

# PEACEBUILDING IN RWANDA: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

RICHARD SEZIBERA

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## **RICHARD SEZIBERA**

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First of all, I want to thank Prof. Masabo of the Center for Conflict Management (CCM), University of Rwanda and the organizers for inviting me to share my reflections on Rwanda's journey in peacebuilding. It is indeed a journey that was embarked on in 1994, against seemingly insurmountable odds, in a country devastated by the genocide against the Tutsi. It is a journey that has involved millions of Rwandans travelling through uncharted paths, for many, across historical and geographical barriers. It is a journey that has challenged and continues to ask questions of accepted orthodoxies and long held assumptions. It is a journey that continues, and will continue across generations.

Perhaps we should begin by traveling back in time, to 1992, when the then secretary-general of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros Ghali, proclaimed his *Agenda for Peace*.<sup>1</sup> This was a time of active and nascent conflicts in the Middle East, the Balkans, Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda, Somalia, Colombia, and many other countries. It was also a time of democratic transitions on the African continent, a number of which contained within them the potential for violent competition for political power. Developmental models championed by the "Washington

Consensus” had shown their limits, and the values of human and sustainable development were clearly in peril. The agenda introduced a framework to contain violent outbreaks within countries due to developmental deficiencies. It also introduced distinctions between preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. This is the conceptual framework within which the international community continues to operate. Peacebuilding is meant to make peace last, and in many people’s understanding is based on the recognition that peace, development, and democracy are interdependent. The challenges are twofold. First, the stages toward peace may be conceptually distinct, but in practice, they overlap. For example, in post-genocide Rwanda, resources earmarked for peacekeeping could not be used for the reconstruction of educational, health, and justice infrastructure, yet this was critical for peace. Second, there is confusion about the terms themselves. As Archie Mafeje has reminded us, the terms are open to conflicting interpretations. Is objection to one-party autocracy synonymous with multiparty, winner-take-all democracy? Is democratic pluralism synonymous with liberal democracy? What about local autonomy? Is this the same as participatory democracy? These are important questions for peacebuilding in post-conflict societies, and it is dangerous to either ignore them, or even worse, assume that there is a recipe, a magic wand, a prescription, valid for all societies, at all times, in all places. Every country must answer them within the context of its history, its culture, and its means, if it is to succeed.

Rwanda’s efforts at peacebuilding have been anchored in ideological clarity. They are based on a critical examination of our society’s history (ancient and recent), the cultural values that cemented an evolving Rwandan polity over time, and the deficits of leadership and governance that brought the country to the brink of extinction. I do not have the time to get into the details of identity formation in Rwandan history. As we all know, political identities are consequences of how power is conceived and organized. The Hutu-Tutsi identities that were the basis for the genocide of 1994, were largely political identities rigidified by the colonial and post-colonial Rwandan state with state violence and terror, and accepted and legitimized as instruments of political action especially if performed by, or on behalf of a defined “ethnic” majority. The results of this aberration of government and governance in Rwanda were devastating. The genocide against the Tutsi resulted in 1,074,017 people being killed. Over two million fled to neighboring countries, millions more were internally displaced, and over 700,000 refugees that had fled Rwanda between 1959 and 1973 spontaneously returned to the

country with no assistance and no planned resettlement program. GDP per capita, which had already fallen 40 percent between 1989 and 1993 went into negative territory. The international community spent \$1.4 billion dollars on what they called the Rwanda crisis between April and December 1994, only a third of which was spent inside Rwanda, and very little of that on Peacebuilding activities. A study commissioned by the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda titled, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, concluded, and I quote, "The current political situation gives little hope for a peaceful long-term development of Rwanda."<sup>2</sup>

Rwandans respectfully disagreed with this international consensus and embarked on a return to normalcy based on the return and reconstruction of national unity, national sovereignty, and the security of Rwandans and their property. This included democratic pluralism; promoting an economy based the country's natural resources; fighting corruption, favoritism, embezzlement of national resources, and other fraudulent activities; and promoting social welfare. Critical to achieving these were the elimination of the causes of displacement and the return of Rwandan refugees, the fight against genocide and its ideology, as well as international cooperation based on mutual respect. In other words, Rwanda has enacted and executed policies that are aimed at ending the legacy of violence and the culture of impunity, invested in political solutions that cemented stability and allowed for the return of refugees, reconstructed the social fabric, and built an inclusive economic order. Peacebuilding is development, and development is always unique everywhere, and for Rwanda, these efforts have involved making sure that basic but necessary tasks such as collecting garbage, cleaning public toilets, maintaining public markets, etc., do not fall prey to internecine struggles for power, corruption, and public sector decay.

