



GENOCIDE: THE CASES OF RWANDA AND SUDAN

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There is a relationship between societies that aren't free and genocide, but it's not exactly the relationship one might assume. The common wisdom is based on our knowledge of the Holocaust, which we think of as the prototypical case of genocide. We think that an oppressive state begins to discriminate against people, and then this discrimination escalates into an annihilation campaign of genocide. The Holocaust is the case we know best, so we think that must be what's happening in all these other cases, whether Rwanda or Darfur.

But in fact, one sees a slightly different narrative in most other cases. The Holocaust was almost the exception. The more typical case starts with a rebellion, often by an ethnically based group in the society, sometimes with a legitimate grievance of discrimination or poverty, other times with no legitimate grievance, just wanting more power or independence.

States respond to rebellion in a number of ways, often initially with counterinsurgency campaigns. But another of

their options, and one they sometimes choose, is to say "Well, these rebels are supported by their ethnic group, so we should target the civilians." That can be done in a spectrum of ways, ranging from forcing the civilians to leave, which we typically call ethnic cleansing, all the way to actually killing all the civilians. With modern cases of genocide one often sees exactly those roots: first, there's a rebellion, then the government launches a brutal counterinsurgency campaign, which escalates to saying "We have to kill all the civilians who are supporting the rebels."

It matters a great deal that the actual narrative is different from the common wisdom, because the misimpression of what actually happens can lead to unproductive or even counterproductive activism. Not only doesn't it save lives, it may actually cost lives. Addressing the problem of genocide is not just a matter of raising consciousness and creating political will for action, but also understanding what's actually causing such violence, in order to devise remedies that do more good than harm.

RWANDA

Hundreds of years ago, two groups settled in Rwanda: the Hutu and the Tutsi. The Hutu were the vast majority, somewhere around 85 percent of the country, mainly farmers. The Tutsi were more likely to be involved in raising cattle. Over time a symbiotic relationship evolved between these two groups in Rwanda because those with cattle need crops to eat and land to graze herds, but in return have the means to provide security. Cattle are a sign of wealth, so whoever has cattle is higher in the pecking order than subsistence farmers. So in Rwanda, the Tutsi were the more privileged group well before the arrival of any colonialists.

Germany was the original colonial power in Rwanda but lost the colony during WWI, at which point Belgium took over. This was not a settler colony; the Belgians ruled indirectly, which meant divide and rule. To do this, you don't ally with the majority, because there are too many of them. The Belgians allied with the Tutsi and said "What we really want from this country is production"--of tea and coffee. The Tutsi elite became essentially the strong hand of the Belgians. As a result, what previously had been a symbiotic

relationship between Tutsi and Hutu devolved into a more oppressive, exploitative relationship. The Tutsi exerted strong pressure on the Hutu to work harder and produce more, and in turn were rewarded by the colonial power.

The Hutu of course resented this, and so as the country started after WWII to move toward independence, the Hutu said “We want not just independence, but also majority rule. We’re tired of being under the thumb of the Tutsi.” Eventually the European powers supported majority rule, so when Rwanda became independent in the early 1960s, the pecking order switched. The first elected president of Rwanda was a Hutu, and the newly empowered Hutu took small-scale vengeance against the elite of the Tutsi, killing some and forcing others to flee to neighboring states. But after having been in control for so long, the former Tutsi elite were not satisfied to live as refugees. They soon began to invade the country and try to recapture power. A dynamic emerged in the 1960s--which would repeat itself a quarter-century later--of Tutsi rebels invading the country, the Hutu government fighting them off, and then the Hutu starting to attack Tutsi within the country, fearing a possible fifth column. In the early 1960s, there was a series of invasions by Tutsi rebels from Uganda and Burundi and brutal retaliation by the Hutu government against the Tutsi within the country – prompting fully half of the Tutsi population to flee Rwanda.

