'Deep Cleavages that Divide': The Origins and Development of Ethnic Violence in Rwanda

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Abstract
While Hutu and Tutsi subgroups have existed since pre-colonial times in Rwanda, major interethnic violence is a much more recent phenomenon. During the 1950s, issues of race, power and privilege became highly politicised. As decolonisation loomed, the intersections between race and power became bitterly contested, leading to the 1959 Hutu Uprising. The Hutu Uprising was the first major outbreak of interethnic violence in Rwanda, however following this, such violence recurred repeatedly. This article explores key issues that contributed to and emerged from the Hutu Uprising, including the conflation of political and ethnic issues, perceptions of the Tutsi minority as a threat to the Hutu majority, and the politicisation of ethnicity for party political advantage. These factors came to dominate the political agenda in Rwanda at times of national stress, leaving it particularly vulnerable to escalating interethnic violence. Ultimately this led to the 1994 genocide.

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Introduction

“The most advanced elements among the Bahutu are stirring, and beginning to make overt demands”, reported the United Nations (UN) Visiting Mission to the Trust Territory of Rwanda in 1957 (15). Under the auspices of the UN Trusteeship Council, the triennial missions to this Belgian colony had both oversight and advisory functions. The previous mission, in 1954, had declared “There appeared to be very little development of general or even

1 The UN Trust Territory was officially the Trust Territory of Ruanda-Urundi, but Rwanda and Burundi were administered separately. Statements utilised throughout this paper from Trust Territory documents and reports refer to Rwanda only. For consistency, modern spelling of Rwanda is utilised throughout, however original spelling is retained within direct quotes.
local public opinion” (United Nations 1954: 2) in the country; by 1960, however, the subsequent mission reported on the first major interethnic violence there (United Nations 1960). In a remarkably short period, relations between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority had become highly politicised, polarised, bitter and violent. Racially motivated violence plagued the country during the independence process. By July 1962, when the country declared independence, some 100,000 Tutsi had fled as refugees (Webster 1966: 84); just eighteen months later ethnic massacres would claim the lives of 10-14,000 Tutsi (Segal 1964: 15; Lemarchand 1970a: 225). This article will analyse the origins and development of ethnic violence in Rwanda. First, it will explore how, and why, issues surrounding ethnicity became critical during the decolonisation period. It proposes that between 1954 and 1959 – when the first major outbreak of ethnic violence erupted in Rwanda – three key factors combined to provoke extreme levels of ethnic polarisation. Second, it will investigate why ethnic violence became a recurring feature at times of national stress. Arguably, a particularly toxic combination of issues increased Rwanda’s propensity for such violence. Together, these analyses contribute to a greater understanding of the ethnic cleavages that ultimately culminated in the 1994 genocide.

Background

Rwanda has a long history of ethnic diversity, with the majority Hutu comprising approximately 85 per cent of the population, and the minority Tutsi 15 per cent. A third group, the Twa, comprise less than 1 per cent. In at least some parts of the country, Hutu and Tutsi subgroups have existed since pre-colonial times. Tutsi were traditionally pastoralists, with a small Tutsi elite comprising the ruling class, while Hutu were traditionally agriculturalists, of generally lower status. The distinction between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority subgroups has been varyingly described as one of race, tribe, caste, class, domination and subjugation, ethnicity and political identity. Each descriptor appears to have more than a kernel of truth, but also elements of distortion and inaccuracy. Moreover, the nature of these identities is not a static one, as they have changed over time and in response to both internal and external influences. Whereas today these identities are commonly referred to as ethnic identities (and will be referred to as such within this paper, in line with common practice), for much of Rwanda’s history they were considered racial.

The first explorers to reach Rwanda had been quick to notice and comment upon the three groups that comprised the population, and the distinction between them was immediately interpreted as racial, in accordance with anthropological theories of the time. Much study was conducted into the

2 A note on the terminology used in this chapter. Kinyarwanda is a language that uses prefixes extensively, but in conformance with general practice in academic writing on Rwanda, the terms ‘Hutu’, ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa’ will be used without prefixes, to denote both singular and plural. In Kinyarwanda the prefix ‘mu’ denotes singular, and ‘ba’ plural. Where quotes include these prefixes, they have not been altered.
physical attributes of each race, and they were ranked hierarchically. The ‘Hamitic hypothesis’ was invoked to explain the perceived superiority of the Tutsi – an explanation conceived by nineteenth century anthropologists that posited that ‘superior’, ruling groups within Africa, such as the Tutsi, were migratory descendants of Noah’s son Ham, and thus far superior to the ‘negro’ race (although as descendants of Noah’s cursed son, still inherently inferior to Europeans) (Mamdani 2001: 80-87). Under the influence of this hypothesis, for most of the period of German (1894-1916) and Belgian (1916-1962) colonial rule, the Tutsi minority was regarded as racially superior. As such, Belgian colonial authorities bequeathed the Tutsi with privileged access to education and indigenous positions of authority. Over time, this perception of Tutsi superiority was both institutionalised and internalised within Rwandan society. Even as late as 1959, Belgium’s annual report to the UN on the Trust Territory helpfully included a photo of the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa ‘racial types’ (type de race) (Belgian Government 1959).