Intense negotiations and discussions have been the basis for Rwanda's peacebuilding efforts. The Arusha Peace process, although torpedoed by the Habyarimana regime, defined the contours of an acceptable Rwandan polity. There was agreement on what constitutes the rule of law, an emphasis on national unity and national reconciliation, human rights, power sharing, the return of refugees, integration of warring forces, as well as a political code of conduct for political parties. Rwandans agreed on the necessity of a National Human Rights Commission, a Commission on National Unity, a Constitutional Commission, and the reform of the judiciary. Peacebuilding during the transitional period was based on the principles agreed on at

Arusha, with modifications necessitated by the genocide against the Tutsi. A particular emphasis was put on the formation of a republican army and security architecture which was reflective of Rwandan society. Officers and men of the defeated forces were integrated into the defense forces, including into command positions. The first deputy minister of defense, and subsequently the minister of defense were officers in the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR). When the time came to move beyond the emergency phase to the sustainable development phase, in 1998, broad based consultations were held to chart the country's future. The so-called Urugwiro consultations lasted over a year, and involved leaders of all institutions, as well as Rwandan opinion leaders from a wide spectrum. Religious leaders, leaders of pre-independence and post-independence political parties, civil society, and academia. Intense debates were held on Rwanda's past and future, justice after Genocide, national unity, reconciliation and reconstruction, among other topics. The consensus resulting from these discussions was shared with Rwandans by the Constitutional Commission and were codified in the current Rwandan Constitution through a referendum in 2003, revised in 2015. Rwandans agreed on building a state based on "Fundamental Principles," and created an institution, the Senate, to, inter alia, oversee the implementation of the principles in all spheres of national life.<sup>3</sup> The principles are as follows:

1. Prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, fighting against denial and revision of genocide, as well as the eradication of genocide ideology and all its manifestations;
2. Eradication of discrimination and divisionism based on ethnicity, region, or any other ground, as well as promotion of national unity;
3. Equitable power sharing;
4. Building a state governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic government, equality of all Rwandans and between men and women, which is affirmed by women occupying at least thirty percent of positions in decision-making organs;
5. Building a state committed to promoting social welfare and establishing appropriate mechanisms for equal opportunity to social justice;
6. Constant quest for solutions through dialogue and consensus.

All Rwandan efforts at post genocide reconstruction have been based on these principles. From balancing the need to eradicate the culture of impunity with the imperatives of national reconciliation through the Gacaca Justice system, female empowerment and the involvement of women in

decision-making at all levels, to the promotion of access to education and programs that promote universal health care. These principles, as well as the search for homegrown solutions to deal with intractable problems, are the bedrock of Rwanda's return to peace, stability, and development.

Let me now spend a few minutes on principle number six, the "constant quest for solutions through dialogue and consensus." A number of African scholars and politicians have interpreted democracy to mean multiparty competition for power and resources, building majorities based on ethnic groups or other rigidified identities. The forms of democracy practiced in the West, have been exported and swallowed whole by African states, including those emerging from conflicts, with devastating results. Obvious fallacies have been accepted as unvarnished truth. Conflicts on our continent are seen through the lens of moral equivalence, not applied elsewhere. For example, during the genocide against the Tutsi, the international community was bent on bringing the "two sides" to the negotiating table instead of stopping it. But how can there be "two sides" between a group committing genocide and a movement battling to stop it? In the aftermath of such a traumatic national event, how can political competition, which is desirable and critically important, serve to build the state and not destroy it? How can political violence be marginalized as a tool of statecraft? How can a society with a history like Rwanda's move from civil war and Genocide to peace and not get stuck in the dangerous swamp of violent peace? Rwandans grappled with these issues and found a solution through power sharing, informed by the constant quest for dialogue and consensus. A National Consultative Forum of Political Organizations brings together political organizations for the purposes of political dialogue and building consensus and national cohesion. Although cabinet members are selected from political organizations on the basis of seats held by those organizations in the Chamber of Deputies, a political organization holding the majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies cannot have more than fifty percent of cabinet members. The President of the Republic and the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies cannot come from the same political organization. Every year, the National Umushyikirano Council brings together the President of the Republic and citizen's representatives to debate issues relating to the state of the nation and national unity.

