



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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## GOVERNMENT THROUGH MOBILIZATION: RESTORING ORDER AFTER RWANDA'S 1994 GENOCIDE

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### SYNOPSIS

Between April and July 1994, as forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front swept through the country and put an end to a government-led slaughter of an estimated 800,000 people, one of the challenges was to create a government presence and provide basic services in the war-torn country. In order to govern during the crisis, several of the RPF's civilian leaders conducted a daring experiment. When they captured territory in the chaotic aftermath of the genocide, these leaders—active in approximately one-third of the country—adapted the RPF's own structure as a form of emergency government, organizing the population to elect representatives and form executive committees. These committees helped allocate scarce resources for basic services, organized their constituencies to perform basic tasks such as burials and farming, and gave RPF leaders a reliable source of local information. Several RPF leaders said the committees were the only means they knew of restoring order in a dire situation. Although the long-term results of the effort are difficult to gauge, the case offers insights for reformers engaged in provincial reconstruction or the extension of services in insecure areas.

*David Hausman drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Kigali, Rwanda, in May and June 2010.*

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### INTRODUCTION

During less than three months between April and July 1994, extremists within Rwanda's Hutu-controlled government organized the fastest mass killing in history. Mobilizing hundreds of thousands of civilians to participate, the government organized the murder of more than 800,000 people, most within the first month. The killings occurred in the context of a civil war. As the government concentrated its resources on killing Tutsis, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, composed mostly of Tutsi refugees whose families

had been exiled from the country since 1959, quickly moved through the country and was in control of the state by July.

While the war and genocide continued elsewhere, the RPF had to govern in the parts of the country that its forces had captured first. Mostly in the north and east of the country, the leaders in these areas improvised and fell back on the structures they knew best: those of the RPF itself. Designed to recruit swiftly and operate secretly, the RPF's organizational structure was

decentralized, with regions, branches and cells governed by executive committees and assemblies, known in Kinyarwanda, Rwandans' first language, as *nyobozi* and *njyanama*, respectively. The *nyobozi* made daily decisions, and the whole membership of a cell (its assembly, or *njyanama*) met monthly to vote on important issues. During the years that the RPF was a refugee rebel movement, this structure had enabled the organization to raise funds, recruit soldiers and build support in countries with hostile governments.

According to its leaders, the structure proved nearly as well suited to temporary governance during emergency. The RPF's civilian members, known as political cadres, organized the election of executive committees in each cell to win the trust of a traumatized population, deliver basic services, resolve disputes and gain information about the areas they controlled. Measures of success were simple, but results were rarely recorded: Communities buried bodies, RPF committees assigned military doctors to the civil population where they were most needed, and land disputes ended without violence.

The RPF's participatory model of governance offers a template for other post-conflict situations. By engaging the population and quickly holding local elections, the RPF gained the sympathy of those it governed and was able to delegate tasks to them. In so doing, the organization also gained access to valuable local knowledge. The RPF system of elected committees formed the foundation of the Rwandan decentralization program, which took effect a decade later and introduced formal local elections. Rose Kabuye, the RPF political cadre who was in charge of the capital city, Kigali, after the genocide, said she could not have done without the system. "I think if we didn't have that structure, that model, it would have been difficult for us to start," she said. "That was the beginning of even what we have today."

## THE CHALLENGE

When the RPF began to govern as it captured territory between April and July 1994, it faced intertwined political and practical challenges.

Starvation and disease were the first and most pressing problems. Tito Rutaremara, secretary-general of the RPF between 1987 and 1993 and a key member of the party's leadership thereafter, said there was not enough food either for the population or the RPF. Medicine and doctors were desperately scarce. In the chaotic aftermath of the genocide, corpses lay in houses, churches and by the roadside, spreading disease and fear. In the emergency, Rwandans had often stopped going about their daily tasks, and fields lay fallow, exacerbating the food shortage.

The country was also missing about half of its population. The previous regime had slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis, and as the RPF took over the country, the perpetrators of the genocide fled, along with millions of innocent bystanders. Many local administrators from the previous regime left with the other refugees, and they took with them their practical experience of governing. All together, between two million and three million Rwandans fled the country in 1994, mostly to neighboring Tanzania and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

At nearly the same time, about 750,000 Tutsi refugees returned. These refugees had been living in neighboring countries since they fled Rwanda after independence in 1959, when they were persecuted by a Hutu-dominated government that considered them members of an aristocracy aligned with the country's former colonial masters. (Hutus made up approximately 90% of the population, with Tutsis accounting for the remaining 10%.) The Tutsi refugees who returned in 1994 were known as "old case" refugees, and they often reclaimed the land they had owned decades before. In many cases, bitter land disputes arose. The conflicts called for judicial

resolution, but the government's courts were as empty as its offices.

Finally, to solve these practical problems and begin the long process of reconstruction, the RPF needed the support of a terrified, suspicious population. The leaders of the genocide had mobilized the population for killing by demonizing the RPF and arguing that all Tutsis were acting on its behalf. The essential problem was one of persuasion: The RPF needed to organize the population to respond to the crushing problems created by the genocide.

