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Genocide, reconciliation, and authoritarianism: reassessing the sustainability of peace in Rwanda.

Genocide, Reconciliation and Authoritarianism: Reassessing the Sustainability of Peace in Rwanda

Genocide, reconciliation and authoritarianism: reevaluating the sustainability of peace in Rwanda

Juliana Moraes Miura

Abstract

This article critically examines the dynamics of conflict, reconciliation, and the consolidation of political power in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. Based on a historical and institutional analysis, the study argues that genocidal violence cannot be understood merely as a sudden collapse of social order, but rather as the result of political and identity structures built during the colonial period. Using theoretical contributions from Mahmood Mamdani, Johan Galtung, and John Paul Lederach, the article analyzes three fundamental dimensions of post-genocide reconstruction: collective memory, social capital, and institutional reconstruction. The study demonstrates that, although Rwanda has achieved significant progress in economic development and institutional stability in the last three decades, structural tensions persist related to the centralization of political power, the restriction of pluralism, and the instrumentalization of historical memory. It is argued that reconciliation processes based on social capital and community initiatives play an essential role in maintaining everyday stability, but can be limited by authoritarian political structures. By analyzing the intersection between economic reconstruction, transitional justice, and political governance, this article contributes to peace and conflict studies by demonstrating that economic growth and institutional stability are not, by themselves, sufficient indicators of sustainable peace. The Rwandan experience illustrates the complexity of peacebuilding in post-genocide contexts and has important implications for international post-conflict reconstruction policies.

Keywords: Genocide, reconciliation, authoritarianism

Introduction

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda constitutes one of the most devastating episodes of violence.
politics of the late 20th century. In approximately one hundred days, between April and July of that year,
Estimates indicate that between five hundred thousand and one million Tutsis were murdered.
along with tens of thousands of Hutus considered opponents of the regime (Mamdani,
(When Victims Become Killers, 2001). The speed and magnitude of the violence not only shocked.
the international community, but they also exposed institutional weaknesses and deep-seated problems.
Identity divisions historically constructed in the country.

For decades, the Rwandan genocide has often been interpreted as a result of
pre-existing ethnic antagonisms between Hutus and Tutsis. However, historical analyses and
More recent institutional findings demonstrate that such an interpretation is insufficient. Far from reflecting

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Deeply rooted in atavistic rivalries, the ethnic identities that structured the genocide were profoundly...
shaped by colonial policies that institutionalized racial distinctions and political hierarchies
in the state apparatus (Mamdani 2020). The German and, later, Belgian colonial administration
transformed relatively fluid social categories into rigidly defined political identities.
defined, linked to differentiated rights of citizenship, education and access to political power.
In this context, the 1994 genocide cannot be understood simply as an explosion.
not as spontaneous intercommunal violence, but as the collapse of a constructed political order.
on racialized categories of belonging and exclusion. As Mamdani argues,
Genocides are never morally justifiable, but they become historically "thinkable."
when certain political structures make collective violence a conceivable instrument.
of social reorganization (Mamdani 2001).
Following the genocide, Rwanda began an intensive process of national reconstruction. The new
The government led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) implemented institutional reforms.
reconciliation programs and economic development policies that transformed
significantly impacted the country's economic structure. Over the last three decades, Rwanda has become...
often presented as an exemplary case of post-conflict reconstruction, marked by
Rapid economic growth, urban modernization, and a significant reduction in poverty.
However, this reconstruction process raises a central question for peace studies and
Conflict: Does Rwanda's contemporary political stability represent sustainable peace or...
Is it simply the absence of overt violence under a highly centralized governance model?
This article argues that, although Rwanda has made significant progress in
economic development and institutional reconstruction, the sustainability of its peace.
remains uncertain. To examine this question, the study analyzes three fundamental dimensions of
Rwandan reconstruction process:

(1) The politics of memory and the mechanisms of transitional justice,
(2) the role of social capital and community initiatives in everyday reconciliation, and
(3) The economic and institutional transformations that have taken place in the country over the last three decades.

By analyzing these dimensions in an integrated way, it is argued that the Rwandan experience reveals
both the potential and the limitations of contemporary peacebuilding strategies in
post-genocide contexts. Although community initiatives and transitional justice mechanisms
have contributed to the reconstruction of the social fabric, political centralization and restrictions
Pluralism raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of this peace.
term.

