

The Ideology of Genocide: How Bad Politics Led Rwanda to the Genocide Against the Tutsi

The Genocide against the Tutsi did not emerge overnight. It was the tragic culmination of decades of political manipulation, ethnic division, and institutionalized discrimination. While many factors contributed to the tragedy, the roots of genocide can largely be traced to the colonial policies introduced by Belgium during its administration of Rwanda.

A turning point came in 1931, when the Belgian colonial administration introduced identity cards that classified every Rwandan according to ethnicity. What had historically been social categories within Rwandan society were transformed into rigid ethnic identities. This marked the beginning of a political system that institutionalized division among Rwandans.

The ideological foundations of this policy had been laid even earlier. On November 27, 1927, Monseigneur Léon-Paul Classe wrote a letter explaining why the colonial administration believed the Tutsi should remain in positions of leadership. In the letter, he argued that "the Tutsi possess qualities that cannot be ignored." He concluded by emphasizing that these views were not his alone but reflected the general thinking of many missionaries serving in Rwanda.

Belgian colonial rule fundamentally altered relationships among Rwandans. Like many colonial administrations, it relied on the principle of divide and rule, believing that a divided population would be easier to govern. The historical record leaves little doubt that colonial policies deliberately deepened social divisions.

Some have questioned why the King of Rwanda did not completely oppose these divisive policies. The answer lies in the limited authority he possessed under Belgian rule. Although he remained the symbolic ruler of Rwanda, real political power rested with the colonial administration. The King occupied only the sixth level within the colonial hierarchy, beneath the King of Belgium, the Governor-General of the Belgian colonies in Africa, the Governor-General of the Belgian Congo, the Governor of Rwanda-Urundi, and the Resident of Rwanda.

The extent of colonial control is evident in official correspondence. A letter dated February 5, 1932, sent by the Belgian administration to the Resident of Rwanda, contained detailed instructions regarding the King's responsibilities, conduct, and even his salary. Such documents illustrate that ultimate authority no longer rested in the Rwandan monarchy but in the colonial government.

As independence movements spread across Africa, political tensions within Rwanda intensified. Members of the National Council, most of whom were Tutsi, published a document known as the *Mise au Point*, demanding greater political rights and increased participation in governing their own country.

At the same time, colonial rule had imposed forced labor on many Rwandans. People were compelled to build roads, mine minerals, and cultivate export crops such as coffee and tea under

harsh conditions. Yet as the struggle for independence gained momentum, Belgian authorities increasingly portrayed the demand for self-government as a Tutsi political project.

Rather than supporting a unified independence movement, the colonial administration shifted its political support toward an emerging Hutu elite led by Grégoire Kayibanda. In 1957, this group published the *Bahutu Manifesto*, presenting itself as the defender of the Hutu population against what it described as centuries of Tutsi domination.

From that point onward, ethnicity increasingly became the defining principle of political competition in Rwanda. What had once been social distinctions evolved into deeply entrenched political identities, laying the foundation for decades of mistrust, discrimination, and violence. The years that followed independence did not bring reconciliation. Instead, ethnic discrimination became increasingly entrenched in the country's political institutions.

On the night of December 24, 1963, more than 25,000 Tutsi were massacred in Gikongoro Prefecture in an operation led by Prefect Nkeramugaba. The government justified the killings as an act of self-defense, claiming they were a response to an incursion by *Inyenzi* fighters—Rwandan refugees affiliated with UNAR who had launched attacks from Burundi two days earlier.

In early 1964, several international media outlets, including Radio Vatican, *Le Soir*, and *La Libre Belgique*, reported on the massacres. Despite these reports, the international community paid little attention. Although the *Inyenzi* attacks continued until 1968, they failed to achieve their objectives. Meanwhile, Tutsi who remained inside Rwanda continued to face persecution, and by the early 1970s many were expelled from secondary schools and universities solely because they were Tutsi.

Throughout his presidency, Grégoire Kayibanda repeatedly used political rhetoric that portrayed Tutsi as the source of the country's problems. During the celebrations marking Rwanda's first anniversary of independence in 1962, his speeches fueled ethnic resentment while portraying refugees as a national threat.

As divisions emerged within the ruling PARMEHUTU party in 1968, Kayibanda increasingly blamed the country's political difficulties on the Tutsi. Those who rejected this narrative were themselves accused of disloyalty. Gradually, nearly every national challenge was attributed to the Tutsi population, while the government continued to cultivate fear and hatred among Rwandans.

