

Citizenship in a democratic Society

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April-May 2007

The title of this essay suggests an assumption of a democracy, as the emphasis is on citizenship in a “*democratic society*”. Unfortunately, democracy is a luxury that many countries around the world and certainly most on the African continent do not have. Although struggling with issues of democracy doesn’t mean one can not have a meaningful discussion on citizenship, they both go hand-in-hand, and usually where there is no democracy, citizenship is always at stake for all or parts of the population. I will attempt to illustrate this through very sensitive issues currently faced by my country men and women in Rwanda, and will also share a personal perspective on the situation in Rwanda. I will give a brief note on the situation in South Africa, where I live in exile. There is a sharp contrast between the two countries that I unintentionally discovered. Having explored the essence and vitality of citizenship to good governance (and vice-versa), I will discuss some practical ways of discovering and developing citizenship in young people. The last part will focus on my views about the meaning of citizenship, which is, in my opinion, independent of any particular country, but rather inherent in all humans. As an attempt to set the background to the current situation in Rwanda, I will provide a brief account of the Rwandan conflict as I understand it. Though there is a lot to be proud of and to praise the current Rwandan government for, in this essay, the focus is on the issues that affect true citizenship especially among the youth.

Citizenship in Rwanda has for many centuries been clouded by practices that encouraged the exclusion and/or maltreatment of “the other” between Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups in my country. There are different understandings of what was the nature of the treatment of the Hutus (the majority) by the Rwandan Tutsi feudalist monarchy before 1959 when the King and many Tutsis were forced into exile following a Hutu revolution (currently much contested by the Government in Rwanda). Some say the monarchy was characterized by enslavement of the Hutus by the Tutsis, while others characterise it as clientism, or just as a socially fair, cultural practice, unique to Rwanda. Hutus insist they were generally considered inferior. After the 1959 Hutu Revolution and 1962 independence, policies of the two successive regimes that ruled in Rwanda diminished the rights of the minority Tutsi. Furthermore, the exiled Tutsis (following the 1959 revolution) have been refused the right to return as Rwandan citizens under the pretext of overpopulation of the country. They decided to start a rebellion, under the banner of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) in October 1990, despite negotiations that were underway with the Rwandan Government to repatriate them. Under the pressure of the International community and the raging war, President Habyarimana decided to open up the political space, introducing a multi-party system. Tensions between Hutus and Tutsis increased. Despite the peace negotiations and the Arusha Accords signed in 1993 between the Government and the RPF, which was in its implementation phase, the situations was increasingly out of control. On April 6th 1994, the plane carrying the Hutu President of Rwanda and his Burundian counterpart and their senior aids was hit by missiles while preparing to land at the Kigali Airport, ironically coming from a regional summit aimed at speeding up the process of implementation of the Accords in Tanzania. The widely

known Rwandan genocide was triggered, and the RPF successfully launched its final offensive to topple the Rwandan Government. Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered by extremist Hutus (massacres later qualified as genocide) while mostly Hutu civilians were systematically killed by RPF fighters (massacres yet to be qualified). Rwanda has no natural resources to fight over, nor has there been a major land dispute. Clearly, all the killings were committed by those who consider the “others” as dangerous and/or worthless citizens, in most cases dehumanised and explicitly called various animal names to increase what seemed to be the passion of their killers. Just over a hundred days later, Kigali (the capital city of Rwanda) fell into the hands of the RPF, and many Rwandans fled into the Democratic Republic of Congo, then called Zaire. A new government was installed in July 1994, led by the RPF, which inherited a country in which more than a million people had been barbarically killed, and some millions of others terrorized, both in and out of the country.

Although there is a huge amount of effort deployed to deny it, the situation was reversed in favor of the Tutsi minority, disguised as “*de-ethnicised Rwandanship*” while in practice, the government in many cases acts to distinguish between Hutus and Tutsis, despite claims that “There is no Hutu, no Tutsi in Rwanda, only Rwandans”. Everyone is forced to demolish that part of their identity. The government teaches that, in fact, these words were once “meaningless”, and must be completely “erased” in the new Rwandan socio-political vocabulary. But an astonishing contradiction is witnessed through current efforts by the government to find a word or a phrase that emphasises best the 1994 events as the Tutsi Genocide, because it is believed that calling it the “Rwandan Genocide” is confusing and diminishes it. This only implies the existence of Tutsis and Hutus. The meaning of those words slowly takes another meaning, such as the word “survivor”, which is often used to simply imply Tutsi. On the other hand, there is a tendency to diabolize the word Hutu, and it is now unbearable due to the associated collective guilt, both in Rwanda and out.