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Colonialism, racial construction, and the origins of genocide.

The genocide occurred shortly after the death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana and...
president of Burundi, whose planes were shot down in April 1994. Although the regime of
Habyarimana already cultivated hostility against the Tutsis, the most extreme forms of mobilization
Genocidal tactics emerged when radical political groups began to instrumentalize the
social resentment and mobilizing broad sectors of the Hutu population towards organized violence.
The scale of civilian participation in the violence revealed the depth of social divisions. Militias
how Interahamwe, together with sectors of the army and local leaders, coordinated the
killings. Young men trained during the civil war went on to train other civilians, expanding
The capacity for genocidal mobilization quickly increased. The stated objective was total extermination.
of the Tutsi population, including women and children. Hutus who refused to participate in the
Those involved in the massacres were often accused of treason and executed.

To fully understand these events, it is necessary to analyze the role of colonialism in
The construction of rigid racial identities. As Mamdani argues, political identities in colonial Africa did
not emerge spontaneously, but were produced by systems.
institutional structures that organized power and citizenship according to racial and ethnic categories.
(Mamdani 2001).

During colonial rule, European administrators—first Germans and later,
Belgians — institutionalized the distinction between Hutus and Tutsis. Influenced by racial theories.
European colonizers began to interpret the Tutsis as descendants of the Tutsi peoples.
Hamites, considered superior, while the Hutus were classified as Bantus.
"natives." This racial hierarchy was incorporated into fundamental state institutions.
colonial, including education, public administration, the tax system and structures
ecclesiastical.

The Catholic Church played a central role in this process, contributing to its consolidation.
A racial narrative that separated Hutus and Tutsis as biologically distinct groups. Documents
Identity organizations began to officially register these categories, transforming social distinctions.
fluid identities that are rigid and politically significant.

These colonial policies produced a system in which the Tutsis were frequently
positioned as administrative intermediaries between the colonial power and the local population.
At the same time, this structure fueled resentments that would later be mobilized.
by political leaders in the post-colonial period. As Mamdani observes in When Victims Become

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Killers and genocides are unjustifiable, but not inexplicable; they are "thinkable" within certain contexts.
specific historical contexts that make collective violence politically conceivable (2001).

The post-genocide era: memory, transitional justice, and social reconstruction.

Following the genocide, Rwanda faced the monumental challenge of rebuilding a society.
devastated.

The scale of the violence has left the country in chaos, with communities destroyed, families separated and...
a legacy of profound trauma. The period following the genocide was marked by a
Mass displacement of people, which generated a serious humanitarian crisis. The community
The international community faced strong criticism for its failure to intervene effectively and prevent the...
bloodshed during the genocide.

In response to this devastating chapter, Rwanda embarked on a difficult journey of recovery.
Reconstruction and reconciliation. Efforts were made to bring those responsible to justice.
for genocide through international tribunals, at the same time as they were initiated
Internal processes aimed at recognizing and confronting atrocities. Rebuilding
Trust and promoting unity among communities have become central objectives for the
national stability.

In the following two decades, the country underwent a broad process of memorialization. More than
Five hundred memorials were established in different regions of the country, many of them with support.
from the government, with the aim of preserving the memory of the genocide and promoting an identity.
national based on recognition of the past (Fox 2021).

These memorials play a central role in the construction of collective memory and in
recognition of the victims. However, they also reveal persistent tensions between different
groups of survivors, which demonstrates that processes of public memory can,
Simultaneously, promote unity and expose social divisions.

Memorialization is considered a fundamental mechanism of transitional justice.
complementing traditional approaches such as truth commissions, trials, and reparations.
Transitional justice mechanisms generally fall into two main categories:
retributive justice, which focuses on punishment proportional to the crimes committed, and justice
Restorative therapy, which emphasizes reconciliation and attention to the needs of victims.
Memorialization, as a form of restorative justice, contributes to the construction of a memory.
collective and for the promotion of social harmony (González-Enríquez and Aguilar 43; Fox).