By 1973, Kayibanda's government had reached its final days. When questioned about the expulsion of Tutsi students from schools, President Kayibanda defended the policy by dismissing those responsible as idle troublemakers and criminals rather than addressing the discrimination itself.

Political tensions were also growing within the government. The Constitution adopted in 1961 limited the presidency to three terms, yet Kayibanda sought to remain in office beyond those

limits. At the same time, accusations of regional favoritism became increasingly common, with senior government positions concentrated among politicians from his home region of Nduga.

These divisions spread into the military. Many officers from northern Rwanda, particularly Gisenyi and Ruhengeri (BAKIGA), became increasingly dissatisfied with the government's policies. In an attempt to secure military loyalty, Kayibanda promoted Juvénal Habyarimana to the rank of Major General on April 1, 1973. The gesture, however, failed to ease growing discontent.

On July 5, 1973, Rwanda experienced its first military coup. The First Republic under President Grégoire Kayibanda came to an end and was replaced by the Second Republic under Major General Juvénal Habyarimana.

Eleven military officers carried out the coup. They dissolved both the government and Parliament, placing the country under the authority of a military council.

In 1975, Habyarimana established what he called the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND), making it the country's sole legal political party. Membership in the party became compulsory for every Rwandan citizen. Its official motto was "Unity, Peace, Development."

Three years later, a new Constitution formally established the institutions of the Second Republic.

During the early 1980s, Rwanda enjoyed relative economic stability. Its currency remained one of the strongest in the region. Yet political and economic challenges soon emerged.

Following Yoweri Museveni's insurgency against Milton Obote in Uganda, thousands of Rwandan refugees living there were forced to return to Rwanda. Many initially feared returning, and the Rwandan government resisted accepting them. Under international pressure, however, authorities eventually allowed them to settle temporarily in Kigondo, within Ngarama Commune in Umutara Prefecture, where living conditions were extremely difficult.

In April 1984, President Habyarimana met Rwandan students in Belgium. When asked about the refugees arriving from Uganda, he claimed that of approximately 45,000 arrivals, only about 5,000 were genuinely Rwandan. He famously compared Rwanda to "a glass already full of water," arguing that the country no longer had room to receive additional refugees and calling upon other nations to accommodate them.

In 1986, the MRND Central Committee concluded that Rwanda's limited land made it difficult to absorb returning refugees and even proposed exploring diplomatic arrangements to settle some Rwandans in Gabon. That same year, Rwanda's economy entered a severe downturn as international coffee and tea prices collapsed. Ironically, 1986 also marked the victory of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army in Uganda, a campaign in which many Rwandan refugees had played an important role.

In 1987, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF-Inkotanyi) was officially established.

By 1988 and 1989, Rwanda's economic crisis had deepened considerably. Foreign exchange reserves declined dramatically, coffee prices continued to fall, and government revenues shrank by nearly forty percent. Drought affected parts of the country, including Gikongoro.

Meanwhile, international pressure for democratic reforms intensified. During the 1990 Francophonie Summit in Gabon, French President François Mitterrand urged African governments to embrace multiparty democracy. On September 1, 1990, Faustin Twagiramungu and other politicians issued a public document criticizing one-party rule and calling for democratic reforms.

On October 1, 1990, the Rwanda Patriotic Front launched the Liberation Struggle.

The launch of the Liberation Struggle on October 1, 1990, marked a turning point in Rwanda's political history. Yet from its earliest days, the conflict unfolded within an atmosphere already characterized by deep ethnic polarization.

On October 2, 1990, Major General Fred Gisa Rwigema, the commander of the RPF-Inkotanyi forces, was killed. Two days later, French, Belgian, and Zairian troops arrived in Rwanda to support President Habyarimana's government through what became known as Operation Noroît.

During the same month, several senior RPF officers, including Major Peter Bayingana, Major Chris Bunyenyezi, and Adam Waswa, also lost their lives. Believing the RPF had been defeated, the government officially announced on October 23, 1990, that the war was over.

At the same time, thousands of Tutsi civilians paid the price for the conflict. More than 10,000 were arrested and accused of being RPF collaborators (IBYITSO). Others were killed across different parts of the country simply because of their ethnic identity.

Between 1990 and 1991, government forces began organizing and training groups of Hutu youth that would later become known as the Interahamwe militia.

