

Paul Kagame: Machiavelli's Prince

by Renford Reese, Ph.D.^{1*}

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.²

Niccolò Machiavelli, the Italian diplomat and political theorist, remarked in his political manifesto that “It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both.”³ The writings and ideological construct embodied by Machiavelli in the 16th Century are exemplified in the leadership of Paul Kagame, the current president of Rwanda. As a modern day Machiavellian *Prince*, Kagame has inspired Rwandans with love, fear, and a unique paternalism. Despite the centuries that separate the ideology of Machiavelli and Paul Kagame, the old teachings from city-state Italy have found utility in the central African nation of Rwanda. Kagame’s enigmatic and Machiavellian leadership style has helped propel Rwanda into a fledgling success story amidst the difficult political climate of Africa.

AUTHORITARIANISM IN AFRICA

Men ought either to be well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious ones they cannot; therefore the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge.⁴

The foibles of African politics are perhaps best demonstrated by the Mo Ibrahim prize, which offers a personal reward of \$5 million USD as well as a \$200,000 annual pension to any democratically elected African leader who displays good governance and peacefully steps down from their post at the conclusion of their term. Despite this hefty financial incentive, the awards committee has not been able to find an African leader from the 50-plus countries to award in four of its seven year history.⁵ African leaders have extracted the most ignoble and callous lessons from Machiavelli and have used these lessons to manipulate and oppress the masses.

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²Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W.K. Marriot, (*Constitution Society*, 1984).

³*Ibid.*, 79.

⁴Machiavelli, *The Prince*, *Ibid*, 7-8.

⁵Global Public Square Staff, “Where are Africa’s great leaders?” *CNN Global Public Square*, October 19, 2013.

For example, circulating stories of Mobutu Sese Seko, the former president of Zaire, helps to summarize African leadership. A president of another African nation telephoned Mobutu and said, “Mobutu, my people are coming to get me.” Mobutu asked, “How are they coming?” The president answered, “By road.” Mobutu admonished him, “Didn’t I tell you not to build those roads!” While the story is allegory, building the roads is an apt metaphor for empowering the people. Mobutu embodied the belief of crushing men as presented by Machiavelli, depriving them of education, infrastructure and social programs. An educated and capable populace is more of a political threat than one that is ignorant. Having witnessed firsthand this popular political philosophy in Africa, it appears Mobutu is an example of the norm on the continent.

Despite the problems inherent to authoritarianism, Lee Kwan Yew showed the world in Singapore that a noble authoritarian leader could transform a nation. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Lee Kwan Yew responded to a question about human rights violations in his country. Lee responded that the US could not point the accusatory finger at his country because it was the most affluent country in the history of the world and people were still hungry, homeless, with no health care. Lee said that the US could not export its brand of human rights to Singapore. He urged his critics to come to Singapore in order to see Singapore. In his book, *From Third World to First World: The Singapore Story*, Lee reflects on the noble-authoritarian leadership style that was necessary in order to make his country rapidly successful.⁶ Lee’s forceful brand of leadership is a perfect example of the potential successes of an authoritarian government which is focused on building rather than oppressing.

It is within this context that we must deconstruct one of Africa’s most influential leaders—Paul Kagame. His role as a head of state has been both romanticized and criticized. The critics charged that beyond the paved roads and clean sidewalks, Kagame has embraced a dictatorial flair that has blemished his remarkable achievements. On the other hand, supporters of Kagame point to Rwanda’s rapid economic growth under Kagame’s policies. Kagame has enjoyed a great deal of success towards the objectives that he has laid out for Rwanda, but it will always carry the stigma of being at the cost of political freedom.

As the faculty coordinator of the Africa Study Abroad programs at California Polytechnical Institute Pomona, I have taken several groups of students to Africa over the years. In the pre-trip orientation sessions, I introduce my students to the history, politics, and culture of the host country. The most perplexing question that comes out of my orientation sessions is, “How is the country with massive resources and potential the subject of such suffering and underdevelopment?” Examining African leadership helps us to explain this paradox. Typically African leaders have woefully failed their states in providing good governance. Widespread corruption has undermined the growth, development, and potential of the world’s richest continent. Africa holds forty-two percent of the world’s gold, twelve percent of its oil reserves, and has nine out of the fifteen countries that are the fastest growing globally.⁷ Despite Africa’s richness in resources, countries like Rwanda are copious with untapped potential.