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In the field of transitional justice, Rwanda has adopted a combination of retributive mechanisms and Restorative. International tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), These tribunals were established to try leaders responsible for genocide. They represented an attempt to apply retributive justice through punishments proportionate to the acts committed. crimes committed.

The trials — especially those conducted by the International Criminal Court for Rwanda — these constitute mechanisms of retributive justice, whose objective is to hold people accountable. prosecuting the perpetrators for the crimes committed. Truth commissions, on the other hand, They are situated at the restorative end of the transitional justice spectrum, seeking to reveal the truth. about past crimes, to produce public knowledge about the violations that occurred and contribute to the reconstruction of unity and social peace. Although these programs may in fact... While they may promote healing and forgiveness processes, they also have limitations, such as the risk of... to marginalize certain victims or their experiences of suffering. Furthermore, when the new The Rwandan government faced the challenge of dealing with an extremely high number of potential defendants, in the context of a weakened judicial system, opted to resort to the model South African confession in exchange for clemency. Instead of adopting a policy of amnesty — deemed inadequate given the magnitude of the genocide, the decision was made to apply penalties. reduced to those who confessed their participation in the crimes (González-Enríquez and Aguilar 43). Local reconciliation programs — including free legal assistance, initiatives Community and educational programs have also proven to be practical tools for To cope with the tensions of the post-conflict period. These efforts enabled individuals and communities dealt more directly with social, political, and psychological challenges. left behind by the genocide.

Social capital and everyday reconciliation

Reconciliation processes emerged at the community level. Small acts of cooperation. Daily interactions between neighbors have become important elements in the reconstruction of social relations. Fox describes these practices as "everyday reconciliations," in which survivors and former members of the community are involved. perpetrators begin to coexist again through daily interactions based on pragmatism and social necessity (Fox 2021).

These practices can also be interpreted in light of the concept of social capital. How? According to McDoom (2013), social networks play a crucial role in both

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Mobilization against violence, as well as peacebuilding, can be facilitated by interpersonal bonds. They can be used for cooperation, but they can also be instrumentalized to mobilize collective violence. Social capital was — and continues to be — a crucial element in the processes of building and maintaining peace in the post-genocide period, acting as an essential mechanism for the Rebuilding social bonds, collective healing, and the restoration of community relationships. deeply fragmented by violence. Several of these initiatives became visible in in the context of post-conflict reconstruction, particularly through grassroots movements and community organizations, which often did not seek direct transformations in the context of legal or institutional transformation of the State. Instead, they focused their efforts on transformation. of everyday relationships between individuals, encouraging processes of social reconnection and creation. of new bridges of sociability and trust between previously divided groups (de Lame 303; Eraman 130).

In this sense, while the colonial system contributed to producing and institutionalizing On the one hand, many organizations do not adhere to rigid racial categories, deepening identity divisions. Governmental bodies operating in the post-genocide period endeavored to promote processes of Social reconstruction based on consensus, dialogue, and reconciliation. Initiatives for building... Peace authors often emphasize the importance of individual development as a foundation. for collective transformations, arguing that the strengthening of individual consciousness Understanding conflicts and their origins can foster greater social resilience in the face of hate speech. and violent mobilizations. From this perspective, such processes of social transformation — Simultaneously individual and collective—they are considered fundamental to inaugurating a A new phase of political stability and social cohesion. Although, at first glance, they may seem insignificant, small everyday acts of kindness and cooperation — often influenced through memorialization rituals and transitional justice mechanisms — they play a These daily practices play a relevant role in building long-term peaceful coexistence. They gradually contribute to restoring trust between individuals and communities. deeply scarred by collective violence.

In this context, the strengthening of social capital, particularly in its *bridging* dimension. *Social capital* — that is, the ability to create links between distinct groups — has proven to be a a fundamental element. As McDoom argues, this type of social capital played a role. a decisive role both in the mobilization process that enabled the perpetration of the genocide as well as, subsequently, in the efforts of social reconstruction and maintenance of peace during the period. post-conflict.