There was a very light German colonial presence in Rwanda, and with less than 100 Europeans in the country, officials “could not really modify Rwandese society in depth” (Prunier 1995: 25; Melvern 2000: 7). The German colonial authorities utilised a system of indirect rule, which effectively reinforced the pre-existing complex and highly organised Tutsi monarchical system (the mwamiship), and the power of the Tutsi aristocracy. When Belgium assumed control of Rwanda, it too implemented a system of indirect rule, utilising the indigenous Tutsi elite to implement a range of policies. Over time, however, the model of indirect rule was substantially modified to meet Belgian economic and developmental goals. In the first three decades of their rule, colonial authorities focussed on building a road and infrastructure network, measures to prevent famine, the introduction of cash crops, and the provision of basic education and medical care.

In the wake of World War Two, however, new challenges arose. The new United Nations mandate advocated rapid political development and preparation for independence in the colony. Triennial Visiting Missions insisted on the first steps towards the democratisation of the indigenous political system. At the same time, a new generation of Catholic missionaries and clergy brought anti-racial and egalitarian values to Rwanda after experiencing the Holocaust in Europe (Mamdani 2001; Linden 1977). Many Hutu children were now receiving a rudimentary education, there were increased opportunities for Hutu in the emerging monetary economy, and through further education in the seminaries. These factors led to the emergence of a Hutu consciousness in the mid-1950s, or what has been dubbed the ‘Hutu awakening’. For the first time, race became a contested

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3 Germany was ‘allocated’ territory that included Rwanda at the Berlin Conference in 1885, but the first German to arrive in the country did not do so until 1894. Belgium occupied Rwanda in 1916 in the course of World War One, the legitimacy of the occupation was confirmed under a League of Nations mandate in 1923.
political issue. In just a few short years, Hutu-Tutsi divisions led to the first major outbreak of interethnic violence, the Hutu Uprising of November 1959.

**Ethnic Polarisation**

Arguably, three key factors combine to explain the very rapid and extreme polarisation of Hutu-Tutsi divisions, and the resulting interethnic violence. First, the critical nature of this issue to the nascent Hutu counter-elite cannot be underestimated. For this first generation of politically conscious Hutu, race was not one political problem amongst the many challenges that beset Rwanda, but the central issue, and the lens through which all other developmental issues were approached. In March 1957 this became apparent with the publication of the *Bahutu Manifesto*. Signed by nine members of the Hutu counter-elite, including future Rwandan president Grégoire Kayibanda, it has been described as “probably the most important document in modern Rwandan political development” (Wagoner 1968: 158). The *Bahutu Manifesto* challenged every facet of Rwandan society:

Some people have asked whether this is a social or a racial conflict ... In reality and in the minds of men it is both. It can, however, be narrowed down for it is primarily a question of a political monopoly held by one race, the Mututsi, and, in view of the social situation as a whole, it has become an economic and social monopoly. In view, also, of the de facto selection in education, this political, economic and social monopoly has also become a cultural monopoly (Niyonzima and others 1957: 3).

The *Bahutu Manifesto* identified a range of problems facing Rwanda and even proposed numerous solutions – all of them highlighting a fundamental racial component. Thus integral to Rwanda’s economic development was reform of the land ownership system, based upon traditional Tutsi privilege; while integral to education development was equitable access to education and government-funded scholarships (Niyonzima et al 1957). Political development required “that Bahutu should in fact be promoted to public office”, and that positions such as sub-chiefs and chiefs should be elected by taxpayers (Niyonzima et al 1957: 8). For the Hutu counter-elite, the fundamental problem was Tutsi racial privilege, and addressing this issue was crucial for all areas of Rwanda’s political and economic development.

