

## THE POWER OF HORROR IN RWANDA

By Kenneth Roth

During a gruesome three months in 1994, about 800,000 Rwandans were murdered as part of a calculated effort by a group of Hutu extremists to eradicate the country's Tutsi population.

The genocide ended only with the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a rebel group founded by Rwandan exiles who ousted the Hutu extremists. The front's austere and savvy commander, Paul Kagame, now serves as Rwanda's president.

In the 15 years since the extremist government was ousted, Rwanda has become an island of stability in a volatile region. The economy is booming, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi is officially downplayed, and ethnic and political violence has been largely eradicated. Kigali, the capital of a country that likes to portray itself as the Switzerland of Africa, is orderly and manicured.

But Rwanda has a long way to go. Despite the facade of occasional elections, the government essentially runs a one-party state. And ironically, it is the genocide that has provided the government with a cover for repression. Under the guise of preventing another genocide, the government displays a marked intolerance of the most basic forms of dissent.

There is no meaningful opposition. The press is cowed. Nongovernmental organizations are under attack. When parliamentary elections held last September produced a whopping 92% victory for Kagame's ruling party, evidence collected by the European Union and Rwandan monitors suggested that the government actually inflated the percentage of opposition votes so as to avoid the appearance of an embarrassing Soviet-style acclamation.

One tool of repression has been the *gacaca* courts -- informal tribunals run without trained lawyers or judges -- which the government established at the community level to try alleged perpetrators of the genocide. The original impetus was understandable: Rwandan prisons were overpopulated with tens of thousands of alleged *genocidaires* and no prospect of the country's regular courts trying them within any reasonable time. The *gacaca* courts provided a quick, if informal, way to resolve these cases. In theory, members of the community would know who had or had not been involved in the genocide, but in reality the lack of involvement by legal professionals has left the proceedings open to manipulation.

Today, 15 years after the genocide, people are still coming forward and accusing their neighbors of complicity in it, suggesting that *gacaca* has morphed into a forum for settling personal vendettas or silencing dissident voices. The prospect of suddenly being accused of past participation in the genocide, with little legal recourse against concocted charges, is enough to make most people keep their heads down in the political arena.

The government says it will close the *gacaca* courts in June. But the government has another tool of control -- the crime of "genocide ideology." Formally adopted last year, the law outlawing "genocide ideology" is written so broadly that it can encompass even the most innocuous comments. As many Rwandans have discovered, disagreeing with the government or making unpopular statements can easily be portrayed as genocide ideology, punishable by sentences of 10 to 25 years. That leaves little political space for dissent.

Pressing the government to amend these repressive laws and practices is not easy, as I discovered in recent meetings with senior officials from the prime minister on down. They are understandably sensitive about political invective that can lead to renewed ethnic slaughter, but the public faces the very real danger that any political criticism of the government will be construed as fomenting genocide.

Western governments, guilt-ridden at not having stopped the genocide and impressed by Rwanda's stability and economic growth, have been all too willing to close their eyes to this repressive sleight of hand.

But Kagame's strategy is shortsighted and dangerous. He claims to be building a society in which citizens are only Rwandans, not Tutsi or Hutu, but his repression of civil society means that avenues to forge alternative bonds among people are limited. That makes it more likely that in moments of tension Rwandans will resort to their ethnic identity, as so often happens in repressive societies.

The challenge for world leaders 15 years after Rwanda's genocide is to overcome guilt and look beyond the enforced peace to convince Kagame and his government to build the foundation for more organic, lasting stability.

The best way to prevent another genocide is to insist that Kagame stop manipulating the last one.

(Kenneth Roth is an executive director of Human Rights Watch)

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