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(Re-)imagining a reluctant post-genocide society: the Rwandan Patriotic Front's ideology and practice

Filip Reyntjens

ABSTRACT

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has developed an elaborate ideology that it articulates widely and skilfully. While some themes have been the subject of research, an overall approach is lacking. This article brings together analyses of four major themes in the RPF's ideology. Two are closely related: history is the backward-looking basis for the RPF's societal policies, while national unity and reconciliation are the present and forward-looking ones. The two other themes addressed are nationalism/self-reliance and high modernism. For each of these themes, this article presents their emergence and substance, followed by an assessment of their practice and implementation. Two major flaws in the RPF's ideology are addressed: its at times shaky factual and historical foundation, and its use to legitimize policies that have little popular support. The gap between the public and hidden transcripts is particularly problematic with regard to the issues of history and unity/reconciliation, on which there is no common reading. The fact that strong underground narratives on these themes contrast with the RPF's ideology suggests that Rwanda is not heading towards long-term peace and stability.

Introduction

Although the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has developed an elaborate ideology that it articulates widely and skilfully, this ideology has surprisingly not been the subject of much encompassing research. Specific themes have been addressed, often implicitly but not in an overall fashion. This article attempts to fill that void, and resonates with a renewed interest in the ideational side of politics. For instance, Straus draws attention to the legacies of political ideas and the role of ideology in shaping outcomes. Thus, 'ideas and ideologies shape strategic behaviour'¹ and 'political ideas are independent forces that shape outcomes in ways that are both visible and invisible'.² Ideology, as Althusser observed, is not just a discursive instrument but a form and system of power,³ and the subject of an intensely political debate.⁴ Analysing the RPF's ideology is therefore useful for understanding its political choices and strategies. In particular, it shows how the regime has used ideology as a tool to deflect domestic and international criticism and control the population, in other words as a means to maintain power.

'Ideology' is understood here as the beliefs and ideas at the basis of a political, economic, cultural or social project, and the theoretical, programmatic and discursive means to achieve it. The RPF's ideological statements were initially quite limited, including those in its eight-point programme, made public after the October 1990 invasion. Among the eight points, three could be considered ideological (consolidation of national unity; democracy; and building an independent self-sustaining nation), while the other points were political rather than ideological (corruption, mismanagement and misuse of public office; repatriation and resettlement of Rwandan refugees; provision and expansion of public services; peace and security; and foreign policy and consolidation of independence).⁵ Not one of the dozens of statements and communiqués issued during the civil war contained ideological substance.⁶ A ninth point was added to the RPF's programme after it took power, namely 'Fighting genocide and its ideology'.⁷ This was logical, and it indeed became the RPF's main ideological stance. However, this theme will not be discussed as a separate item, as it pervades other themes addressed in this article.

Although certain themes emerged long before the creation of the RPF, the formulation of a consistent ideology has been incremental. Some elements were added in the course of time; some gained less prominence. Some themes are longer lasting; others have come up in response to particular challenges by internal dynamics or the international context. Despite this piecemeal construction, the RPF's ideology has become coherent and consistent in its formulation, promotion and implementation. Its presentation in this article is based on RPF documents, statements made in RPF-controlled bodies and media, and opinions of RPF leaders and ideologues.

This article studies four major themes in that ideology. Two are closely related: history is the backward-looking pillar for the RPF's societal policies, while national unity and reconciliation are the present and forward-looking ones.⁸ The two other themes are nationalism/self-reliance and high modernism. Of course, these themes frequently overlap, but they are presented here under separate headings for analytical clarity. This article will first present their emergence and substance, followed by an assessment of their practice and implementation.

History

Vision

The RPF's vision of history is that precolonial Rwanda was a harmonious society in which Hutu, Tutsi and Twa were not ethnic labels but categories referring to wealth and status. The three groups shared the same history, culture, religion and space. Inter-marriage was frequent and social mobility was real, as Hutu could become Tutsi and the other way round, by becoming richer or poorer, particularly as measured by the possession of cattle. While Rwanda was not without conflict, this was never ethnic in nature. Although the kings belonged to Tutsi lineages, they lost this ethnic label upon assuming office, and they were the benevolent guardians of all Rwandans' well-being. Just as was the case in Europe, Rwanda's history is one of kings and victorious wars. The RPF's military historian Frank Rusagara presents a list of kings with precise dates of their reign, starting in 1091.⁹ His narrative is based on the notion of conquest, *ku-aanda* ('from which Rwanda derives its name'¹⁰), literally 'expansion or spreading out from the centre': 'the principle

of *ku-aanda*, which involved annexation and subsequent integration of neighbouring territories, informed the continued expansion and growth of pre-colonial Rwanda.¹¹ All the kings mentioned by Rusagara are warrior kings, and the 'Map of *Ku-aanda*' includes large parts of current day Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).¹²

Both the unity and the expansion of Rwanda were destroyed by the Belgian administration and the Catholic Church. Economic and political independence were lost; the introduction of foreign education and religion undercut Rwandan culture; in the context of a divide and rule policy, Hutu and Tutsi were set up against each other, and political ethnicity emerged; earlier equilibria were damaged by modifications made to the functions of the king and the chiefs. '[T]his seed of segregation and favouritism (of the Tutsi elites) among Rwandans... ultimately destroyed their unity'.¹³ After independence, the regimes of the first and second republics 'decided to carry on the segregation legacy of the colonial masters, and the problems were compounded further'.¹⁴ No wonder the RPF put the entire colonial and postcolonial period up to 1994 between brackets: 'The colonial and neo-colonial occupation of Rwanda, which took a century, from 1894 to 1994, ensured the desecration of the original Rwandan state and the military institution'.¹⁵

After that lost century, the history of Rwanda resumed in 1994 when the RPF took power after defeating the genocidal regime, and restored dignity and unity. It liberated the country from dictatorial leadership and built a nation based on law, democracy, peace, security, justice and development.¹⁶ The RPF's historical narrative is actively promoted in the national and international media, at conferences inside the country and abroad,¹⁷ by sensitizing at occasions like *gacaca* and *ingando* (see below), and by speeches by national and local authorities. Rwandans from top to bottom are very familiar with this discourse on history and are able to recite it flawlessly.