The *Bahutu Manifesto* was prepared to highlight the critical issue of race relations to the 1957 UN Visiting Mission. The Visiting Mission also received a starkly different account of race relations in Rwanda, however, in *Mise au Point*, the *Statement of Views*. Published by the Superior Council, comprising Rwanda’s Tutsi political elite, the *Statement of Views* also viewed race relations as “the fundamental problem in our country now” (High Council of State 1957: Annex II). Yet astonishingly, this statement was not referring to the problems of Hutu-Tutsi race relations – which did not rate a mention in the entire document – but race relations between whites and non-whites in the country. This highlights the high degree of racial awareness and the hierarchical nature of Rwandan society, but also a strong desire to de-
emphasise the Hutu-Tutsi distinction and recast Rwanda as a homogenous nation in a bid for the elite to retain its power (Atterbury 1970). The primary focus of the Statement of Views was on preparing Rwanda for rapid independence, through proper training, recognition and utilisation of the current indigenous elite (Wagoner 1968). Self-government was an interim goal, and the Statement noted “It would be difficult at the present to specify when it will be possible to grant us self-government, but we are anxious that we should be trained for self-government now” (High Council of State 1957: Annex II). The Superior Council’s desire for rapid self-government, and omission of the Hutu-Tutsi issue, reflected an awareness of the potential threat posed by the nascent Hutu political movement, and a response designed “so they, the Tutsi, could use the machinery of government to maintain their power” (Webster 1966: 40). Both the Bahutu Manifesto and the Statement of Views were key documents in that they “provided the ideological basis for much of the political action which followed” (Webster 1966: 40; Harroy 1984: 237).

The second factor that contributed to the rapid ethnic polarisation of Rwanda during this period is the lack of responsiveness of both the Belgian colonial authorities and the UN Visiting Missions to this critical issue. Despite the Bahutu Manifesto and the Statement of Views, arguably neither authority realised the importance or disintegrative potential of the race relations issue prior to late 1959. The 1954 Visiting Mission completely failed to mention the problem of sub-group identity, and it was left to the Belgians to point this out in criticising their report (United Nations 1955: 47). Yet the Belgian authorities themselves made no attempts to address the issue. In 1956, a proposal to include Hutu representation on the (colonial-led) General Council of Ruanda-Urundi was defeated, leading its only proponent to resign. In a parting shot, Mr. Maus bemoaned “the conflict of interests between the Tutsi and Hutu communities which is the most pressing social problem and the most poignant human drama in the Territory, will therefore continue to be officially ignored by our institutions” (United Nations 1960: 40).

The Bahutu Manifesto and Statement of Views ensured at least some level of official acknowledgement of the race relations issue in 1957, but led to little real action. The UN Visiting Mission welcomed “the increasing rate at which the traditional society in Ruanda-Urundi is adapting itself to modern democratic ideas and forms” (United Nations 1957: 9). Yet it also acknowledged, for the first time, that the acceleration of political development for which previous Missions had pressed so strenuously might be a cause of political turmoil (Rawson 1966):

The inevitable disintegration of such a civilisation [traditional Rwandan society] on contact with the modern world and its replacement by new forms may give rise to serious difficulties in spite of all the Administering Authority's vigilance (United Nations 1957: 12).
While noting the “especially delicate stage” of Rwanda’s political development, it had little to offer of value, with hazy statements such as “Without minimising the danger of haste, the Mission believes that over-cautiousness is no less dangerous” (United Nations 1957: 12). The only practical suggestion it proposed – with extraordinary optimism – was further education:

Under the influence of secondary and university education and of contact with the outside world, traditional conceptions are giving way and the elite of the old regime are coming up against a new elite. It will not be long – and indeed there are already indications of this – before the traditional political structure and the respect for feudal institutions will be as irksome to the rising generation of young educated Batutsi as to the new Bahutu elite (United Nations 1957: 23).

As such, the 1957 Visiting Mission failed to meaningfully respond to the Bahutu Manifesto and Statement of Views. Predominantly focussed on the need for rapid decolonisation (reflecting the international political climate of the time), it appeared to seriously underestimate both the importance and severity of the issues surrounding race relations in Rwanda.

There is conflicting evidence as to how seriously the Belgian Administering Authorities regarded the Hutu-Tutsi problem. Certainly they recognised the “deep cleavages which divide the Batutsi, the Bahutu [and] the Batwa ... Those cleavages are obvious ... and they dominate the whole of social life” (United Nations 1955: 47). But the stratified nature of society in Rwanda had been uncontested for decades – and indeed utilised as the basis of indirect rule – and the new Hutu challenge to Tutsi domination appears not to have been perceived as a pressing issue prior to the Hutu Uprising in late 1959. Afterwards, this rapidly changed, and the report of the 1960 Visiting Mission claimed that “In his discussions with the 1957 Visiting Mission, the Governor described relations between the Tutsi and Hutu as the key problem of the Territory” (United Nations 1960: 42). But if that was the case, it was not clearly described as such in either the 1957 report, or Belgium’s annual reports on the Trust Territory. Indeed, a careful reading of documents during this period suggests that Vice-Governor General Jean-Paul Harroy did not concede until December 1958 that “the Hutu-Tutsi question posed an undeniable problem” – some twenty-two months after the Bahutu Manifesto’s publication (Lemarchand 1970a: 152).