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Contemporary Rwanda: Economic growth and fragile peace

Three decades after the genocide, Rwanda has shown a remarkable economic trajectory. The country
It transformed itself from a society devastated by war into a growing economy, often cited as an
example of development in Africa.
The government has invested significantly in infrastructure and technology, including a 95 project.
Millions of dollars to expand the national telecommunications network (Crisafulli 2012). How
As a result, the country has sought to transform itself into a regional center for information technology.
Social indicators also show significant progress. The poverty rate has fallen from 56.9%.
from 2006 to 44.9% in 2011, lifting approximately one million people out of poverty.
only five years (Crisafulli 2012).
Despite these advances, the Rwandan political system has been the target of increasing criticism.
International observers point to concerns related to political repression and restrictions.
to freedom of expression and constitutional changes that may allow the permanence of
President Paul Kagame in power until 2034 (Cropley 2021).
The government led by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) has made significant progress in
Institutional reconstruction and the consolidation of a more structured bureaucratic governance.
However, it has also been the target of substantial criticism for concentrating political power and wealth.
in the hands of a small elite, in addition to facing accusations of ethnic discrimination and repression
to political dissent, weakening of civil society and the conduct of a process of
Democratization considered flawed. Rwanda's military participation in the conflict in the Republic.
The Democratic Republic of Congo also contributed to regional instability. In parallel, the
The government has avoided stronger international condemnations by mobilizing what some
Analysts call it "genocide credit," that is, the international political capital resulting from its
role in stopping the 1994 genocide. In this context, the international community itself,
By tolerating or downplaying such practices, we risk allowing forms of violence to continue.
structural (Reyntjens 177).
Furthermore, the regime led by the Rwanda Patriotic Front exhibits important continuities.
with the period prior to the genocide, particularly with regard to the concentration of power.
within a restricted elite, the use of clientelistic networks and the instrumentalization of ethnic identities
in the exercise of power. As the author observes, "the way in which power is exercised by the RPF
echoes, in several respects, the period of one-party rule" (Reyntjens 208).

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Conclusion

Defining what constitutes "peace" in societies that emerge from violent conflict is a task.
conceptually complex. As Malkki notes, anthropological perspectives
They frequently question the assumption that social harmony represents the natural state of
human societies (Eramian 2017). In political science, in turn, peace is usually defined
such as the absence of organized violence and the presence of institutional stability. However,
Contemporary approaches in peace studies argue that a true peace
Sustainable living requires something deeper: cooperative social relationships, political justice, and inclusion.
institutional (Galtung 1969; Lederach 1997).

In light of these perspectives, the Rwandan experience presents a profoundly ambivalent picture. On the one hand, there are community initiatives, transitional justice mechanisms, and practices.
Daily acts of reconciliation demonstrate concrete efforts to rebuild the social fabric.
devastated by genocide. Local processes of reconciliation, memorialization practices and the
Strengthening forms of social capital has contributed significantly to restoring the
interpersonal relationships and promoting pragmatic forms of coexistence among communities.
previously divided by violence.

On the other hand, the consolidation of a highly centralized political system gives rise to
important questions arise about the nature of the peace built in the country. Although Rwanda has
achieved remarkable progress in economic development, institutional modernization and
Poverty reduction, economic growth, and administrative stability are not, in themselves,
guarantees of lasting peace. The concentration of political power, restrictions on pluralism, and the
Limitations to the space for political contestation suggest that the observed stability can coexist.
with persistent forms of political control and structural violence.

In this sense, Rwanda illustrates a recurring paradox in post-conflict reconstruction processes:
A country can achieve significant levels of stability and economic development.
while still facing substantial challenges in consolidating a fully inclusive peace.
and sustainable.

The Rwandan experience demonstrates that peacebuilding cannot be reduced solely to...
Absence of violence or the success of economic development policies. Processes
Lasting peacemaking efforts depend equally on the existence of political institutions.
inclusive, protecting civil liberties and the ability of societies to deal critically
with your past.

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Therefore, although Rwanda represents a remarkable case of post-genocide reconstruction, its
This trajectory also highlights the limitations of contemporary peacebuilding strategies that
They prioritize stability and economic growth, without necessarily promoting openness.
Politics and institutional pluralism. The sustainability of peace in the country will ultimately depend on politics and institutional pluralism.
instance, of the capacity to reconcile economic reconstruction, social reconciliation and
Political inclusion in a national project that goes beyond merely managing the memory of the genocide.

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