COLONIALISM IN RWANDA: SETTING THE STAGE FOR TRAGEDY

⁶Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. (New York: Harper Collins books, 2000).

⁷ Paul Kagame, “Rwanda and the New Lions of Africa,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2013.

Rwanda experienced as much of the detrimental effects of colonization as the rest of Africa. In 1916, Germany's African colonies were taken over by other European powers, and Rwanda had the unfortunate fate of being governed by Belgium. "Under Belgian rule, the issuance of ethnic identity cards formalized the quasi-feudalistic relationship between Tutsi lords and Hutu vassals into an apartheid-like regime."⁸ This period of colonization sowed the seeds of division in Rwandan society, and created an oligarchy where the Tutsi minority held power over the Hutu majority. This forced division created ethnic tension and was the foundation of later conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis.

Such key aspects of Rwandan history are lost in popular films such as *Hotel Rwanda*. These films do not give the proper examination into the complex workings of the genocide within Rwandan history. Viewers see a tragic snapshot of an incomprehensible tragedy. An ignorant viewer of *Hotel Rwanda* might think that Hutus awoke one day with the intense desire to kill Tutsis. This obviously was not the case, and such extremist tendencies among Hutus were actually born from decades of oppression under (Belgian led) Tutsi control. This oligarchy also had roots in Rwanda's pre-colonial history, where a feudal system distributed power among the Tutsis. However, Gourevitch and Kagame note in their book, *After Genocide*, that the original categorizations of the Tutsis and Hutus were actually rather elastic.

In 1959, thousands of Tutsis were massacred in a Hutu uprising. Paul Kagame, a Tutsi, was two years old when the revolution broke out. He was born in 1957 while Rwanda was still a colony of Belgium. During the uprising, the Europeans had observed the inevitable power shift and decided to instead support the Hutu regime. In 1961 the Tutsi government was toppled, earning Rwanda its independence. This was the same year that Kagame and his family fled to Uganda, where he grew up in a refugee camp. This dramatic change of power left the Tutsis subject to repercussions after years of continued violence. Among the repercussions were the ethnic quotas that came into existence. These quotas "severely limited Tutsi opportunities for educational, military, or political advancement, and periodic massacres propelled a continuing stream of exiles."⁹

Many Rwandan refugees were forced out of Rwanda by periodic massacres, which were endorsed by the Hutu government. Events turned from bad to worse for Tutsis when the greed of Hutu officer, Juvénal Habyarimana, led to a coup and seizure of power in 1973.¹⁰ *Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda* by Helen M. Hintjens indicates that apart from the ethnic quotas that contributed to the tension between the Hutus and the Tutsis, there was an economic aspect to what triggered the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Hintjens explained that there was a militarization of state expenditures as a result of a significant increase in the military from 1989 to 1994. The consequence of this was that international financial aid was being put towards arms as opposed to necessities such as food.

Habyarimana proved to be a violent and corrupt dictator. Challenges to his brutal rule arose from the Rwandan Patriotic Army, in which Paul Kagame played a central role, and its political faction, the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The RPA and RPF were made up of Tutsi refugees who were largely based in Uganda. Alan J. Kuperman's *Rwanda in Retrospect* described how the genocide of 1994 was the result

⁸Philip Gourevitch and Paul Kagame, "After Genocide," *In Transition*, no.72 (1996): 162-164.

⁹Philip Gourevitch and Paul Kagame, "After Genocide," 164.

