1990 after the attack by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF):

“The Tutsi are thirsty for blood and power and want to impose their hegemony on the Rwandan People by the cannon and the gun. All Hutu must know that every Tutsi woman works for its Tutsi ethnic group. As a consequence, every Hutu who marries a Tutsi woman, makes a Tutsi woman his concubine, or makes a Tutsi woman his secretary or *protégée* is a traitor.”

During the genocide, extremist Hutu media like Radio-télévision des mille collines (RTLM) presented the Tutsi as cockroaches and RPF accomplices and called for their death.

The hate speech by an individual like Umurerwa shows publicly that this phenomenon is also present at the personal level. The utterings of one person would not be cause for too much concern were it not that the host of the X Space was a well-known public figure with more than 137,000 followers on X. Discussions on social media denied that this hate speech took place or downplayed what was said.

A director-general of the Ministry of National Unity & Civic Engagement in charge of guarding the RPF's truth and values refused to condemn it. Likewise, neither the regime's media nor public officials mentioned the incident, and by their silence, condoned what was said.

While the words used were clearly punishable under Rwandan law, neither the police nor the Rwanda Investigation Bureau showed the slightest interest. And yet, had a Hutu stated a fraction of what was said in an open X Space, he or she would have “disappeared” or been jailed.

Hate speech by Tutsi extremists in the 1950s was followed by the revolution that overthrew a Tutsi-dominated regime, led hundreds of thousands of Tutsis to flee abroad, turned Tutsis who remained in the country into second-class citizens, and eventually was the origin of the civil war that started in 1990.

In the early 1990s, hate speech by extremist Hutus contributed to creating the conditions for the 1994 genocide in which three-quarters of Tutsis were exterminated.

The latest official Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer claims that 94.7% of the population regard the country as reconciled. The official ideology is that there are no longer Tutsis and Hutus, and that “We’re all Rwandans now”, an illusion cruelly contradicted on X Space.

This episode simply confirms what a wealth of field research shows, namely that, though ethnicity has been banned from the public discourse, it is an invisible variable that remains a central factor in Rwandan social identity.

Through the discussion on X, this issue has again reached the public space. In light of the country’s history, this is a potentially dangerous development. Because of the regime’s strong physical control, it is unlikely that this incident will have a violent fallout in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if and how the ruling Tutsi ethnocrats will address this challenge and how the Hutu demographic majority will eventually react to such insulting expressions of ethnic superiority. **DM**

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