At the same time, only Tutsi (and “moderate” Hutu) victims of the same genocide are honored and remembered, their remains are exhumed and reburied with due tribute, but Hutu civilians, victims of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF, now in power) before, killed before, during and after 1994 are diminished and not talked about.

The Rwandan justice system (including the so called *Gacaca*, a quasi-traditional system, proposed to deal with the overwhelming number of post-1994 prisoners suspected of having persecuted and/or killed Tutsis) unflinching seeks to judge alleged Hutu killers and accomplices, but consistently turns a blind eye to the (still unqualified) systematic killings of hundreds of thousands of Hutus since 1990. Calls to honor innocent Hutu victims and to bring the authors of those crimes to justice are vehemently dismissed, often ridiculed. The system actually criminalizes any attempts to highlight the imbalances in criminal and social justice, especially when the words Hutu and Tutsi are used to demonstrate the difference in consideration. Such attempts are said to be a manifestation of the so called “*genocidal ideology*” according to policy makers.

Unfortunately, the Rwandan regime has also managed to take hostage the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda based in Arusha, whose functioning would be under threat if they even considered investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by other than the alleged authors of the genocide, despite being part of its mandate; because the Rwandan government threatens to stop co-operating.

Sadly, as Rwandans have no coherent version of history agreed upon, it is extremely hard to pose any questions in the quest to understand the evolution of the Rwandan story, citizenship and its complexities. History is being rewritten by the victors, only to erase what was “known” before, and to put forward a new perspective. History education has been prohibited until a “revised” version has been finalized. Glimpses of the current narrative show a total contradiction with what was taught before 1994, often omitting or diminishing important aspects of the former version. People’s pseudo-political opinions are cyclically made historical facts and taught as absolute truths. Having been exposed to both versions growing up in Rwanda, I am often astonished (and honestly, confused) by the fundamental changes and different interpretations of the same historical events. Where one speaks of three distinct ethnic groups that ended up sharing the same land over many centuries and creating the nation, the other insists on three social classes distinguished by wealth (e.g. the number of cows they owned); where one speaks of slavery, the other speaks of fair socio-cultural practice or clientism; where one speaks of Hutu revolution, the other tells of a colonist-incited popular uprising; where one speaks of a referendum, the other suggests a conspiracy/coup by colonists to overthrow the King, and so on. And even more recent events are intentionally either distorted or glanced over, such as the infamous 1994 missile attack on the presidential plane repeatedly referred to – and even taught - as a plane crash.

However, the astonishing commonality of the two versions of the Rwandan tale is the clear and vigorous claim to *victimhood*, which in my opinion, is extremely damaging. Every side (Hutu and Tutsi) wants history to make them victims of “the others” so as to justify their subsequent reactions and find a way *not* to take responsibility for their deeds. None seems ready to reflect on what was their part in the course of events, which I believe a responsible citizen should do. As Rwandans, we seem obsessed with the power of blaming, and constantly seek to be defensive and sabotage the other. As a result, on the one hand there those with no regard whatsoever for victims (and survivors) outside of the “official” narrative of the genocide, which is only a part of a vast history of the Rwandan conflict; on the other, there are those who still have the guts to shamelessly deny that the genocide took place in 1994. In the middle, there are those citizens who are totally indifferent, those who are passive by choice, and those who are constantly frustrated at being denied the space to reflect freely and participate in every aspect of their nation and national identity.

In Rwanda today, the lack of freedom of expression, freedom of press and freedom of assembly, pre-requisites to a democracy, make it even worse. To be a “good citizen” and live or operate “freely” in Rwanda requires a passive adherence to the one and only one line of thought traced by the government on all aspects of life. There is no platform for criticism and/or alternative views. *It is not allowed, for instance, to start this kind of*

debate at any level inside the country. This is a taboo subject, implicitly rendered a serious criminal offense by those who define citizenship for the rest. Journalists, politicians and others who choose to speak are immediately labeled “genocidal ideologists”, and often land in jail or are forced into exile. Non-Rwandans who criticize the regime are banned from going (back) into the country.