Discussion

Jan Vansina, a leading historian of Rwanda, finds 'a whole set of false propositions and assertions'¹⁸ in the RPF's historical narrative. 'The linguistic and cultural unity of the country today did not exist in the seventeenth century and Rwanda is not a "natural" nation. ... Rwanda really became a nation in the twentieth century.'¹⁹ 'Formerly, neither abundance nor order flourished in the country and it is false to think that everyone was happy with their station in life and all lived under the shepherd's staff of wise kings.'²⁰ The reason for the elaboration of 'such erroneous propositions' is 'the projection of a nostalgic utopia into the past, a past that contrasts with a painful present'.²¹ The makers of Rwandan history are not impressed: 'The social and ethnic political reading of history is not that of Rwandans, but results from domination and imperialism, with all due respect to certain authors such as Jan Vansina, who pretend that this already existed before colonial days'.²² Of course, ideologies are utopias to some degree, but the RPF's construction of history is presented as a reality of the past.

There is nothing extraordinary about winners (re)writing history, and Rwanda is by no means an exception.²³ While the RPF's narrative serves a contemporary political purpose, as will be explained later, it would be too simple to attribute it exclusively to deliberate manipulation. Although dealing with Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki's findings on the construction of mythico-history in long-settled refugee communities may help us understand this process among the Rwandan Tutsi diaspora, and

thus the RPF. Malkki found 'a shared body of knowledge about their past in Burundi' among the Hutu refugees.²⁴ Narratives were quasi biblical, heavily moral stories whose purpose was to educate, explain, prescribe and proscribe.²⁵ Some narratives were factually correct, others were not. Told and retold, underpinned by strong didacticism, these historical accounts were similar, almost formulaic.²⁶ In all likelihood, similar constructions took place among the Rwandan Tutsi diaspora, thus developing a sincere, strongly internalized historical belief. But what is sincerely believed is not *per se* true, and it supports current political objectives and strategies.

Alternative historical accounts cannot be articulated, at least not in the public arena. For example, during a scholarly debate in Kigali in 2004, an academic expert mentioned the value of different 'truths'. A high ranking official demanded the floor to insist: 'There is only one truth and we know it'.²⁷ This monopoly of history writing is problematic, for several reasons.

First, the official narrative 'is open to replication but closed to debate'.²⁸ This closure of the debate on the interpretation of the past is actively policed by the regime,²⁹ exemplified in the way history is taught in the *ingando* re-education camps. They are a forum for the reproduction of the government script, as indicated in notes of participants, which in places read like a catechism (question-answer).³⁰ Interviewees gave responses 'that seemed like recitations of what they had heard during *ingando* lessons'.³¹ The prevalence of this politically correct historical narrative could also be observed in an essay competition organized in 2004: all 3,000 essays from secondary and tertiary students were structured alike, and the accounts were identical.³²

Second, this proclamation of history impedes research and teaching. David Newbury points to the deliberate neglect of Vansina's work which makes it necessary to revert to earlier, outdated or incomplete accounts, and he warns: 'We ignore historical method—and familiarity with even basic historiography—at great risk'.³³ Yet Purdeková notes that '[n]o single Rwandese intellectual could be found to take a public position on Jan Vansina's (work)'.³⁴ The Berkeley Rwandan History Project realized that curriculum development based on scientific evidence and discussion of alternative narratives 'became unpalatable for a government focused on control'.³⁵ In addition, the government's educational policy that only its official historical narrative can be transmitted conflicts with another official goal for education reform—to embrace modern, democratic teaching methods including critical thinking and debate.³⁶ More ominously, King argues that, as in the past, the history curriculum is a reflection of dominant government narratives from which deviation is not permitted: 'Most educators believe that this sort of teaching runs counter to meaningful peacebuilding'.³⁷

Third, there is a grave danger in an official historical account that is not shared by most Rwandans. A wealth of field research data shows that alternative narratives circulate, but they are confined to the hidden transcript that silently, and in a sense subversively, challenges the regime's public transcript.³⁸ This creates a situation 'in which competing singular versions of history—the RPF metanarrative and the counternarrative—effectively continue the conflict through discursive means'.³⁹ Relegating this counternarrative to the private domain may render it invisible but does not make it disappear. On the contrary, research on political values of ordinary Hutu found that public policy risks contributing to the very dangers the regime claims to be combatting.⁴⁰ There is some anecdotal evidence that many Rwandan Hutu, in the privacy of their homes, in conversations with people they

trust ('their own') and in expressions of everyday resistance⁴¹ develop a mythico-history like that found by Malkki in Burundian Hutu refugee communities, whereby home in Rwanda is akin to a refugee settlement. That mythico-history is miles apart from the RPF's meta-history.⁴² Both histories are factually erroneous, and no bridge is built to unite them.

The legacy of genocide has created a powerful rhetorical weapon for the RPF, giving it 'a right to remake Rwanda',⁴³ including its history. The RPF views alternative historical interpretations as challenges to its legitimacy and its politics.⁴⁴ Indeed, the regime considers knowledge production to be an aspect of its (international) sovereignty.⁴⁵ Its version is protected against challenges by laws on divisionism and genocide ideology, by judicial prosecution and by political repression (see below).