¹⁰Alan J. Kuperman, "Rwanda in Retrospect," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no.1 (January/February 2000), 94-118.

of a culmination of ongoing political events. The RPA fought with the Ugandan guerilla Yoweri Museveni to overthrow Uganda's government in 1986. By October 1990, the RPA had invaded northern Rwanda. In 1993, the RPA and the Rwandan Armed Forces (Forces Armées Rwandaises, or FAR) were engaged in open combat. In the midst of pressure by the international community in 1993, Habyarimana agreed to the Arusha Accords, which set forth a power sharing distribution among the Hutus and the Tutsis. However, he sought to retain power by trying to make modifications to aspects of the agreement. This created division among Hutus. Extremists viewed acceptance of the accords as tantamount to a surrender, while more moderate Hutus were inclined to accept the agreement and end the conflict before the RPF achieved total victory. Meanwhile a group of Rwandan extremists close to Habyarimana, known as the Akazu, began its preparation and training to massacre Tutsis on an unprecedented scale.

On April 6, 1994 an airplane, which carried Habyarimana and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, was shot down near the Kigali airport. This was the incident that many point to as the spark for the powder keg of tension and animosity in Rwanda that culminated in its genocide. Hintjens explained that during Habyarimana's leadership in the 1990s, the Akazu began to organize themselves with senior military and civilian officials in the Rwandan government. They traced their legitimacy and lineage to the Hutus of northwest Rwanda and were known to have had control over Habyarimana's political networks. As a result of Habyarimana's rule and the influence that the Akazu exerted, a system of clientelism emerged. Ultimately, Habyarimana and the Akazu rejected the demand that the Arusha Accords set in place regarding the integration of the RPA with the Rwandan Armed Forces as they perceived this as a threat to their authority. It had been evident that Habyarimana and the Akazu were standing in the way of reforms that were suggested by the Arusha Accords, which forms the context behind the shooting down of Habyarimana's airplane.

Immediately after the death of Habyarimana, Hutus began a killing campaign. Kuperman stated that in a two week time period, two hundred and fifty thousand people had been killed, making this incident the fastest rate at which a genocide was carried out in history. Habyarimana's plane was downed between the second week of April, and by the third week of May in 1994, an estimated 5-10 percent of the Rwandan population was killed.¹¹ Kuperman's research indicates that approximately five hundred thousand Tutsis were killed and an estimated range of ten thousand to one hundred thousand Hutus were killed.

After this tragedy, many counted Rwanda as a lost cause. As was evident in Stephen Kinzer's accounts in *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It*, it was predicted that cyclical revenge in the country would be inevitable. Predictions assumed that Rwanda would be worse than the average poor African nation, that it would be another Somalia. Decades after the genocide, Rwanda is no Somalia. In fact, they are on opposite ends of the spectrum.

What is intriguing about the Kagame story is how a person once accused of the incident that incited the Rwanda genocide could come back to lead the nation. As a revolutionary, it was through his unique employment of Machiavellian sensibilities at times that enabled Kagame to navigate the treacherous pitfalls of politics and leadership to becoming president. In a short period of time, Kagame had to gain the trust of the

¹¹Helen M. Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 1999): 241-286.

oppositional Hutus in order to build credibility and gain access to leadership in his devastated nation. As Kuperman pointed out, there were Hutus that had been targeted by Habyarimana and the extremist Hutu faction of his government; therefore, it was understandable that Kagame sought to achieve their support. As the *New York Times Magazine*'s Jeffrey Gettleman writes after visiting Rwanda and interviewing President Kagame, "No country in Africa, if not the world, has so thoroughly turned itself around in so short a time, and Kagame has shrewdly directed the transformation."¹²

KAGAME'S POLICIES BEARING FRUIT

Jeffrey Gettleman's *The Global Elite's Strongman* reveals that Kagame has managed to reduce infant mortality by seventy percent, increased economic growth by eight percent over a five year stretch, and has established a national health system. According to Marc Sommer's *The Darling Dictator of the Day*, Kagame has placed women's rights at the forefront of the national agenda. Paul Kagame's *Rwanda and the New Lions of Africa* discussed how *Foreign Policy* magazine named the country the fifth best investment destination worldwide. Gettleman and Katie Collins stated that the country has risen to be the 52nd ranked country in which to do business according to a World Bank report. Sommers emphasized that the World Bank ranks Rwanda as the eighth easiest country to start a new business. An example of Rwanda's increasing economic appeal was demonstrated when Sommers pointed out that Starbucks and Costco now buy about one quarter of Rwanda's premium coffee crop.¹³