With an imposed reconciliation (often so unclear between who this should be taking place) based on an over-simplification of context, which wants on one side [Tutsi] innocent victims and survivors of the genocide who must be looked after and on the other, [Hutu] cold-blooded perpetrators (génocidaires) and their supporters who must repent and/or be punished; accompanied by a continuous and rigorous entrenchment of the much cherished victim mentality, Rwandans are forced to agree with every policy of the government because it is *the only right way, unique to the Rwandan situation*, aimed at protecting them against, among other things, “*another possible genocide*” as is so often repeated.

There is no open political space. Political parties are forced (by the constitution) into a “*consultative forum*” which supposedly, among other responsibilities, “*facilitates the exchange of ideas by political organizations on major issues facing the country*”, “*advises on national policy*”, acts as “*mediator*” in inter-party conflicts and “*assists in resolving*” internal party conflicts; and by which decisions “*shall always be taken by consensus of the constituent organizations*”. In this way, political debate – if any - happens behind closed doors, and the Rwandan people only get one perspective with no opportunity to comment or right to criticize. The infamous forum was introduced in 1994 via the so called “RPF declaration”, published after the RPF conquered the country by force. It was later included in the constitution, and it is controlled by the obvious party in power, RPF.

There is generally limited information about the intentions of the leadership of the state. The top down management of all social and political policies and the active crafting of a new and very debatable ideology stamped upon everyone without distinction continue to strangle the already shy voice of young Rwandans. The main vocal civil society movements are those concerned with the Tutsi victims and survivors of the 1994 genocide. Everything else goes unchallenged, creating a perception of consensus and “evidence” of democracy and stability.

The youth is channeled into a narrow road, with no chance to engage or to challenge systems they find themselves in. All candidates of tertiary institutions are obliged to go to the so called “Unity and Reconciliation Camps” [I was part of the 2000 cohort], in which the focus is on basic military and guerilla training, intensive ideological/political education and “correction” of history, with no debate or discussion beyond a few questions from students (in full military uniform) to the carefully chosen presenters at the end of their usually exhaustive lectures. The leading sermon-like teachings are that previous models were wrong, that what has been taught in history is incorrect and dangerous (and so “here is the correct version” and “the right model”). There is very little mention of national pride, and there is no space for alternative thinking. Further, there is

no opportunity to share experiences and feelings about the information relayed. It is essentially an ideal opportunity to push down throats the “good governance” and “true reconciliation” models crafted by an exclusive handful of people, which must be swallowed without resistance. In meetings where similar teachings take place for the general public, any “negative” comments or questions are followed by a now famous reminder that all people knew before is to kill Tutsis or stand and do nothing. So they sit and learn how to be “good”, in what looks like a massive daytime brainwashing operation underway in Rwanda.

Often, good principles and projects are inserted in the manuals used to teach and to showcase ‘progress’ to all those who read them. Unfortunately, the implementation phase sees the total opposite happening, as it is enforced by the regime, usually through members of the army and the intelligence services dispersed all over the country. As a result, the civil teachers lose their credibility among their neighbors and at the receiving end there is often frustration, as one of them who recently fled the country recounted.

In economy, despite a rather plausible emphasis on technology and globalization, like in most countries in the world, the gap between the rich and the poor (another topic altogether) is rapidly widening. There is a so called “2020 vision”, aimed at, among other things, reversing the dominance of agriculture (over 90% of the population working on their land) to less than 50% (the latest presentation assisted to stipulated less than 10%) of the population in the sector, with no clear plan on what these masses will do and/or become. It is unclear how consequent problems such as land issues are addressed. Expropriations are taking place, mainly around wet valleys, without compensation. The “2020 vision”, largely unknown to the masses, is enforced with no consultation whatsoever, and championed within NEPAD (New Economic Partnership for African Development) and other international fora to which only selected aspects of the Rwandan dynamics are hypocritically presented, but seem to be enough to gain the autocracy a lot of praise in the APRM (African Peer Review Mechanism) and beyond.

Shiny tall buildings are springing up rapidly in Kigali, while the more than 80% of the population suffers the ordeal of impoverished rural areas, where the best of the land no longer belongs to them but to the privileged elite; very few can and are willing to take their harvest to markets, because of extremely heavy taxes, imposed even in deep rural areas where people carry their goods on their head to popular markets, often over many kilometers; none is allowed to have their cattle grazing out, even if it is in their own field. Most Rwandans, Hutu and Tutsi, are getting poorer. A large scale, smooth, masked daytime dispossession process is taking place.