To the extent that the problem was recognised, the Administering Authorities appeared unsure how to address it. The General Council of Ruanda-Urundi passed a motion to study the Manifesto, but repeatedly postponed discussion of the Hutu-Tutsi polarisation (United Nations 1960). Governor Harroy initially adopted a stance that aligned closely with the position of the Tutsi elite, suggesting that the Hutu-Tutsi problem was largely an economic (rather than racial) issue, and warning of ‘misuse’ of the terms Hutu and Tutsi (United Nations 1960). This aligned with the Administration’s early position in favour of abolishing the terms Hutu and Tutsi – a position advocated by the Tutsi elite but strongly opposed in the Bahutu Manifesto for its potential to mask discrimination (Niyonzima and others 1957: 11). During this period,
however, the Administration largely failed to take a consistent or decisive stance on the Hutu-Tutsi issue, and the authorities appear to have been unsure as to the best way in which to proceed. Meanwhile, as the democratisation process gathered pace ahead of anticipated independence, it did so in an environment of increasing polarisation.

The third, critical factor that contributed to the extremity of the ethnic polarisation was the confluence of the race relations issue with the democratisation and independence process. The rapid pace of decolonisation precluded the use of longer term conciliatory and ameliorative policies that might have improved Hutu-Tutsi relations over time. Rather, each side perceived the issue as immediate rather than chronic, and one that must be resolved prior to independence. Increasingly, that resolution came to be visualised as through a ‘victory’ of one group at the expense of the other. By 1959 the disastrous potential of the convergence of the race relations issue and the independence process was clear. Observer M.A. Munyangaju summed up the atmosphere on 30 January:

> The situation is very tense between Bahutu and Batutsi. A small quarrel would be enough for starting off a ranged battle. The Batutsi realise that after this, everything is finished for them and are preparing for the last chance. The Bahutu also see that a trial of strength is in the making and do not wish to give up (Quoted in Bhattacharyya 1967: 218).

Race was the political issue when political parties were allowed to form. Thus the founding charter of Union Nationale Rwandaise (UNAR), the party of the Tutsi elite, declared in August 1959:

> Although the Ruandais society is composed of individuals of highly unequal value, and it is not equitable to accord the same value to the vulgar thoughts of the ordinary man as to the perspicacious judgment of the capable ... Although universal suffrage will infallibly end in the enslavement of the educated minority by an uncultivated majority ... It is nevertheless impossible to refuse universal suffrage to the Bahutu. An open opposition will provide one more argument to the colonists whose civilisation ... [and] loyalty is now known (UNAR Charter, in Nkundabagenzi 1961, translation utilised from Bhattacharyya 1967: 248).

The most popular Hutu party, Mouvement Démocratique Rwandais / Parti du Mouvement et de l’Emancipation Hutu (MDR-PARMEHUTU), announced its goal as “a true union of all the Rwandan people without any race dominating another as is the case today” (Manifeste-Programme du Parmehutu 1959, in Nkundabagenzi 1961: 113). The few, quiet proponents of moderation received little support. The bitterness of the debate is further illustrated by a September 1959 press release from the Hutu social party APROSOMA, which began “The plans of the Tutsi party in Ruanda – representing the Tutsi who are exploiters by nature, zenophobes [sic] by instinct and communists by necessity …” (United Nations 1959:1). By November of 1959, these divisive, race-based politics contributed to the outbreak of the Hutu Uprising.
The Hutu Uprising

The Hutu Uprising, or Rwandan Revolution as it is alternatively known, is particularly significant as the first major outbreak of interethnic violence in Rwanda. Tensions were high throughout 1959. A Belgian working group had visited in April, with a view to developing a decolonisation plan for the colony. Intergroup friction escalated as Hutu and Tutsi leaders each sought to convince the working group of their proposals for the nation’s future. Tension continued to simmer through a long delay before the release of the working group’s findings; and as elections due for the end of the year approached without the form they would take being finalised (Atterbury 1970: 64). Additionally, the sudden death of the Rwandan monarch on 25 July and the appointment of his replacement in controversial circumstances contributed to an atmosphere akin to a “simmering cauldron” (Atterbury 1970: 64). By 1 November, it only took a spark to ignite the Rwandan revolution. An altercation in which a band of “young UNAR militants” attacked a PARMEHUTU leader led to a Hutu retaliation that escalated into revolution (Lemarchand 1970a: 162). Hutu-led violence and the burning of Tutsi huts rapidly spread. As the subsequent Visiting Mission report noted:

The operations were generally carried out by a fairly similar process. Incendiaries would set off in bands of some tens of persons. Armed with matches and paraffin, which the indigenous inhabitants used in large quantities for their lamps, they pillaged the Tutsi houses they passed on their way and set fire to them. On their way they would enlist other incendiaries to follow in the procession while the first recruits, too exhausted to continue, would give up and return home. Thus day after day fires spread from hill to hill. Generally speaking the incendiaries, who were often unarmed, did not attack the inhabitants of the huts and were content with pillaging and setting fire to them (United Nations 1960: 73).