National unity, harmony and reconciliation

Vision

In June 1958, mwami (king) Mutara Rudahigwa summarized the debate on the 'Hutu-Tutsi question' in the *Conseil supérieur du pays* as follows:

These are just destructive rumours propagated by a small group of guys (*des types*) who act under foreign influence ... and whose intention it is to divide the country. These enemies of the country will not succeed in dividing Rwanda ... The entire country is united in the search of the bad tree that produces these sour fruits of division.⁴⁶ When it is found, it will be cut, uprooted and burned, so that it disappears and leaves no trace.⁴⁷

Less than two years later, the monarchy and Tutsi supremacy were overthrown by a Hutu revolt.

The RPF's vision of ethnicity and unity echoes that of the late 1950s. Referring to the country's history, a document published in 1999 by the Office of the President states that '[b]efore the Europeans' arrival, Rwandans were understanding each other, the country was characterized by unity'.⁴⁸ It goes on to affirm that 'the unity of Rwandans is a foundation on which a new Rwanda will be built'.⁴⁹ While suggesting that unity existed before colonial days and that it was restored after the RPF took power, the regime realizes this aim has not been achieved. Thus, among the missions of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) are 'to educate, sensitize and mobilize the population in areas of national unity and reconciliation' and 'to denounce and fight actions, publications, and utterances that promote any kind of division and discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia'.⁵⁰ The strategy is two-pronged: on the one hand, educating people and disseminating information; on the other, monitoring, 'fighting' and repressing acts and discourses opposed to unity. The former can be seen at work, for example, in the neo-traditional *gacaca* courts and in the *ingando* re-education camps,⁵¹ while the latter shows in legislation on 'divisionism' or 'sectarianism' and on 'genocide ideology', and prosecutions under these laws.⁵²

'Consensus democracy' became the political translation of the restoration of harmony. From its earliest days, the RPF has professed a determination to establish 'true democracy', defined as 'political majority rule based on a genuine programme uniting all Rwandans'.⁵³ After the genocide, the Government of National Unity's programme endorsed this as the guiding principle of its policies. National consensus, reached after consultation and debate

with all concerned parties, was defined as 'the majority's good ideas'.⁵⁴ The meaning of 'consensus' was made clear by a speaker at a meeting of the Liberal Party in 2008: 'We are not here to oppose President Kagame but to build the nation. Rwanda does not need a European-type opposition'.⁵⁵

The government's perspective on reconciliation is based on the view that the Rwandans possess an innate sense of social harmony, undermined by previous colonial and postcolonial regimes, which can be recovered.⁵⁶ Clark defines the government's version of reconciliation as 'transactional', namely 'immediate and elite-imposed'.⁵⁷ More important, reconciliation is a 'national' process occurring between groups in society, never described as 'Tutsi and Hutu' but as 'victims and suspects' or 'survivors and perpetrators'.⁵⁸ Provided the policies to achieve it are right, harmony can be restored rapidly.⁵⁹ Education is one way of achieving this. Schools are tasked with the 'detoxification' of youth and with the restoration of 'recently eroded Rwandan values', and education in schools and elsewhere is considered a 'structure to neutralize the ideology of genocide'.⁶⁰

The elimination of ethnicity on the one hand and the prominence of Tutsi elites in public (and private) institutions on the other were explained early on. When, in the past, Hutu were a majority in public office, this was labelled 'ethnic discrimination'; however, now that Tutsi were a majority, this became 'meritocracy'. Privat Rutazibwa, an early RPF ideologue, advanced a revealing justification for this state of affairs: 'The Hutu elites as a whole entirely subscribe to the fundamental thesis of the ethnist ideology, namely that power belongs to the Hutu because they are a majority'. Such an observation allowed the exclusion of the 'Hutu elites' in their entirety, in order to base the exercise of power on 'the qualification of competence and personal merit'.⁶¹

2008 was the year of the 'fight against genocide ideology'. Parliament called for disciplinary and legal sanctions against school headmasters and teachers, as well as the 're-education' of all pupils displaying the ideology, and the education minister announced the creation of a 'situation file' for each teacher and pupil. The Berkeley Rwandan History Project was faced with a senior Rwandan historian's warning that 'the conversation was approaching genocide ideology'.⁶² The National University's student committees were dissolved because of 'ethnic divisionism' and 'genocide ideology'.⁶³ In mid March, the government appointed the members of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, tasked, among other assignments, 'to put in place a permanent framework for the exchange of ideas on Genocide, its consequences and the strategies for its prevention and eradication'. In August, the constitution was amended by the insertion of 'against the Tutsi' after the word 'genocide', in order to counter suggestions of a 'double genocide' (the claim made by some deniers that both Hutu and Tutsi were the victims of genocide). Finally, a law criminalizing 'genocide ideology' was promulgated in November.⁶⁴

Discussion

The preamble to the 2003 constitution states that the People of Rwanda are '[r]esolved to fight the ideology of genocide and all its manifestations and to eradicate ethnic, regional and any other form of divisions'.⁶⁵ The RPF's de-ethnicization project is top-down, and based on the belief that, as ethnic divisions can be made, they can also be unmade. Hintjens notes that the regime's authoritarian engineering mode has prevented the

emergence of potentially more complex identities from below that could form the basis for more inclusive forms of citizenship.⁶⁶ Like history, unity is part of a 'rehearsed consensus'.⁶⁷ The government's policy produces the appearance rather than the reality of national unity and reconciliation: ordinary Rwandans 'confront it in ways that seek to restore their personal dignity while subtly attempting to live their own truth',⁶⁸ and the rural poor 'must perform the prescribed rituals of national unity and reconciliation, regardless of their private realities'.⁶⁹