Foreigners who visit the country will only see wonders without realizing that what they see is what was meant to be exposed to them. They will probably never know that “dirty” poor people have been explicitly excluded from circulation in the city (e.g. without shoes you may not walk in the city). Those who visit the rural areas are taken where a show case has been well prepared in advance, while other poor people in nearby agglomerations, including 1959 repatriated refugees and some survivors of the 1994 slaughter, starve to death. Selective social relief funds only help some Tutsi survivors of

the genocide. Then it is said: there is progress, unity, reconciliation, peace, stability and democracy. We are on the “way forward”, together as Rwandans. Or...are we? According to the current government in Rwanda (and many it managed to convince), only “negative forces” ask this kind of questions.

As is norm in our times, *democratic* elections must take place to talk of a democracy. Rwanda too, has been faithful. Political party activities in public are explicitly prohibited. For the “*secret*” ballot voting such as in the presidential elections, there are *educated and duly trained “helpers”* who stand with the *voters* to *help* them use the ballot paper *correctly* and enforce the use of fingerprints. It is common cause that the so called helpers are used to force people to vote with no choice. For the local elections, the candidates introduce themselves directly to the people in an open-air mass meeting, then stand in front and voters queue behind their candidate of “*choice*”, usually under the watchful eye of scattered military officers and government officials. Then the elections are proclaimed successful, free and fair. The RPF and their leader Paul Kagame, win with over 96%. The West applauds, donors pour more money.

That is the climate in which young people in Rwanda are growing up in. Rwandans are forced to abandon an already fuzzy heritage and accept a crafted perspective of history. People are now convinced that no good can come out of them without the tight control of the government which is characterized by a heavy use of the army in the administration of the country. There is a lot of pain and unexplored feelings that are continually and systematically suppressed, creating more anger and frustration. Many human rights taken for granted elsewhere are non existent in Rwanda, where a typical situation that alarmists would call a time-bomb prevails.

In the nearly six years I have been in exile in South Africa, I witness and admire elements of a democracy in the making: freedom of expression, press, assembly and circulation, healthy political activities, strong trade unions, functioning organs of state such as the National Prosecution Authority, largely independent and engaging media, separation of powers, a very wide and representative civil society, a free and critical academic world and others. All this is of course against the background of the consequences of the apartheid system, such as heavy social and economic inequalities, poor education among many black people and so forth.

My observation, however, is that young South African Citizens still have a long way to go in knowing and appreciating the value of what is available to them (compared to elsewhere on the continent), as well as using it. Despite the (reportedly underperforming though well intentioned and resourced) Youth Commission, many initiatives to provide support, some opportunities created by the public and the flourishing private sector, and many student financial aid systems such as the National Financial Aid Scheme, many young South Africans still complain about the lack of opportunities. Many rural area schools are not in an good state, and there is too little information about what is possible after high school among the pupils and often their teachers, hence a lack of motivation [I witnessed this when I was invited by a fellow student who comes from the rural Eastern Cape to deliver a motivation talk to grade 11 and 12 learners].

The current (Broad Based) Black Economic Empowerment system, which seeks to remedy the imbalances of the past, is needed for effective transformation to take place. However, the success of the current model of the BEE, unfortunately often politicized, is largely debatable. To be politically correct is to approve of it and its success thus far. My opinion is that it's absolutely crucial that high standards of integrity be maintained in this essential exercise of post-Apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, for the sake of the young people of this country, I believe that great care needs to be taken, because an overemphasis and/or over-prolongation of such a system may end up creating an excessive sense of entitlement among the previously disadvantaged youth (among whom this is occasionally seen), which is a very disempowering attitude. It also has the potential to create a sense of resentment in the so-called previously advantaged youth, who may have a perception that opportunities are closing down on them.

There is no doubt that "South Africa For All" is a dream already proved realizable, and even for those still skeptical, there is evidence that it is a realistic and possible creation. A strong platform on which ALL South Africans can move forward together is well in place. In my opinion, the way back is unlikely.

Anywhere in the world, citizenship is an important factor in the life of the country. Where there is democracy or at least foundations of a democracy, decent citizenship implies awareness of one's rights, responsibilities, and a patriotic use of these, respecting other citizen's lives. In countries where there is no foundations of a democracy, citizenship may be a little challenging, because one is called to constantly adapt to the conditions imposed on them, keeping the vision for a better future and the hope that it will indeed happen.