The RPF, however, had not been defeated. On January 21, 1991, the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) launched a surprise attack on Ruhengeri, capturing the town for approximately eight hours. During the operation, prisoners held at Ruhengeri Prison were freed, military supplies and medicine were seized, and Camp Muhoza was captured, providing the RPA with valuable equipment and strengthening its military position.

Meanwhile, Rwanda's political landscape was undergoing significant change. In January 1991, President Habyarimana accepted the principle of multiparty politics. By June, Parliament had legalized political parties, allowing opposition movements to register formally.

Political tensions nevertheless continued to intensify. In January 1992, following the appointment of Prime Minister Sylvestre Nsanzimana, who lacked the support of opposition

parties, large demonstrations organized by the MDR, PL, and PSD attracted more than 105,000 participants.

As political competition increased, extremist organizations also emerged. On February 16, 1992, the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR) was established, presenting itself as a defender of Hutu interests.

On April 7, 1992, Habyarimana reached an agreement with opposition parties and appointed Dismas Nsengiyaremye as Prime Minister. One of the new government's primary responsibilities was to begin peace negotiations with the RPF. Following preparatory meetings in France and Belgium, both sides agreed that formal negotiations would take place in Arusha, Tanzania.

The Arusha Peace Talks officially began on July 12, 1992, with the signing of a ceasefire agreement. Later that year, negotiations advanced to include discussions on political power-sharing.

During this period, Lieutenant Colonel Anatole Nsengiyumva circulated a report entitled *What Soldiers and Civilians Think*. According to the document, many civilians viewed the negotiations as a betrayal and believed the enemy should be eliminated. Among sections of the military, similar views prevailed, with accusations that the RPF was receiving support from opposition political parties and that the country was being "sold" to its enemies. The report also criticized President Habyarimana, accusing him of placing personal interests above national interests.

The Arusha negotiations eventually produced a detailed power-sharing agreement. Cabinet positions were allocated among the MRND, RPF, MDR, PSD, PL, and PDC. The future national army was to consist of equal numbers of soldiers from the RPA and the government forces (FAR), while parliamentary representation was to be shared among the participating political parties.

Not everyone welcomed these agreements. Colonel Théoneste Bagosora reportedly opposed the power-sharing arrangements. Around the same period, extremist military networks emerged, including a group known as "AMASASU." Internal documents discussed identifying and targeting individuals described as collaborators and enemies, while military publications increasingly defined the country's principal enemy as the Tutsi population and anyone considered sympathetic to the RPF.

In 1992, Léon Mugesera delivered one of the most notorious hate speeches of the period, calling upon Hutu to kill Tutsi and drive them into the Nyabarongo River, claiming they should be sent "back to Ethiopia." The following year, President Habyarimana repeatedly delayed implementing the Arusha Peace Accords while violence against Tutsi civilians continued in areas such as Kibirira and Bigogwe.

On February 8, 1993, the RPA launched a major offensive that brought its forces to within approximately thirty kilometers of Kigali. Two months later, Ruhengeri was captured once again.

France increased its military support for the Habyarimana government by providing additional weapons and ammunition.

The conflict produced an enormous humanitarian crisis. By the end of 1993, more than one million people had been displaced within Rwanda.

On December 28, 1993, six hundred RPA soldiers arrived in Kigali and were stationed at the CND building to provide security for RPF political representatives preparing to participate in the Broad-Based Transitional Government established under the Arusha Accords.

The political crisis reached its breaking point in early 1994. On January 5, Joseph Kavaruganda, President of the Supreme Court, administered the constitutional oath to President Habyarimana. In March, Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana submitted a proposed list of ministers for the transitional government, but President Habyarimana rejected it.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, shortly after the Arusha Peace Process had reached its final stage, the aircraft carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down as it approached Kigali.

The following day, April 7, 1994, the Genocide against the Tutsi began.

The killings unfolded with extraordinary speed and coordination. Civilians had already been mobilized, lists of intended victims had been prepared, militias had received military training, and thousands of machetes had been distributed before the violence erupted.

These developments marked the culmination of decades of discriminatory politics, extremist ideology, organized propaganda, and systematic preparation. According to the perspective presented in this article, they represent the final stages in the political process that led to the Genocide against the Tutsi.

Understanding this history is essential, not only to remember the past, but also to recognize how political division, discrimination, and hate can gradually evolve into mass violence when left unchecked.

The Genocide against the Tutsi remains one of history's clearest reminders that the misuse of politics, when combined with intolerance and dehumanization, can destroy a nation. It also reminds us that safeguarding unity, justice, and human dignity is the shared responsibility of every generation.