It is not surprising then that Clark found that the population's perspectives on reconciliation were at odds with that of the government. His respondents argued that reconciliation must be forward-looking rather than seeking to reinstate a lost sense of unity. Instead of seeing this as a group-to-group process, they emphasized individual-to-individual dynamics. They also felt that harmony could not be restored rapidly, but needed long-term interactions. Criticizing the notion of reconciliation as imposed by the state or other elites, their experiences of negotiated reconciliation clash with the government's transactional interpretation that sees reconciliation as the immediate effect of policies such as *gacaca* and *ingando*. Clark's participants argue that reconciliation needs to 'come from the heart' rather than 'from the authorities'.⁷⁰ Zorbas, too, found that ordinary Rwandans' understandings and expectations contrast with the official government discourse on reconciliation, the 'RPF Healing Truth'.⁷¹

McLean Hilker noted that, while the regime has been successful in suppressing public reference to ethnicity, 'ethnicity was omnipresent', and she saw 'a constant—and almost existential—need to know the ethnic identity of significant others'.⁷² Arguing that 'because ethnicity has officially been banned from public life, it has become an unobservable variable in most (empirical) studies of post-genocide Rwanda', Ingelaere also observed that ethnicity remains a central factor for Rwandan social identity, that ethnic group identity is arguably more meaningful than before the genocide, and that Hutu/Tutsi distinctions are more rigid than ever.⁷³ He concluded that 'the durability of ethnic difference [is] lurking under the surface of daily life'.⁷⁴ While Chakravarty's Hutu respondents displayed feelings of sympathy, regret and shame for the genocide against ordinary Tutsi, they showed suspicion towards elite Tutsi.⁷⁵ The general sentiment she found was that Hutu are now the victims of a new period of injustice under elite Tutsi rule,⁷⁶ and that the Hutu 'middle ground' may yield to more radical views,⁷⁷ exactly the opposite of what the RPF claims it wishes to achieve.

King's participants prefaced their views on ethnicity with 'we are told that' or 'our government says that', hinting that their genuine opinion may differ from the government line.⁷⁸ Clearly, attempts to 'de-ethnicize' Rwandan society are not working: the result has been to emphasize rather than de-emphasize ethnicity.⁷⁹ This was reinforced by frustration about the 'Tutsization' of public office that was hidden under the guise of ethnic amnesia. By the mid 2000s, around two-thirds of positions in the state apparatus, at both the central and the local level, were occupied by Tutsi, most of them members of the RPF.⁸⁰ Bradol and Guibert insisted that 'to stress the absence of ethnic identities has become a means of masking the monopoly by Tutsi ... of political power'.⁸¹

I will now briefly discuss the impact of the RPF's ideological stance on unity and reconciliation in three areas: *gacaca* and *ingando*, commemoration, and legislation. Both *gacaca* and *ingando* are seen by many participants in field research as ways of extending the regime's reach and strengthening control over Hutu. With regard to *gacaca*, Ingelaere

found that ‘the decline in mutual trust, the distorted experience of reconciliation, and the lack of active popular participation ... are mainly the consequence of a problematic quest for the “truth”’.⁸² The regime takes care of that ‘truth’, which is widely propagated and ‘has instilled a far-reaching degree of self-censorship in the population with regard to elements not fitting in the official “public transcript”’.⁸³ State control ‘reinforces the power of the post-genocide government at the expense of individual processes of reconciliation’.⁸⁴ Probably the worst long-term consequence of the *gacaca* process and the regime’s discourse surrounding it is the collectivization of Hutu guilt, reinforced by two facts. First, with over one million convicted, about seventy per cent of Hutu males who were adult in 1994 were found guilty by the *gacaca* courts.⁸⁵ Second, in June 2013, President Kagame ‘invited’ all Hutu to ask for forgiveness for those who killed in their name. This imposition of collective guilt was institutionalized in the ‘*Ndi Umunyarwanda*’ (‘I am Rwandan’) campaign launched in October 2013.⁸⁶

On *ingando*, the participant observation findings of Susan Thomson, who was sent to a camp to be ‘re-educated’ because her research was ‘against national unity and reconciliation’ and ‘not the kind of research the government needed’,⁸⁷ summarize the problem well. She saw *ingando* as ‘an alienating, oppressive, and sometimes humiliating experience’ that ‘teaches these men, the majority of whom are ethnic Hutu, to remain silent and not question the RPF’s vision’.⁸⁸ The graduates of these camps that she met saw them as efforts to exercise social control over adult Hutu men: ‘Instead of being re-educated, these graduates have merely learned new forms of ritualized dissimulation and strategic compliance’.⁸⁹

De Lame argues that commemorations are used to instrumentalize history for very concrete political goals. They are compulsory and require people, by their presence, to show adherence to the official version of facts and their commemoration. ‘These rituals contribute to the maintaining of divisions.’⁹⁰ In a similar vein, Burnet notes that through nationalized mourning the regime proposes a particular narrative that promotes a polarizing ethnicized discourse and the symbolic pairing of victim and perpetrator,⁹¹ a point also noted by Ibreck who argues that the Kigali Memorial Center narrative is ‘exclusive, obliterating elements of the past and obstructing the potential for interethnic dialogue and reconciliation’.⁹² In addition, Burnet finds that ‘[t]he nationalized mourning ceremonies operate under a substantially different symbolic system than community-level mourning’.⁹³ Brandstetter raised a similar issue: the memorial sites are radically new symbolic settings, inscribed in a global landscape of memory where ‘the aesthetics of modernity are plainly visible’.⁹⁴ The Kigali Memorial Center ‘seems to highlight the cosmopolitanism of the ruling elite in Kigali and its familiarity with globalized practices of commemoration’.⁹⁵ Ibreck also observes this ‘transnationalization’ of memory: national remembrance is used ‘not only to mould domestic legitimacy, but also to anchor ruling elites with international frameworks for legitimization’.⁹⁶