There were few fatalities associated with these attacks, however serious damage was done as thousands and thousands of huts were pillaged and burned, plantations plundered and livestock killed (Lemarchand 1970a: 167).

The Tutsi reaction was swift, organised and politically motivated (United Nations 1960: 75, 77; Lemarchand 1970b: 904; Lemarchand 1970a: 164). UNAR leaders, working in cooperation with the Rwandan monarch, quickly organised commando units, dispatching them to kill and arrest specific Hutu Leaders (United Nations 1960: 75, 77). According to the UN Visiting Mission report:

Each commando party amounted to some hundreds of persons or more, and included a majority of Hutu, but the leaders were generally Tutsi or Tw. The group would set off on its mission with very definite instructions. In other cases, emissaries were sent out from Nyanza with verbal orders instructing them to bring back or kill certain persons … It seems to be an established fact, moreover, that in many cases a commando group set out with orders only to arrest a person, but in effect killed him, either because he resisted arrest or because some attackers had the instinct to kill (United Nations 1960: 77).
Well over a dozen prominent Hutu leaders were killed in this way. UNAR appeared to be trying to eliminate the Hutu leadership, and thus its opposition. The Belgian Administration took more than a week to bring the situation under control, and it was not until 14 November that quiet was fully restored. At least 200 people were dead, and several hundred more wounded (United Nations 1960: 82).

From the perspective of November 1959, it is difficult to see how the Hutu Uprising earned the moniker of the ‘Rwandan Revolution’. The Uprising began almost spontaneously; it did not target Rwanda’s political institutions or colonial authorities; and did not seek or manage to overthrow anything (Wagoner 1968: 190, 193). Perhaps what was most revolutionary, at first, was the emerging consciousness amongst the Hutu that they could agitate for change, and that the long past of Tutsi domination did not foreordain the future (Wagoner 1968: 193). Within just a few months, however, the Uprising resulted in truly revolutionary change. The Belgian Administration announced radical reforms in preparation for decolonisation. For the first time, it recognised the legitimate political rights and aspirations of the Hutu majority. In the course of the Uprising, hundreds of Tutsi chiefs and subchiefs had vacated their posts, and the Administration filled these vacant posts predominantly with Hutu. Thus, by 1 March 1960 the number of Hutu chiefs went from 0 to 22 (out of a total of 45 chiefdoms), and the number of Hutu subchiefs rose from 10 to 297 (out of a total of 531) (United Nations 1960: 85-86). Furthermore, in the wake of the violence, Belgium appointed Colonel Logiest as the ‘Special Civilian Resident’, to ensure the maintenance of peace and order and implement the planned policy changes. Colonel Logiest was known to be favourable to the Hutu cause, and expressed his position openly:

What is our goal? It is to accelerate the politicization of Rwanda … Not only do we want elections but we want everybody to be aware of this. People must go to the polls in full freedom and in full political awareness. Thus we must undertake an action in favour of the Hutu, who live in a state of ignorance and under oppressive influences. By virtue of the situation we are obliged to take sides. We cannot stay neutral (quoted in Lemarchand 1970a: 175).