Called the "Digital President," Kagame has also been noted for energetically embracing technology in Rwanda. Not blessed with the natural resources of many other African countries, Kagame has creatively found ways to boost the country's economy. In an interview with Katie Collins, Kagame stated,

For a landlocked country you want first of all to address the infrastructure problems, which is logistics, transport, communication and so on and so forth.[...]you also want to get involved in high value products and in services because these are not directly affected by the position we're in of being landlocked.¹⁴

Kagame's leadership has enabled a million Rwandans to overcome poverty in a six-year period. He has invested in health care, education, and agriculture. As he states in a *Wall Street Journal* article, "Yes, we need to keep liberalizing our economies and pursuing greater global integration. But governance reforms and social development, propelled by economic growth that delivers tangible improvements in the lives of citizens, must also continue."¹⁵ It is this analytical, multi-pronged, and sophisticated approach to development that has made him a transformational leader.

There is a view that development is a marathon, not a sprint. We do not agree. Development is a marathon that must be run at a sprint. In our pursuit of progress, we have of course looked to East Asia's so-called "tiger" economies for inspiration. But

¹²Jeffrey Gettleman, "The Global Elite's Favorite Strongman," *New York Times Magazine*, September 4, 2013.

¹³Marc Sommers, "The Darling Dictator of the Day," *New York Times*, May 27, 2012.

¹⁴Katie Collins, "Exclusive: Rwanda's 'digital president' Paul Kagame on technology's role in Africa's future," *Wired*, November 4, 2013.

¹⁵Paul Kagame, "Rwanda and the New Lions of Africa," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2013.

*Africa's experience is unique, and we must now define our own destiny. So while being described as an "African tiger" is a welcome recognition of how far Rwanda has come, perhaps it isn't quite right. After all, our continent has its own big cat. Step forward the new lions of Africa.*¹⁶

I have traveled to Africa on several occasions, and in terms of infrastructure and development, each of the countries that I have visited seemed to move painfully slow towards improvement. In this context, I have never been surprised by what I have seen on any of these journeys—until I visited Kigali, Rwanda. I marveled at the infrastructure. The green public spaces were well manicured. The houses that peppered the rolling hills were aesthetically pleasing and well built. The buildings were modern. The malls and the supermarkets were as clean and as abundant with goods as those in the West. At Kigali Independent University, I saw a campus that was on par with the average university in the United States. Kigali represented progress on a continent that continuously produces despair. Stephen Kinzer, author of *A Thousand Hills*, captures the spirit of the Rwandan transformation when he writes, “It has recovered from the civil war and genocide more fully than anyone imagined possible and is united, stable, and at peace.”¹⁷

Centralized leadership has transformed Rwanda. Sommers revealed that in the 2010 elections opposition parties were not allowed to register and independent newspapers were shut down. This ensured that Kagame was able to win elections with ninety-three percent of the votes and maintain the power that has allowed for Rwanda to recover after the 1994 genocide. The implication is that the authoritarian nature of his leadership may have played a role in Rwanda’s transformation and Kagame’s rule. In Paul Kagame’s Rwanda, it is illegal to ask a person what their ethnic background is. Each year in April, during the anniversary of the genocide, each Rwandan is required to visit a genocide memorial site. One Saturday morning during each month is set aside for cleaning, during which Rwandans clean their homes and their communities. With the exception of government vehicles, there are no cars allowed on the streets during this four hour period.

As Marc Sommers states, “There’s no question who is in charge in Rwanda. The government’s commanding presence in Rwandan lives is aggressively maintained by Kagame and a clique of other former Tutsi refugees from Uganda.”¹⁸ Critics of Kagame point to Rwandan opposition figures who have been jailed during his tenure and his alleged support for M23, a rogue rebel group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁹ Sommers also explained that loosening up the authoritarian government in Rwanda and advocating for the freedom of the press and politics are issues that should be promoted by the international community because the Rwandan people undertaking these efforts on their own could be potentially dangerous.