Finally, law and justice. Legislation on ‘divisionism’ and ‘genocide ideology’ serves a dual purpose: it shields the RPF’s narrative on history and national unity and reconciliation, and enables it to silence political dissent. These laws are vague⁹⁷ and blend criminal defamation and other lesser offences, and even the legitimate expression of opinions, with genocide ideology. In 2008, when the justice minister accused Human Rights Watch leading researcher Alison Des Forges (who fought the genocide tooth and nail in 1994 and later substantially contributed to the conviction of genocide suspects) of becoming

'a spokesperson for genocide ideology', this substantiated the argument of Human Rights Watch that accusations of genocide ideology were used by the government to intimidate or silence its critics.⁹⁸ Apart from legislation, other ways are 'shadow methods' (such as harassment, disappearances and killings) and self-censorship.⁹⁹

Nationalism and self-reliance

Vision

The heading of nationalism and self-reliance here includes other elements such as dignity, claims of exceptionalism, distrust of everything and everyone outside the RPF, an obsession with control, intelligence and security, a sense of entitlement and of 'we know better', and a monopoly of legitimacy and morality. A strong nationalist discourse can be found in statements made by the Tutsi-dominated royalist party UNAR (*Union nationale rwandaise*) during the years leading up to independence.¹⁰⁰ For instance, at the launch of the UNAR in September 1959, the party's chairman François Rukeba stated:

The whole of Africa is struggling against colonialism, the same colonialism which has exploited our country and destroyed our ancestral customs in order to impose alien ones on us. The goal of our party is to restore these customs, to shake off the yoke of Belgian colonialism, to reconquer Rwanda's independence. To remake our country we need a single party, like UNAR, based upon tradition and no other ideology. He who does not belong to this party will be regarded as the people's enemy, the Mwami's enemy, Rwanda's enemy.¹⁰¹

While the UNAR opposed the RPF after its victory, the latter's sociological base is the Tutsi diaspora that fled Rwanda from 1959 onwards and supported the UNAR in exile. Its nationalist heritage is still visible today (another continuity from the UNAR to the RPF is their claim to represent all Rwandans).

Later experiences also had a major impact on the RPF's vision. Some of its main leaders were deeply involved in the National Resistance Movement's¹⁰² struggle in Uganda,¹⁰³ and they took home some of its defining ideas such as self-reliance, African unity and the need to re-educate the masses and to change their mentality. Clark notes that the RPF's backstory 'instilled a deep sense of purpose and resolve, a collective identity through conflict, and an ethos of self-reliance', as well as 'a persistent sense of vulnerability'.¹⁰⁴ Verhoeven also draws attention to the formative years of elites 'spent in violent environments, under constant threat of infiltration and extermination by their enemies'.¹⁰⁵ A more recent defining experience was civil war and genocide. Verhoeven argues that the RPF learned that compromise is a dangerous strategy and that bold military action delivers more than negotiations and peace accords; that it is unwise to depend on the outside world when in need, a conviction that led to suspicion vis-à-vis outsiders; and that the lukewarm reception by most Rwandans was a sign of ingratitude that clashed with the RPF's sense of entitlement for having 'liberated' them.¹⁰⁶

These feelings explain the regime's assertive, at times arrogant stance and their often fraught relations with the world. These showed in struggles with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), when there was a real danger that RPF suspects would be prosecuted (a battle won by the RPF); with the United Nations when Rwanda was criticized over its human rights record and its involvement in the DRC; with donors expressing concern about the same issues and suspending aid; with neighbouring

states; with judges in France and Spain who indicted RPF suspects; and with scholars and journalists critical of the government.¹⁰⁷ Its having defeated the genocide on its own and its military might allow the regime to behave like a regional superpower and to assert that the international community has no moral authority to give it lessons. Thus, having denied Rwandan troops' presence throughout the first Congo war, after it ended Kagame claimed Rwandan leadership: 'the Rwandan government planned and directed the rebellion'.¹⁰⁸ Just weeks after Rwanda invaded the DRC a second time, Rutazibwa argued that 'armed struggle and military management are an inevitable transition'.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, the belief in a military management mode, both at home and abroad, is pervasive. Rusagara, who conflates Rwanda's history to one of conquest (see earlier), claimed that '[b]orrowing from the *Ingabo z'u Rwanda* [the army of Rwanda] of old, the Rwanda Defence Force today not only ensures security for all, but provides a model of national unity and integration that continues to inform Rwanda's socio-political and economic development'.¹¹⁰ Reminiscent of the military expansion of the precolonial kingdom, those undergoing the *itorero* civic education training wear army fatigues when learning about 'Rwandan values'. According to Purdeková, '[c]o-legitimation and half-glorification of military culture and values in today's Rwanda ... translate into and are reflected through most aspects of social life'.¹¹¹