Commentators have varied in their analysis of the Belgian response to the Uprising, with some suggesting the Administration had little choice but to address the Hutu demands for political inclusion, and others portraying a more actively pro-Hutu choice (Rawson 1966: 234; Wagoner 1968: 198; Lemarchand 1970a: 175; Bhattacharyya 1967: 273; Tabara 1992: 179-185). What is clear, however, is that Belgium’s response to the violence – granting Hutu more power within the four months after the Uprising than they had been able to access through years of peaceful campaigning – indirectly, at least, rewarded the use of violence over that of peaceful methods. The violence of the Uprising, whether intentionally or not, led to advantageous political outcomes for the Hutu counter-elite.
The 1959 Uprising was provoked by perceptions of the Tutsi as posing a threat to Hutu self-determination, and by the entwinement of political and ethnic issues. The Hutu counter-elite’s fear of continued Tutsi domination after Rwandan independence was palpable. The Bahutu Manifesto spoke of “the great despair of the Bahutu, who see themselves condemned forever to the role of subordinate manual workers, and this, worse still, after achieving an independence which they will have unwittingly helped to obtain” (Niyonzima et al 1957: 3). This fear was largely realistic – the UNAR charter quoted earlier highlights the lack of commitment to democracy amongst the Tutsi elite. Yet at the same time, the inexorable approach of independence and the urgent need to influence the vote of the largely illiterate and apolitical Hutu population led to an “intense politicisation of the racial cleavages by PARMEHUTU” (Bhattacharyya 1967: 314). For vast swathes of the relatively isolated and almost entirely rural Hutu population, a vote for Hutu rule was truly revolutionary, despite a history of longstanding Tutsi oppression. PARMEHUTU had to challenge its potential constituency to think beyond the traditionally higher status of the Tutsi minority, the historical clientelism relationship between Hutu and Tutsi and the widespread belief in the Rwandan monarch as sacred ruler of the nation. For the Hutu counter-elite, politicising ethnic divisions and highlighting Tutsi oppression offered a more realistic hope of galvanising the Hutu peasantry than the presentation of progressive notions of egalitarianism (Lemarchand 1966: 318). The conflation of ethnicity and politics, however, set a dangerous precedent.

As the process of decolonisation continued in the months and years immediately following the Uprising, both the Belgian Administration and the United Nations struggled to control repeated outbreaks of violence. Sporadic violence destabilised the nation throughout 1960, including the burning of Tutsi huts in many regions. There was a growing refugee problem, which the Administration struggled to address, particularly as UNAR campaigned to gain refugee support. Communal and then legislative elections proceeded despite substantial violence in the period preceding each. Ultimately, PARMEHUTU won the elections and assumed leadership of Rwanda. Meanwhile, groups of Tutsi refugees in the border zones of Uganda and the Congo – who came to be known as inyenzi (cockroaches) – instigated cross-border raids into a number of Rwandan communes. The considerable efforts of both the Belgian Administration and the United Nations failed to curb the violence or resolve the refugee problem prior to Rwandan independence. Both issues would continue to plague Rwanda following independence, as will be discussed further below.

Recurring Violence

The Hutu Uprising is especially notable as the first major outbreak of ethnically targeted violence in Rwanda. It was not the last. Following independence in 1962, ethnic violence recurred at times of national stress. Particularly notable is the violence associated with the Bugesera invasion in 1963, the unrest prior to the Habyarimana coup d’etat in 1973, massacres of
Tutsi following the Rwandan Patriotic Front invasion in 1990, and ultimately the 1994 genocide. Three key aspects of the 1959 violence, however, became common features of many of these subsequent outbreaks. First, the violence led to advantageous political outcomes for the Hutu leadership. Second, it was provoked by perceptions of the Tutsi as a threat to the Hutu. Finally, the violence was intimately related to the conflation of ethnic and political issues. These factors contributed to increasing Rwanda’s propensity for recurring violence.

**The Bugesera Invasion**

Unfortunately, it was not long before the newly independent Rwanda faced its first serious crisis. Like the 1959 Hutu Uprising, the 1963 Bugesera invasion – and the violence it provoked – contained the three components of perceptions of Tutsi as a threat, the conflation of ethnic and political issues, and the ultimately advantageous political outcomes for Hutu leaders (now in government). The invaders were Tutsi refugees, coordinated by the UNAR leadership in exile (Lemarchand 1970a: 219-220). On the night of 20 December, a group of refugees entered Rwanda from Burundi, acquiring additional arms and supporters from within Rwanda on their march towards the capital. It was not until the group was within a few kilometres of Kigali, however, that they encountered a company of the Rwandan National Guard. A brief battle ensued, in which the invaders were easily repelled. Several hundred Tutsi were killed, while others were pursued back to the border (Wagoner 1968: 258). Over the following week, a series of additional raids were launched from the Congo and Uganda, however all were quickly repelled by the now mobilised army (Lemarchand 1970a: 222). The government, however, reacted with shock and panic – particularly when a document was found on the body of one of the invaders, outlining a plan for a new, Tutsi-led government (Wagoner 1968: 259). Government officials were sent to each region to organise ‘civilian defence forces’ to aid the army (Segal 1964: 14). In the atmosphere of fear and panic, however, with wild rumours circulating that Kigali had fallen, defence became attack (Segal 1964: 15). “We are expected to defend ourselves. The only way to go about it is to paralyse the Tutsi. How? They must be killed” proclaimed one government official in the prefecture of Gikongoro, launching a massacre that targeted Tutsi indiscriminately (Lemarchand 1970a: 223-224). Over the course of about two weeks, between 10,000 and 14,000 mostly Tutsi were killed as the massacres spread across the country (Segal 1964: 15; Lemarchand 1970a: 225). It was not until mid-January that the violence ceased.