Kagame’s authoritarian leadership style is found in examples of his “eradication campaign” in which he banned grass-roofed huts and banned people from wearing dirty clothes in public.²⁰ These unusual rules seem overreaching but employ psychological oppression by stripping identity from inhabitants. However, Kagame’s alleged beating

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Stephen Kinzer, *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda’s Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It*, (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2008), 2.

¹⁸Marc Sommers, “The Darling Dictator of the Day.”

¹⁹Jeffrey Gettleman, “The Global Elite’s Favorite Strongman.”

²⁰Ibid.

of his staff members and treatment of his opposition moves him from the realm of authoritarian to Machiavellian.

THE ENDS AND THE MEANS

A man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity.²¹

Rwanda is said to have the third highest level of political exclusion, behind Sudan and Syria. As mentioned earlier, in the run-up to the 2010 presidential elections Kagame barred most oppositional parties and shut down independent newspapers. Many prominent government officials left the country in “fear for their lives.”²² There is no question as to the legitimacy of Kagame’s position as President of Rwanda. He is not a democratically elected leader, and the people of Rwanda have no voice. In simplest terms, when observing Kagame we must ask if the ends have justified the means.

In every election cycle throughout Africa, politicians connive to get elected to serve themselves, their families, and friends. Kagame has nullified this systematic corruption, which automatically makes him a natural enemy of others who wish to preserve such a system. Yet it is precisely this attitude, which has allowed him to garner outside support from the US and other Western nations. With a lack of natural resources, Rwanda heavily relies on outside aid, and Kagame has managed to keep this aid flowing to great effect. Gettleman notes that,

Aid flows to Rwanda because Kagame is a celebrated manager. He’s a hands-on chief executive who is less interested in ideology than in making things work. He loves new technology--he’s an avid tweeter--and is very good at breaking sprawling, ambitious projects into manageable chunks.²³

It is hard to argue that Rwanda would be well off today were it not for Kagame’s heavy handed political tactics.

Critics tend to underestimate how difficult it is to transform an African state. With Western biases regarding the supremacy of democratic rule, many critics render themselves naïve when dealing with political upheaval found in Africa. In the outcomes versus behavior debate, critics should travel to Rwanda and ask the people whether they would want the strict discipline and dictatorial control of living under the Kagame regime or if they would prefer the decentralized democratic institutions of a South African state.

The West has long supported autocratic strong men in Africa. The US’ longstanding support for Mobutu is an example of a contradictory American foreign policy. The US says that it supports democracy in various pockets of the world, but its historic policy is to support stability of standing governments when its interests are protected by said government. These preferences have motivated the US to support leaders who secure their interests above all else. This is also insightful as to why

²¹Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 71.

²²Marc Sommers, “The Darling Dictator of the Day.”

²³Gettleman, “The Global Elite’s Strongman.”

America has enthusiastically supported Kagame, despite the fact that he has eschewed democratic ideals and political freedom.

CONCLUSION

There have been few leaders as enigmatic as Kagame. It is difficult to categorize his leadership style because it engenders so many paradoxes. He is progressive but has embraced undemocratic practices. He is intolerable of criticism but is also intolerable of corruption. He is benevolent but proven to be ruthless. He has done bad things in order to achieve good things. For Kagame, the end justifies the means. The fact that we cannot categorize Kagame makes us uncomfortable. His leadership does not fit within a traditional leadership framework. His dictatorial flair has led to remarkable outcomes for a once devastated and demoralized people. Despite the criticism Kagame has received of human rights organizations, it would be a monumental challenge to find an equally capable and progressive leader for Rwanda that is not authoritarian.

Kagame possesses the same grit and tenacity as his counterparts on the continent, but it is his vision for collective progress that separates him from his peers. His will and capacity to move his nation forward is unique. If Machiavelli could witness Kagame's leadership prowess, he would certainly be impressed because no leader has so thoroughly reflected his idealized Prince like Kagame has.