Politics in Rwanda is about constant dialogue and consensus. The eleven political formations compete for power based on their political platforms, but are all part of the consensus on the major issues that define the state.

Elections based on proportional representation allow for the participation of many political formations in parliament.<sup>4</sup> Women, the youth, and persons living with disabilities are also represented. Those political formations not represented in parliament participate in national policy making through the Consultative Forum of Political Parties. The ultimate aim is to ensure that electoral competition does not lead to the exclusion of any segment of Rwandan society. Post-conflict nation-building must, if it is to succeed, involve a deliberate decision not only to reconstruct the state in order to deliver peace, security, and development, but also to involve all segments of the fractured society in the process of reconstruction.

This involvement of all members of the society cannot be superficial, or intermittent. It has to be systemic and sustained. Local empowerment through effective and efficient decentralization has been a key feature of Rwandan governance post-genocide. Given the country's history, there is a constant structured reflection and dialogue on what it means to be Rwandan—not merely a collection of clans, or denominations—through homegrown structures like the Itorero or the Ndi Umunyarwanda (I am Rwandan). The involvement of the community also implies a willingness for government and leaders to be held accountable. Accountability mechanisms exist at different levels, but perhaps the most important are citizen's perceptions of governance and service delivery. Every year, the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) produces a detailed Citizen's Report Card covering the economic, social, and governance sectors.<sup>5</sup> Central and local entities are examined and ranked in terms of delivery, and this serves as a good basis for discussing needed improvements.

So, let me end where I began. Peacebuilding in Rwanda is a journey. It is a journey that started with a tabula rasa; an exercise during which there was precious little precedent to draw on; journey on which there was no established path to follow. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, peacebuilding cannot be forced into a straitjacket.<sup>6</sup> It is not a one size fits all operation. Peacebuilding is development, and development is always unique, every time, everywhere. We must all have the humility to accept this fact, but also the certainty that if a country like Rwanda can make progress despite her difficult past, societies everywhere can, in their own way, succeed. Peacebuilding need not be like Jupiter, present, possible, but mostly unseen and unavailable.

## NOTES

1. United Nations, "An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping—Report of the Secretary-General," doc. A/47/277- S/24111, June 17, 1992.
2. John Eriksson, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience Synthesis Report* [Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), March 1996]; The JEEAR steering committee, which also funded the study, was composed of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, USA, the EU Commission, OECD (DAC), IOM, UNHCR, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, IBRD, ICRC, IFRC, ICVA, Doctors of the World, Interaction, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, and Voice. France suspended its involvement in the steering committee in December 1995.
3. The "Fundamental Principles" are, in part, expected to be implemented using homegrown solutions. Article 11 emphasizes Rwandan culture as a source of homegrown solutions. It is clear that in order to build the nation, promote national culture, and restore dignity, Rwandans should initiate homegrown mechanisms based on their values to deal with matters that concern them. Laws may establish different mechanisms for homegrown solutions.
4. Any political formation that receives more than five percent of the vote is guaranteed seats in parliament proportional to its share of votes. The state also avails funds to support their operations.
5. The Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) was established by Law no. 56/2016 passed on December 16, 2016. It is empowered to, inter alia, carry out research on governance in Rwanda; examine citizen perceptions of service delivery; and promote principles of good governance, democracy, and service delivery.
6. Erskine B. Childers, "Who is the Tailor of Peacekeeping?" 1996, reprinted in: *Development Dialogue*, no. 56 (June 2011): 185-193.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Amb. Dr. Richard Sezibera is a Rwandan medical doctor, politician, diplomat, and civil servant. He is currently a member of the Senate of Rwanda. Before that he was the 4th Secretary-General of the East African Community (EAC), the regional intergovernmental organization composed of the Republic of Burundi, the Republic of Kenya, the Republic of Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania, the Republic of Uganda, and the Republic of South Sudan. Dr Sezibera is also a former Minister of Health for Rwanda. Prior to this, he served in many capacities in the Rwandan Government, including as a Member of Parliament, and Ambassador to the United States of America, Presidential Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region, where he worked on peace, security, conflict management and resolution, as well as regional integration issues. He is a long-serving board member of Gavi, an international alliance for promoting access to vaccines for children living in poor countries, first as a member representing governments of developing countries and then as an independent. Dr. Sezibera is the current Chair of Gavi's Programme and Policy Committee (PPC).*