There is little doubt that the massacres were driven by fear. European observers in the nation during December 1963 and January 1964 reported an atmosphere of “near panic throughout Rwanda” (Wagoner 1968: 264). The report of the United Nations Commission that investigated the massacres also concluded that they were a result of Hutu “fear and panic” following the Tutsi incursion (United Nations 1964). The divisive, racially driven election campaigns prior to independence just a few years earlier – depicting Tutsi as
cruel oppressors – most likely contributed to the extreme levels of fear. The conflation of ethnic and political divisions was particularly notable in the reporting of the massacres in the international press. “Genocide” Charge in Rwanda’ and ‘Rwanda Policy of Genocide Alleged’ blared The Times (1964a: 8; 1964b: 10). The Rwandan government sought to refute this highly politicised reporting, commenting “This despicable slander comes from the people that profit from it” (Rwanda, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 1964: 18). Rwandan President Kayibanda issued multiple statements expressing his frustration at the “subversive activities” of “neo-colonialists” in trying to mislead opinion and provoke international intervention, the return of foreign forces and/or the downfall of the government (Rwanda, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 1964: 22-25, 29-30). Yet ultimately, the events of December 1963 and January 1964 had some advantageous outcomes for the Kayibanda government. The massacres left the UNAR leadership heavily decimated, and the UN report into events described them as resulting “in the silencing of the opposition” (United Nations, Press Services Office of Public Information 1964). Rwanda’s survival in the face of invasion became a source of national solidarity and pride for the Hutu majority. The crisis brought a sense of cohesion to the Kayibanda government that had not previously existed, and a resurgence of popular support (Lemarchand 1970a: 227).

The Habyarimana Coup d’Etat

In subsequent outbreaks of violence, the three factors of perceptions of Tutsi as a threat, conflation of ethnic and political issues, and ethnic violence leading to advantageous political outcomes appear not just as features, but also as drivers of the conflict. Most dangerously, political leaders actively attempted to manipulate these factors to their benefit. For example, this is clearly apparent during the unrest in 1972-73. By 1972, the Kayibanda government was struggling to maintain support in the face of severe economic challenges (Weinstein 1974: 351). When large-scale massacres of Hutu (by the mostly Tutsi army) broke out in neighbouring Burundi, the violence spilled over to provoke renewed ethnic hostility and unrest in Rwanda. Yet Kayibanda did not respond decisively (Mamdani 2001: 137). Several authors have suggested that he allowed the hostilities to continue, or even actively fermented them, in an attempt to deflect criticism of his government’s performance in other areas (Prunier 1995: 60-61; Greenland 1976: 115; Melvern 2000: 20). When Major-General Habyarimana, commander of the National Guard, subsequently seized power in a bloodless coup d’état in July 1973, he too used issues surrounding ethnicity as a political tool to justify both his seizure of power and the legitimacy of his rule. Thus in an interview given two weeks after the coup, he asserted:

The former regime had spread division, on a political level, an ethnic and regional division; a division that was to give rise to massacres in Rwanda ... when I saw that this was to lead to a fratricidal war, I said no and toppled the former government (Habyarimana 1981: 147).
The more complex reality, including the failed assassination attempt against Habyarimana by members of the former cabinet just prior to the coup, was not mentioned. And while in this case Habyarimana promoted ethnic reconciliation for political advantage, later in his rule he would do the opposite.

The 1994 Genocide

It was in the early 1990s that the factors which provoked the extreme ethnic polarisation during the decolonisation period, and those that subsequently increased Rwanda’s propensity for repeated ethnic violence, came together with devastating results. In October 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a group of second generation Tutsi refugees based in Uganda, invaded Rwanda. Repeated incursions led to a civil war in the country’s north. At the same time, the government faced an economic crisis and strong international pressure to introduce democratic reform. Habyarimana attempted to regain the support of his disaffected constituency through a renewed focus on ethnic divisions (Twagilimana 2003: 105). The RPF invasion recalled the frightening Bugesera invasion of 1963 in the minds of many Hutu, and led to renewed perceptions of the Tutsi as posing a threat to Hutu (Des Forges 1999: 65). These perceptions were augmented by the government, which exaggerated the RPF threat, and tolerated and participated in anti-Tutsi rhetoric and violence (Des Forges 1999: 65). In November 1992, for example, Hutu extremist Léon Mugesera claimed to be speaking for the president when he concluded a public speech with nothing short of a call for genocide:

The fatal error we made in 1959 was to let them [the Tutsi] leave the country. Their home is Ethiopia, and we are going to find them a shortcut, namely the Nyabarongo River. I must insist on this point. We must act forcefully! Get rid of them! (Quoted in Twagilimana 2003: 106).