In 1967, the Tutsi refugee rebels realized that they could not reconquer the country this way and stopped the invasions. Accordingly, attacks on Tutsi within the country also stopped. To be clear, when the Tutsi rebel invasions stopped, so did the attacks against Tutsi civilians in Rwanda. So the popular impression of Rwanda as a place where the Hutu and Tutsi have always been at each other’s throats is simply untrue. In fact, from 1967-90, there was virtually no ethnic violence in Rwanda (except for a small disturbance in 1973 when the Hutu president was deposed by a Hutu officer and attempted unsuccessfully to blame the Tutsi). Why then did we subsequently get a genocide? Because the Tutsi refugees, who had been quiescent for 23 years, reinvaded in 1990, having acquired military expertise and materiel in neighboring Uganda. They had joined a rebel force there that came to power in 1986, so now they were in the Ugandan army, had access to weaponry, and said, “Why not invade and take over our own homeland?” As in the 1960s, Rwanda’s Hutu government responded by targeting not only the rebels but also Tutsi civilians within the country. However, the rebels were much more competent than they had been in the 1960s. They came closer and closer to capturing the capital.

In 1993, with pressure mounting from the rebels and from the international community, the Rwandan government signed a peace treaty. The number of casualties at this point was fairly low, some 2,000 killed from 1990-93. But the government feared that the Tutsi wanted not just to share power but to take power. It stalled on implementing the agreement and tried to rouse the Hutu populace, reminding them of the old days of being second-class citizens. Under the 1993 peace agreement, some 2,500 UN peacekeepers arrived, and there was still hope of implementation until April 6, 1994, when the Hutu president was assassinated. The Hutu claimed, and evidence increasingly points to the fact, that the

Tutsi rebels had shot the president’s plane down. The Hutu immediately pursued a “final solution.” Over the next three months, the fastest genocide in recorded history took place, with over a half-million Tutsi killed, some three-quarters of their population in Rwanda.

The peacekeepers managed to protect a few thousand people, but as the violence escalated, the UN withdrew, downsizing in April 2004 from a force of 2,500 to an authorized level of about 250. A larger UN-authorized force did not return until late June, when the genocide was mostly over, and in July 2004 the Tutsi rebels conquered what was left of the country. So the Tutsi refugee rebels won their war, but at an enormous cost to their fellow Tutsi inside Rwanda. The Hutu fled--over 2 million became refugees, including their Army--mainly to Zaire, from where they tried repeatedly to reinvade. This is partially what led to the Zairian civil war of 1996, and then another Congolese civil war starting in 1997, and several more million people dying in the DRC due to the disruption and deprivation of those wars.

So there certainly is a lack of freedom throughout the narrative. At one point the Hutu are oppressed; at another point the Tutsi refugees aren’t free to live in their own country. In fact, they were banned from reentering the country in the 1970s-80s. But the situation for Rwanda’s Tutsi--both within and outside Rwanda--wasn’t so terrible during those decades. No one was being killed, ethnically cleansed, or badly oppressed. In fact, some Tutsi were thriving. In Uganda, the chief of staff and the head of intelligence of the Army were both Rwandan Tutsi. There was even some resentment in Uganda because the Tutsi refugees were faring better than native Ugandans. Despite this, it was the decision by some Rwandan Tutsi refugees to invade Rwanda that triggered the set of events that led to the genocide. So there is a relationship between lack of freedom and genocide, but it’s not the simplistic story that one might imagine. This is not to excuse but to explain what happened.

As for whether international military intervention could have prevented the genocide, the common wisdom is that this would have been easy if only we had mustered the political will to act. But addressing this issue requires us to answer three questions: how fast did the genocide progress, when did we realize a genocide was underway, and how quickly could we have deployed troops to stop it?

The genocide didn’t start gradually and accelerate later, leaving a window for decisive intervention, as most people think. Rather, the massacres exploded immediately throughout most of the country. Indeed, most of the killing occurred during the first two to three weeks. Nor did the U.S. government immediately know it was a genocide. The international media had a greater presence in Rwanda than U.S. intelligence agencies, and if one looks at the media coverage from the first two weeks after the Hutu president was assassinated, it focused largely on the renewed civil war. When the president was killed, the Tutsi rebels launched a new offensive and the army started defending against the rebels. So at the same time as the genocide was erupting, there was renewal of civil war that disrupted implementation of an internationally brokered peace agreement. International actors were focused on the latter, and so did not become aware of the former until about two weeks into

the violence.

Moreover, the Tutsi rebels were winning the civil war (and, indeed, ultimately won it). So it was hard initially for international observers to reconcile the Tutsi as victims of genocide if they were in the process of winning a civil war. Also, during the initial days of violence, international reporters were evacuated from the countryside, where most of the violence was occurring, so they could not report it. Only in retrospect did human rights groups document the massacres by painstaking interviews with survivors. Indeed, at the time, the estimated death toll in the media didn't increase from the second or third day of violence all the way through the end of the second week.

