

Rwanda's masterful deception

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AFRICA / 15 FEBRUARY 2019, 07:06AM / SHANNON EBRAHIM



Canadian General Romeo Dallaire alleged that the RPF's Tutsi Commander Paul Kagame had allowed the genocide to continue longer than it needed to. Picture: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

Exactly twenty years ago I sat in an Ottawa cafe with Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, the former Commander of the UN Peacekeeping operation in Rwanda at the time of the genocide. Six years after his utterly failed mission, Dallaire was suffering from post-traumatic stress, but I was told he had something very important to tell me. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was to hear, especially considering I had just visited Rwanda, its genocide memorials, and sat taking notes around a dinner table with the Rwandan cabinet.

Dallaire did say that he didn't expect me to believe what he was saying under the circumstances, but that it was the truth, and one day I would realise the veracity of what he was telling me. It has taken me twenty years to process that conversation and to have the courage to write about it.

Dallaire started out by recounting the horrifying days of the genocide, and his sheer helplessness in the face of the refusal of the big powers sitting at the UN to authorise and capacitate his mission on the ground to intervene to stop the bloodletting. A genocide unfolded before his eyes that took 800 000 Tutsi lives in 100 days. The trauma of that type of guilt is something too grave for any human to overcome.

Much of Dallaire's story is recounted in his memoir *Shaking Hands with the Devil*. What I never expected to hear from him, however, was what came next. Dallaire alleged that the Rwanda Patriotic Front's Tutsi Commander Paul Kagame had allowed the genocide to continue longer than it needed to. Dallaire's interpretation was that in Kagame's calculations, the extent of the genocide was likely to ensure that the RPF would be able to rule the country for decades into the future, due to the collective guilt of the international community. At the time, it was all too much for me to absorb or accept.

Dallaire also told me about emails he had been receiving since the end of the genocide from French Canadian nuns he had known on the ground in Rwanda.

Their repeated messages said that Hutus were disappearing on a weekly basis in Rwanda, taken from their homes in the dead of night, never to be seen again. The idea that the liberators could have been slowly cleansing their society of members of the Hutu majority,

quietly abducting them without a trace, was horrifying. Dallaire claimed to have heard similar reports from other people he considered reliable sources.

As time went by more was unravelled, this time by human rights organisations about camps of Hutu refugees in the Eastern DRC having been “liquidated” by the Rwandan military in the years after the genocide. These were camps with tens of thousands of men, women and children in them that were simply eliminated from the face of the earth. It is something that the Rwandan government, with Paul Kagame as its President denied, but many mass graves were eventually found by the UN and human rights organisations.

If one peels away all the gloss that is the dominant narrative about Rwanda – the 8% economic growth rate, the reduction in poverty and maternal mortality rates, the advances in education, IT, and the low levels of crime and corruption - a very different picture emerges. The miracle and image of Rwanda’s successes gives way to a nation gripped by fear, fear to say what they really think, to vote the way they want, to challenge government policies, or to hold their leaders to account. The 25 years of Kagame’s rule has ensured this culture of fear and intimidation, where at each election Kagame claims to have won well over 90% of the vote, boasting that the poll is nothing but a formality to confirm his right to rule.

The intoxicating addiction to power led Kagame to preside over a referendum in 2015 to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in office in 2017, enabling him to extend his rule by a further seven years. The amendment also allows him to stand for a further two terms beyond 2024, potentially allowing him to remain in power until 2034. The result of the referendum was supposedly 98% in favour.

The EU and the US may have criticised the amendments saying it undermined democratic principles, but the US continues to provide 20% of the Rwandan national budget, the UK is the second biggest donor and Rwanda's foreign aid budget as a whole total US\$1 billion annually. No matter how Kagame may have manipulated electoral outcomes, he has remained the darling of the West. Collective guilt for not intervening to stop the genocide? A desperate need for a foreign aid success story? Or the reliable extraction of strategic minerals from the Eastern DRC, and the secure corridor Rwanda provide for their transport out of the region?

Whatever drives the West, what is particularly troubling is the levels of domestic repression Rwandans are living under. Any attempt to criticise the government is deemed a threat to national security and an attempt to stoke sectarianism. Critics, opponents, and journalists are jailed or disappeared, and the numbers are rising. It is no longer only opposition leaders or critics that are jailed, but their family members as well. To add to the draconian nature of the state, it is documented by Human Rights Watch that petty criminals are being extra-judicially executed by the security forces. Some villagers are shot for stealing a cow or a bike. It is all part of a strategy to spread fear in the society to enforce order, absolute control, and keep the electorate subdued.

For the last year Kagame presided over the African Union as its Chair, but his façade of good governance and democracy was never challenged. Perhaps it is time to tell the truth about the way things really are in Rwanda and to start challenging some of the myths that surround the notion of the Rwandan miracle. I have to wonder whether if Madiba was still alive he wouldn't have called for a more transparent electoral system, and supported the notion of majority rule in Rwanda?

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