As Rwanda was facing mounting criticism, particularly from 2002 onwards, Kagame developed an increasingly nationalist discourse. In August 2002, he insisted that 'Rwandans must stop being dependent' upon the international community, whose attitude 'compounds our problems [and] emerges from indifference, ignorance and malice'.¹¹² In December 2008, he stated that '[w]e ... must find an immediate solution to handouts' and 'come out of the reliance on foreign aid'.¹¹³ In his end of year speech he accused the West of blocking 'our development out of vested interest to keep us backward'.¹¹⁴ In mid 2012, when some donors suspended part of their aid because of Rwanda's support for a rebel movement in the DRC, the government launched the *Agaciro* Development Fund aimed at generating domestic finance for development. *Agaciro* means 'dignity', and it immediately became a buzzword displayed in bars, on banners and cars. Faced with opposition from the US and France against constitutional changes in Africa to allow presidents to extend term limits, Kagame was very clear: 'We don't feel challenged by this type of lesson. It is clear that no one can dictate our behaviour'.¹¹⁵

Linked to nationalism, self-reliance and dignity is the conviction that Rwanda is special and that Rwandans know best what to do and how to do it. The idea that the experience of genocide makes Rwanda profoundly different from other countries is not only strongly advocated by the regime but also largely accepted by donors. Thus, the 2002 USAID Conflict Vulnerability Assessment of Rwanda argued that '[t]he concept of Rwandan exceptionalism ... remain(s) valid and will doubtless continue to do so for some time'.¹¹⁶ When concerns were expressed about the Rwandan villagization programme (*imidugudu*) and it was pointed out that such policies had failed in other countries, the director of lands responded: 'Tanzania did it wrong; we'll do it right'.¹¹⁷ No wonder a European aid official based in Kigali felt that 'the conviction of the Rwandans that they are the best makes them little attentive to other points of view'.¹¹⁸

Discussion

Despite being financially very dependent,¹¹⁹ Rwanda has maintained a great deal of policy independence from donors. It is a prime example of the ‘negotiating capital’ of some aid recipients discussed by Whitfield.¹²⁰ Rwanda managed to convince donors that governance was ‘technocratic’ and ‘developmental’ and thus unrelated to politics and rights. Even if they were not fully convinced, that is what donors wished to believe in order to make the relationship less sensitive. In addition, the regime has been able to claim moral authority over donors, using ‘the legacy of the genocide to de-legitimize external interference in the country’s domestic affairs’.¹²¹

Van Leeuwen noted that the ‘narrative of difference’ was based on ‘ambiguous assumptions’, not on any real evidence.¹²² The USAID Conflict Vulnerability Assessment mentioned earlier, which recognized Rwandan exceptionalism, also noted a ‘countervailing fear’ that this ‘may serve to mask an attempt to secure a long-term RPF stranglehold on political power’.¹²³ Rwandan assertiveness does indeed test the limits of international tolerance. This became very clear in 2012 when Rwanda supported yet another rebel movement in the DRC, and consistently lied about its involvement, against all evidence.¹²⁴ Even the ‘friends of the new Rwanda’ (such as the US, the UK and the Netherlands) could no longer tolerate it. They issued warnings and eventually imposed sanctions. When they conduct a reality check, donors may also realize that the images of progress they see turn out to be superficial and misleading, and are aesthetics rather than reality.¹²⁵

While it is undoubtedly honest in part, the regime’s assertive discourse is also aimed at shielding it from international criticism and condemnation. This shows in many ways. When criticized, Rwandan reactions are very outspoken, even when they are addressed to their main donors or political allies such as the US. For instance, after a US embassy cable on the dominance of Tutsi in institutions became available through Wikileaks, Kagame reacted furiously, stating that the US had no credibility to judge his government because they stood by a ‘genocidal government’ and that he wanted ‘a break with these fellows’.¹²⁶

Indicting the international community is part of a proactive strategy. When accused of supporting the M23 rebellion in the DRC, Kagame attributed responsibility for the crisis in North Kivu to the international community and the Congolese government.¹²⁷ A report issued by the Rwandan parliament in February 2013 simply reversed the roles: Rwanda was the victim of the crisis in the DRC, and accusations merely served to blemish Rwanda’s image. The bottom line of the regime’s discourse is that Rwanda is the victim of a conspiracy by the international community, which acts in bad faith and does not understand the reality of the situation.

High modernism

Vision

Rwanda Vision 2020 epitomizes the Rwandan elites’ ambitions. Released in 2000, it aims to ‘transform Rwanda’s economy into a middle income country (per capita income of about 900 USD per year, from 290 USD today)’. The ‘pillars’ identified to achieve this goal include good governance, underpinned by a capable state; the transformation of agriculture into a productive, high value, market-oriented sector; the development of an efficient private

sector spearheaded by competitiveness and entrepreneurship; a comprehensive human resources development, encompassing education, health and ICT; infrastructural development, entailing transport, energy, water and ICT networks; and the promotion of regional economic integration.¹²⁸

The ambitions go far beyond governance and the economy. Indeed, they aim to radically transform social relations, identities, space and the outlook and behaviour of individual Rwandans. They are therefore linked to other ideological themes, unity and reconciliation in particular. Those who returned from the diaspora brought with them a cosmopolitan and urban way of life and thinking that they project onto the entire country. This modernizing project is being implemented at a fast pace, and it is top-down. Purdeková notes a government conception of a 'fast-paced, forward-bound transformation',¹²⁹ leading to the creation of 'an ideal development subject'.¹³⁰ People need to *kwihutisha amajyambere*, 'hurry up progress'. The motto is: *Birashoboka*, 'everything is possible'.¹³¹