Finally, the U.S. could not have transported even a modest military force, including its requisite equipment, halfway around the world quickly. To get there as fast as possible, both the troops and their equipment--armored personnel carriers, artillery, helicopters--would have had to be flown in. But there was limited airfield capacity in Rwanda and surrounding states, and other constraints on airlift, so it would have taken about 40 days to get a force of 15,000 troops with equipment to Rwanda. Of course, one wouldn't need to get the whole force there to begin halting the genocide, and our forces could have mitigated the killing once they were able to disperse to the countryside. But that would have required a matter of weeks, not days, and the genocide was moving quicker than that. At best, a military intervention could have saved some but not most of the victims, mitigating but not preventing the genocide.

SUDAN

Sudan involves two categories of civil war. The first is a north-south civil war that ran on and off for nearly fifty years. Then there's the war we hear about today, in Darfur which I address further below. The north-south war was between the mainly Arab/Muslim north and the mainly African/animist/Christian south. The two parts had always been different, so much so that under British colonial rule there were separate administrators for each. As independence approached, the south rightly felt neglected, especially economically. The per capita GDP in the south was one tenth that of Khartoum, the capital, in the north. So when independence came around, the southerners in Sudan wanted to be independent. The northerners maintained that the south had always been subordinate to them and must remain part of the country. So you had a civil war from 1956-72, which eventually was settled by an agreement in which the north granted the south autonomy. But in 1983, inspired by an upsurge of Islamism, the north reneged, revoked autonomy, and imposed sharia law on the south.

Not even all Muslims in Sudan want to live under sharia, but certainly Christians and animists don't. So this was another example of "living without freedom." In response, the south launched a new rebellion in 1983, starting a civil war that ran all the way until a few years ago. In this renewed war, the government of Sudan responded to the rebellion with an especially brutal counterinsurgency. The counterinsurgency involved several elements. First, the government employed the regular army, but not to a great extent, because this was tough fighting, involving high casualties, and the northern Sudanese didn't want to sacrifice their sons in high numbers.

So the second tactic was aerial bombing. But the Sudanese don't have the smart bombs deployed by the U.S. Air Force. Instead, they use very dumb bombs, or helicopter gun ships, which are effective at wreaking terror, compelling people to flee their villages. Third, at least two types of militias were employed. One was from the north, and these were jihadists. Some in the north were actually willing to volunteer for a religious war, as opposed to army service. Then there were government-allied militias from the south. This is a divide-and-conquer strategy, too. There were historical rivalries in southern Sudan that the government took advantage of, saying: "You don't like those tribes; we'll help you if you help us." These militia were especially prone to excesses.

The result of this brutal counterinsurgency was massive displacement. Four million southern Sudanese were displaced internally, one million fled as refugees, and some two million died. Most victims weren't killed by a bullet or bomb but as a result of the disruption from the war, losing access to their farms or clean water or medical care. This is typical in Africa, and is also true in DRC and Darfur.

Why was the north doing this? It's not mainly due to racism, although there certainly is a kind of racism--people in the north do consider themselves superior. But the main reason for the north's carrying out ethnic cleansing is that they couldn't fight and win a conventional war. Counterinsurgency is very hard, and an army takes a lot of casualties, as we are re-learning in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Khartoum regime didn't have the political will to fight the war conventionally, but did have the will to essentially subcontract this out to militias, who were quite vicious. The second reason is oil, which became a big issue in the 1990s. Sudan has a lot of oil, most of it in the south, so the displacement there often stems from fighting for control of oilfields.

Eventually there was a major diplomatic effort to end this war and a peace framework was signed in 2002 between the government and the rebels, finalized in January 2005. It provides for revenue sharing so that proceeds from the southern oil are split between the north and south. After six years there's to be a referendum on independence for the south. The bad news is that the south wants to leave Sudan but the north is never going to permit this. So it's a ticking time bomb. War in the south is likely to restart when the south votes on independence in 2011, if not sooner.