But young people, whether in a democracy or not, can learn to practice good citizenship skills, which in my opinion might not be obvious, such as the following:

- Consciousness of self worth in a national context, and value of one's input. It becomes practically impossible to actively participate when the belief that one grows up with is "who am I to change this or that?" I believe it helps to keep asking this: If not you, then who? And if not now, when? The collective only always follows individual decisions, and one must stand up to be counted.
- Interest in current affairs: where is the nation at? What is happening on our dear continent and possibly, why? What is my role in this? How is this affecting me, and what can I do about it? Reading newspapers and magazines, watching television news and/or listening to radio, all depending on what one can afford in terms of time and finance, would help to get one updated on the state of affairs. But it is how concerned or grateful one is about what one hears about what is happening in the country that determines how proactive people are likely to be, as citizens.
- History: to learn and know the history of your country, not to fuel resentment of the past and justify the victim attitude and the sense of entitlement, but to be educated about the nation, the continent, and of course about the world we live in.

To be able to put the present into context, which would greatly help if one wants to make significant course correction through the necessary analysis of where from, where to and how.

- Blamelessness: It is personal power that is at stake when blame becomes the only kind of argument and/or belief to have. The more people, situations and systems and the more to blame them for, the more power to loose! Because it becomes easy not to take responsibility, own one's part in the situation or one's contribution to redress it. "Others must do it", or "it is their fault" kind of attitude is not an attribute of good citizenship. Victim mentality is never constructive. With this comes a genuine sense of compassion.
- Purposefulness: It is extremely important that one has a sense of direction. Finding the passion is not enough. Knowing what to do with it and how to do it is the key to success. Because the more efficient one is in whatever one is passionate about, the more tangible the contribution to the nation.

There are other practical activities to harness citizenship, such as the active use of public facilities such as libraries, the use of mentorship and the advice of the elderly (if available). It is not a lack of resources and/or activities that is the problem. It is about thinking outside of the box. One easy example would be for a group of youth to get together to subscribe to a publication they judge informative. It makes the cost not only low for those who participate, but also all those who will read it, as one issue can be used by many, many people. All it takes is a clear want and explored intentions. Means are found when people start thinking about what steps to make.

The above are a few suggestions about what young people themselves could do. There is a multiplicity of actions that can be taken by those who care about the youth and their citizenship. The following are a few examples:

- How many young people would benefit from a successful politician or business man who would decide to dedicate one afternoon a month to mentor, share with them his/her experience? But everything is money, so everyone wants to charge for their "services"...
- Leadership training workshops and debate platforms to stimulate the youth to interact with each other and with the nation. Such an initiative in each municipality or district would make a difference. But the lack of faith in young people leads to content and process being controlled and/or imposed. Would making information available and gathering youth together have them do nothing with it?

- Life skills trainings have become very expensive and are afforded by few, while those who need it most, not only for themselves but for the nations, have no idea they exist. If one youth is trained, how many people are likely to be touched?
- In countries where division and resentment has eroded the fabric of the nation, it would be useful to have reconciliation workshops to let young people express their feelings and have them taking new commitments for them and for the country, without having to force them into some stream where the process and results have been preempted because of lack of trust in them or hidden agendas?
- Essay competitions like this are another example of positive interaction with the youth to think about themselves in the context of the nation. But how many such initiatives, or how many youth are reached for this? Only those who have internet access, perhaps. And the masses left behind? Would it be a waste of time to take such initiatives to remote areas?
- In entertainment meetings such as concerts, a few minutes of serious talk would not harm or spoil the party. Those are ideal media to get the message across. That would help in cases where there is no culture of reading, which is another essential component of youth's life to be developed.

So what does citizenship mean? The citizenship I am talking about is a personal conscious choice. It is an advanced sense of belonging, feeling of concern and gratitude. It is accompanied by a deep belief in ownership of the life of the nation, as an integral part of it. It can not be awarded nor taken away from without. It is always present within as an essential attribute of the collective dimension of our humanity. All we need is to prompt it in young people, and help to nurture and grow it.

In a democratic nation or not, there are always great opportunities to constantly ask the question: "What is required of me, now? What quality is being called in me?" and equally important: "What is my role as a citizen"?

The world would be fortunate to have more people thinking about the youth, not only to "empower" them as it is always the argument where they seem considered passive, but to create a climate in which they can empower themselves, explore their will and make a decision: **to truly be citizens.**