This is apparent in a number of areas that affect ordinary Rwandans' everyday lives, as a few examples show. The villagization programme, known as *imidugudu*, is an ambitious piece of social engineering, particularly in a country without a tradition of villages, but rather one of scattered settlement where the hills are the basic sociological unit. Yet the Ministry of Land announced in 1999 that 'the ultimate objective of the government is to enable the entire rural population to live in the grouped settlements'.¹³² Inspired at first by the goal to provide more efficient services (but also by the desire to control populations more effectively), it later also became a means of addressing security concerns. Sommers called this a 'breath-taking' policy of 'forcibly changing the residence of nearly all of [Rwanda's] citizens'.¹³³

Land and agricultural policies are another example. As over eighty per cent of the population is mainly engaged in subsistence farming, these domains are crucial. The 2005 land law introduced a radical break with the past, aimed at creating a private land market (through a system of registration of private tenure) and at enlarging holdings (through a system of consolidation). The law provided for a minimal holding of one hectare (while the average holding size is under 0.7 hectares per household), but not for an upper ceiling. The 2004 National Land Policy actually mentioned the need to 'protect the rights of absentee landlords'. Agricultural policies also attempted to engineer modernity. In the framework of its 'Green Revolution', in 2006 the government started to impose the growing of cash crops, and only particular species best suited to specific regions were allowed. This move towards mono-cropping was accompanied by profound changes in techniques and modes of cultivation. The race towards modernity in the agricultural sector also showed in the allocation of large concessions of land to foreign commercial investors active in exportable commodities like flowers, food and biofuels.

These policies are informed by a condescending attitude towards peasants. Their poverty is seen as a direct result of their lack of economic acumen and their laziness, both viewed as obstacles to development and modernity,¹³⁴ and treated 'as a barrier to progress and modernity rather than as a cause for concern'.¹³⁵ These modernizing strategies are phrased in technical, a-political terms: security of tenure, efficient exploitation, plot consolidation, optimal management, and productivity. Greedy noted that '[u]nderlying these somewhat neutral sounding phrases is a more radical, and risky, vision of a privatized, market-driven, modernized and mechanized agricultural sector'.¹³⁶

Discussion

James Scott found 'a pernicious combination in ... large-scale forms of social engineering that ended in disaster': the administrative ordering of nature and society; a high modernist ideology that believes it is possible to rationally redesign human nature and social relations; an authoritarian government willing and able to use coercive power to bring these designs into being; and a prostrate civil society unable to resist these plans.¹³⁷ This is the combination of elements prevailing in post-genocide Rwanda.

The government's policies are coherent, and make a great deal of sense on paper. However, their disturbing and possibly destructive impact can be seen in the examples presented above. With regard to the *imidugudu*, Des Forges noted that 'the perception of many residents of these settlements is that they are poorer now than they were before they moved'.¹³⁸ Newbury found that the policy failed in three respects: '(1) it quickly became coercive ...; (2) it reduced economic security and quality of life; and (3) it increased social tensions, particularly along ethnic lines'.¹³⁹

Newbury argued that in such a highly charged political terrain as land reform, 'Rwanda's leaders might have been expected to take a gradualist, consultative approach, but that did not happen'.¹⁴⁰ Concerns raised over land reform included the 'Latin-Americanization' of property, the fact that the state is the owner of all land (which allows the eviction of farmers in cases of 'under-exploitation'), the lack of consultation, bias in favour of rich absentee landlords, including military officers and senior officials, and the non-transparent nature of the land commissions.¹⁴¹ Although the importance of smallholders is stressed in many quarters including the World Bank, the Rwandan government favours larger land holdings, and therefore the number of people dependent on agriculture must dramatically decrease. However, it has no clear vision of the employment alternatives for peasants driven out of agriculture.¹⁴² A conflict vulnerability assessment for USAID feared that the land policy 'could increase inequality and exacerbate class divisions, which if politicised, could lead to conflict'.¹⁴³ These inequalities have materialized, 'mainly between the city and the countryside, which de facto means between Tutsi and Hutu'.¹⁴⁴ Pottier also points to the 'ethnification of landlessness'.¹⁴⁵ He sees the 'appropriation of large plots by powerful new elites ... [They], including senior government and military officials, are acquiring land for the purpose of speculation rather than agricultural production'.¹⁴⁶ In short, Tutsi absentee landlords are seen grabbing the land of Hutu peasants.¹⁴⁷ Policies like these, with their perception of ethnic bias, also have obvious implications for the reconciliation project discussed earlier.

The Crop Intensification Program (CIP) launched in 2007 did result in increased production, but success came at a price. Agricultural diversity plummeted, and the proportion of land occupied by maize rose from forty-eight to eighty-nine per cent in CIP-participating cooperatives. The price of staple foods on the local markets increased by twenty-four per cent from 2006 to 2008. Imported seeds imposed on the farmers are expensive and cannot be saved and replanted. Farmers thus became dependent on a complex supply chain for seeds they once produced themselves.¹⁴⁸ Those hardest hit by the measures of rural engineering were the poorest peasants, who suffered from famine and malnutrition as a result of compulsory mono-cropping. Although the relationship between CIP and food security is complex, CIP largely favours farmers with more land and imposes considerable constraints on smallholders.¹⁴⁹ That the adverse consequences of top-down policies were

not seen by key decision-makers is perhaps not surprising: since they 'are returnees from exile and therefore relative newcomers to Rwanda ... they could be guided in their planning unencumbered by the realities on the ground'.¹⁵⁰