DARFUR

Unlike southern Sudan, the region of Darfur, in northwest Sudan, is Muslim, like the government in Khartoum. But just as the south was neglected, so was Sudan's northwest, leaving it quite poor relative to Khartoum. Within Darfur itself, as in Rwanda, there had long been a synergistic relationship between the herders (mainly nomadic Arabs) and farmers (mainly settled Africans). So what went wrong to compel members of these two groups to attack each other, as they have been doing since 2003? First, the government in Khartoum had an internal challenge from one of its top officials, Hassan Turabi, who was deemed too extreme an Islamist and purged from the government in 1999. The Khartoum regime feared that Turabi would use Darfur as a staging ground for rebellion, so it installed Arab loyalists in Darfur, which reduced local autonomy and aggrieved the

local populace, especially African tribes. Yet rebellion did not occur until a few years later, in 2003.

The best explanation for why rebellion occurred in 2003 is as a response to the 2002 peace settlement of the north-south civil war, with its provisions for revenue sharing. Darfurians observed that the south had obtained this financial reward by rebelling and attracting international support, which compelled the government to cut a deal. So they too rebelled. The government retaliated, just as it had in the south, with its army, aerial bombing, and recruitment of local militias, which in this case are known as Janjaweed. It's a repeat of what happened in the south but accelerated. In the first year alone, 2 million Darfurians were displaced; 100,000 made refugees in neighboring Chad; and tens of thousands died.

Just as the Darfur rebels hoped, this explosion of violence brought international pressure on the Khartoum regime, compelling it to sign a peace agreement in 2006 making certain concessions to the Darfur region. The government did not agree to huge revenue sharing, as it had with the south, but did concede to increased local autonomy and a small amount of reparations for the war. But most of the rebels didn't agree to this peace, because they had not gotten as good a deal as the south did. So the rebels fight on to this day, and the government continues to respond with a brutal counterinsurgency. The big losers are Darfur's civilians, who are caught in the middle.

This account of Darfur's history, which partially implicates the rebels for perpetuating the region's suffering, outrages many intervention advocates, who lay exclusive blame on the Khartoum regime. But the rebels are willing to sacrifice their own civilians in order to get international attention and thereby more power. Rebels in many such situations--and I've interviewed them personally in cases in Africa and the Balkans --really are this cynical.

What is the message for American students? The engagement of youth in our high schools and universities over Darfur is unprecedented in terms of demands for military intervention. This is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it's heartening that our youth care this much about people in a region that most cannot even locate on a map. On the other hand, they've joined a movement that caricatures the situation in Darfur as a simplistic morality tale, involving a racist Arab regime that just wants to kill black Darfurians. As set forth above, it's much more complicated than that. Moreover, all these calls for intervention are actually emboldening the rebels to keep fighting, which perpetuates the suffering of innocent civilians.

The caricature argues that Darfur is a battle between good and evil and that we could easily intervene to enable good to prevail. But the reality is grayer, and international intervention against the will of Khartoum could become a quagmire like Iraq or Afghanistan. If students embrace the caricature of Darfur and then witness our government failing to intervene to stop genocide, they could become disillusioned with our government and with political

engagement more generally.

The best way to protect students from grabbing onto half-truths and then ultimately becoming disillusioned is honesty. We should talk about the nuances of the situation. Some claims are true: there is a dearth of wealth and freedom in these regions, and civilians do become innocent victims in these wars. But there aren't many good guys or freedom fighters on either side. Most of the fighters and especially their leaders are seeking power at the expense of others, sometimes for their group as a whole and sometimes for themselves personally.

Truly humanitarian aid--food, water, shelter, medicine--does save lives, and it doesn't usually exacerbate conflict. So that's something we can safely encourage students to support. It may not end the conflict, but at least it can save lives. Second, when students engage in advocacy, we should encourage them not to caricature the situation, depicting one party (the government of Sudan) as the only bad guy. Pressure must be exerted on all sides for peaceful compromise.

Finally, we should explore with students the potential for nonviolent movements. In part because of how this country was born, Americans have something of a romance with rebellion in the name of freedom. Our own rebellion in the name of freedom worked, and we became a democracy. But historically that is the exception. Most armed rebellions do not lead to actual freedom or democracy, but to military dictatorship, oppression, often counter-rebellion, and sometimes ethnic cleansing and even genocide. Nonviolent movements may not elicit the excitement of "give me liberty or give me death," but they often have been remarkably successful: most famously with Gandhi in India and also in our own civil rights movement under Martin Luther King; more recently in people-power movements in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. Time and again, oppressive governments have been overthrown and at least some degree of democracy installed without a bullet being fired. This is an important lesson for students -- that rebellion and military intervention are not the only, nor necessarily the best, paths to freedom.

For further reading:

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