The situation deteriorated, with periodic massacres of Tutsi in 1990, 1991, 1992 and 1993. The United Nations and the international community failed to decisively respond to the worsening violence. As in the late 1950s, the rapid growth of ethnic polarisation continued unimpeded.

At the same time as Rwanda was grappling with civil war and economic crisis, a democratisation process was also underway. Rwanda’s heavy dependence on foreign aid meant it had little choice but to accede to Western demands for democratisation following the end of the Cold War (Prunier 1995: 89). As the civil war intensified and peace negotiations suffered repeated setbacks, however, issues surrounding ethnicity became entwined with the politics of democratisation. The dual threats of democratisation and the RPF increasingly challenged the power of Habyarimana and his ruling MRND party, and their response was a massive anti-Tutsi propaganda campaign. The RPF and Tutsi were pitted as foreign and feudal oppressors, seeking to ‘return’ Rwanda to a state of Tutsi dominance and Hutu oppression (Des Forges 1999: 73). Propaganda linked any opposition to the MRND with support for the RPF.
Thus a huge pro-democracy rally in Kigali in January 1992 was labelled as having been organised by the RPF; opposition parties were accused of having “plotted with the enemy” to undermine Rwanda (Hintjens 1999: 261; Prunier 1995: 171; Longman 1997: 298). When the Arusha Peace Accords were negotiated in 1993, issues surrounding ethnicity and democratisation effectively combined, as a Broad Based Transitional Government with positions for both MRND and RPF leaders was negotiated. By this stage, however, the politicisation of ethnicity for political advantage, the conflation of ethnic and political issues, and the resulting perceptions of Tutsi as posing a grave threat to Rwanda had taken the country to the brink of genocide. Before the Arusha Accords could be implemented, Hutu extremists sparked the most intense genocide in history.

On 6 April 1994, Hutu extremists shot down President Habyarimana’s plane as it descended into Kigali airport, killing the President and all on board (Melvern 2012). Within an hour, the genocide commenced. Roadblocks were erected in Kigali, and members of the Presidential Guard dispatched to begin killing opposition figures. Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana was killed on 7 April, along with 10 Belgian UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda) soldiers who were supposed to be protecting her. In response, Belgium withdrew its UNAMIR contingent and other countries quickly joined the desertion. The genocide spread throughout Rwanda with a shocking intensity: “Army and militia forces went street to street, block by block, and house to house, in Kigali and every major city save Butare in the south …Tutsi were dragged out of homes and hiding places and murdered, often after torture and rape” (Jones 2006: 238). Roadblocks were everywhere, and anyone carrying an identification card that labelled them Tutsi – or at times even if they simply ‘looked’ Tutsi, had married a Tutsi or even simply befriended one – was stopped and killed. As the month of April progressed, and it became clear international forces would not intervene to stop the killing, the genocide reached new peaks of intensity. In a period of 100 days, close to a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed (Melvern 2006: 252-253). Meanwhile, the Hutu extremist government, distracted by the work of genocide, had not been able to prevent the RPF from advancing into the country. Slowly, the RPF fought and gained control of Rwanda, and by 18 July it was all over. For the victims, however, the victory came too late.

**Conclusion**

Rwanda was a nation forged from a violent, divisive and racially-driven independence process. The long history of Tutsi domination in the country meant that there was always potential for conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi populations. The failure of the Belgian Administration and UN Trusteeship Council to address the emerging divisions in the late 1950s exacerbated the ethnic cleavages. The rapid decolonisation process, concurrently occurring, led to a toxic conflation of ethnic and political issues, which culminated in the first major outbreak of ethnic violence in 1959. Following Rwanda’s independence, the politicisation of ethnic tension for political advantage and
the entwinement of political and ethnic issues became strategies utilised repeatedly at times of national stress. While they may have offered a temporary political advantage, they created a population that perceived its minority Tutsi as a potential threat, and that was willing to use violence to manage it. When Rwanda experienced the major crises of RPF invasion, economic crisis and political reform in the early 1990s, the Habyarimana government resorted to the dangerous tactics that had previously been so effective. In 1994, those tactics culminated in genocide. This highlights the extreme danger of the politicisation of ethnicity, and the manipulation of ethnic cleavages for political advantage. The repeated conflation of ethnic and political issues rendered Rwanda particularly vulnerable to the massive violence that ultimately occurred.

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