A final note of caution must be struck on the figures used as evidence for Rwanda's economic success that some see as an acceptable trade-off for authoritarian and risky policies. Ansoms et al. took a critical look at data on poverty reduction, inequality and off-farm job creation reported in the national 2010–2011 household survey.¹⁵¹ They point to anomalies in the data set and weaknesses in the data analysis. An important denominator problem led to an overestimation of the actual reduction of poverty and inequality. They also find puzzling contradictions in the data showing a spectacular increase in jobs, particularly in the off-farm sector.¹⁵² One of the reasons why data 'in the field' often do not fit with reality is that local authorities and even households are bound by 'performance contracts' (*imihigo*) through which they commit themselves to achieving quite precisely set targets. They are therefore tempted to 'doctor' their achievements in order to avoid sanctions.¹⁵³ An American medical doctor who worked in Rwanda noted that Rwandan leaders 'are obsessed with the outward perception of their performance ... The Rwandan government doctors statistics on health indicators to impress their donors'.¹⁵⁴ In a subsistence economy, the calculation of GDP is in part based on reporting 'from below', so Rwandan growth figures may actually be less impressive than the world would like to believe. Overestimated GDP figures have been noticed elsewhere too, e.g. in Ethiopia, a country with a regime comparable to that of Rwanda.¹⁵⁵ However, as donors need 'success stories' and recipients need money, neither wants to rock the boat.

Conclusion

Over the years, the RPF has developed a coherent and wide-ranging ideological repertoire. Some elements—its vision of history and the nature of ethnicity, but also its nationalist outlook—date from well before it took power, and can even be traced back to elite Tutsi positions before independence. These visions were further refined and made more precise after its victory, when other themes were also added, in particular its high modernist stance and its insistence on self-reliance, the affirmation of Rwanda's uniqueness, and of course the fight against the ideology of genocide. After the RPF had taken power and was in charge of running a state, this ideological content became more concrete and was used in support of a political project. Its position in government also allowed the RPF to successfully impose its ideological formulation and have it widely accepted, at least in the public realm. Through a combination of excellent communication and repression of alternative views, it became nearly unchallengeable.¹⁵⁶ To return to Althusser's notion of ideology as a form and system of power, it sought to legitimate the RPF's ever tightening grip on political, military and economic power, and to fend off challenges to its monopoly.

Rwanda is not at all unique in having a dominant ideology that is not (entirely) based on reality, be it historical or contemporary, not shared by many in society whose lives it wishes to affect, and challenged publicly or clandestinely, at home and abroad. Nor is the overnight imposition of a new ideology very different from—even the opposite of—a previous one unique. This has happened as a result of many revolutions, and it has even happened

in Rwanda before. Some of these new ideologies have stood the test of time, generally when they were shared by many in society and/or when they were seen as the foundation on which better lives could be built. The problem with the RPF's ideology, as with some other ones, is that it does not go with the grain: many Rwandans do not share it, and rather see it as a weapon of oppression. In short, the wide gap between the public and the hidden transcripts shown by a wealth of field research is a major challenge to the ideological foundation and justification of the RPF's ambitious project.

The shifts in this ideology are interesting, as they indicate why and how the RPF, as a learning organization, has responded to events and challenges. The visions of history and national unity served above all to hide ethnocracy and to project a utopian, harmonious past. The anti-genocide ideology became a prominent theme for obvious reasons: 1994 should not be allowed to happen again, but it also became a powerful weapon to maintain its legitimacy and to deal with dissenting voices. While nationalism is an old theme too, the RPF only put it forward from the early 2000s, when it was being criticized increasingly on issues such as democracy, human rights and involvement in the DRC. High modernism also came to the fore around 2000, when the country had been rebuilt in human and material terms, and immediate security concerns had been met through operations in the DRC and the crushing of an insurrection in the north-west. This was not just an ambitious engineering project in itself, but was also seen as a way to stave off potential discontent through the provision of services and the improvement of people's lives. In other words, competent technocratic governance is expected to offset frustrations caused by poor political governance.

Pottier has convincingly shown how the RPF achieved a monopoly of knowledge construction: 'reality is what Rwanda's political leaders, as moral guardians, tell the world what it is'.¹⁵⁷ This article has addressed two major flaws in the RPF's ideology: its at times shaky factual and historical basis, and its use to legitimize policies that have little popular support.¹⁵⁸ The fact that the regime harshly prohibits challenges to its discourse may be indicative of its own uncertainty about how solid its project is, and how it is received both at home and abroad. Therefore, while it may seem to have been successfully imposed, the re-imagining project discussed by Pottier might well be based on quicksand. The gap between the public and hidden transcripts is particularly problematic with regard to the linked issues of history and unity/reconciliation, on which there is clearly no common reading. The fact that strong underground narratives on these themes contrast with the RPF's ideology, that they cannot be discussed in the public domain, and that their clandestine nature may well render them more radical all suggest that Rwanda is not heading towards long-term peace and stability.

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 118. 'Le Rwanda, pays du miracle en trompe-l'oeil', *Le Temps*, 2 July 2012.
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153. Even the regime's press, *The New Times* in particular, has drawn attention to the widespread practice of *tekiniki* (from the French 'techniquer', 'to doctor data').
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155. 'GDP statistics in Ethiopia are subject to significant weaknesses. Applying plausible factor productivities would suggest that the annual GDP growth rate could be off by as much as 3 percentage points in recent years' (International Monetary Fund [IMF], *The Federal Republic of Ethiopia. 2013 article IV consultation. IMF Country Report No. 13/308* [Washington, DC: IMF, October 2013], p. 6 fn. 4).
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157. Pottier, *Re-imagining Rwanda*, p. 207.
158. Even in the absence of reliable surveys and in the context of a tightly policed population, this gap very clearly shows in most field research conducted during the last fifteen years. Participants would typically follow the government line in public, but express their disagreement with government positions in private conversations with researchers.

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