### FRAMING A RESPONSE

As Rwanda's new leaders struggled to govern a devastated country, they drew on their tradition of activism in the RPF, which was founded in response to Rwanda's decades-long refugee crisis and was helped along by the outcome of Uganda's civil war. That civil war ended in 1986, when Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army took power—with the help of thousands of Rwandan exiles, who had joined the army to topple a regime that had persecuted Rwandan refugees in Uganda. Once Museveni was in power, many of these refugees turned their attention to their home country. At the time, the main organization representing the interests of Rwandan refugees was the Rwandan Association of National Unity (RANU), which was founded in 1979 and remained relatively small through the first half of the 1980s. As of 1985, the group had about 10,000 members, according to Protais Musoni, one of its first members.

After the National Resistance Army's victory, RANU was able to move its headquarters from Kenya to Uganda, and began to recruit rapidly in the Rwandan diaspora, making the transition from an activist group to a mass organization. The organization benefited from well educated and committed leaders, almost all of whom had grown up as refugees outside Rwanda. Makerere University, in Uganda, was an active center of recruitment for the organization.

In December 1987, RANU held a congress to expand and systematize its activities. The organization renamed itself the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and Tito Rutaremara was elected the first secretary-general. Rutaremara attended the conference after returning to Uganda from France, where he had completed a doctorate in urban and rural planning. (After the war, Rutaremara went on to join Parliament, head Rwanda's constitutional commission and become the country's ombudsman.)

Before the 1987 conference, Rutaremara said, RANU "was a group of young, intellectual people." At the conference, however, the delegates focused on expansion and influence. "They were discussing how to make it dynamic, to make it a mass movement," he said. They decided first to recruit a core group of full-time members. Before 1987, Rutaremara said, "RANU was always depending upon volunteers who were doing other jobs." Those volunteers, however committed, were unable to devote themselves fully to the organization, so the RPF decided to recruit young university graduates into full-time positions.

"You take young intellectuals coming straight from school, because it was very difficult to take someone who is already working and tell him what to bring here and be permanent." Rutaremara said the RPF got the idea for full-time cadres from Vladimir Lenin's pamphlet "What Is to Be Done," published in the early 20th century. "He was proposing, if you want to succeed in Russia, there should be people who become like professionals," Rutaremara said. Wages, however, were low to non-existent: The RPF's new recruits often worked in exchange for food, lodging and the promise of resettlement in Rwanda after the RPF's hoped-for victory.

New recruits received extensive training in politics and other subjects. Polis Denis, who later became secretary-general of the RPF, said the standard training for political cadres, which lasted two or three months, included studies of

Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx as well as RPF ideology, which stressed discipline and Rwandan national unity. Rutaremara added that the training offered brief introductions to several fields of study. “We are giving them a bit of introduction to philosophy, introduction to politics, introduction to economics and so on—and the history of Rwanda especially,” he said.

RPF political cadres depended on an organizational manual to which they also contributed. “There was a library in the bush,” said Népo Rugemintwaza, an RPF political cadre who later became Rwanda’s director of territorial administration. “The manual included a section on governance, and how to operationalize reconciliation.” By 1994, Denis said, the party’s ‘Action Plan,’ which included operational guidance for political cadres, was over 800 pages long. (As of mid-2010, the document had not been translated from Kinyarwanda.) The congress of 1987 set the basic direction of RPF policy, and annual party congresses added to it.

The 1987 congress also helped cement the RPF’s basic ideology. Rutaremara said that recruitment depended on ideas with wide appeal. The RPF’s political program stressed concepts that everyone could agree on. “If you say, ‘I want unity of the country,’ no one would dare to say, ‘No, we don’t want unity of the country,’” Rutaremara said. “If you say, ‘I want democracy,’ no one in the world openly would refuse democracy. No one would refuse to fight corruption, and so on. That is the way you have ideas to be universal. You don’t give any chance to people to refuse it openly.”

The party’s leadership decided on a decentralized model of organization, consisting of a central executive committee, the nyobozi, that oversaw activity in several regions, each of which contained multiple branches and cells.

Cells were the organization’s basic units, and their members elected an executive committee (also called nyobozi) to organize their activities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, while the RPF

was an exiled activist organization, these activities were mostly recruitment, education and fundraising. For important decisions, the entire cell came together to vote as an assembly, or njyanama. This structure was mirrored at the branch, region and national level. Cells sent representatives to vote at meetings of the branch nyobozi and njyanama, branches sent representatives to the regional level, and so on up the hierarchy.

The RPF was not welcome in many of the countries in which it operated, and the size of its cells depended on the level of secrecy required. In Rwanda, the riskiest country of all, cells were limited to a few people to reduce the risk of infiltration. In Burundi, which was also hostile to the RPF, meetings were capped at 20 people, according to Déogratias Kayumba, who became the RPF’s head of political mobilization for that country in 1989. Each RPF meeting in Burundi began with a decision establishing an alibi purpose in case police interrupted the meeting.

Secrecy meant that recruitment took place through a chain in which members looked for prospective members who would be trustworthy and reliable. “It was clandestine, so you started with a few people you trusted—friends, colleagues,” Kayumba said. “Everyone was charged with recruiting someone else.” After some time organizing, Kayumba said, “We knew who was who.”

In 1992, after years of organizing in Burundi, Kayumba joined Rutaremara, Denis and other RPF leaders in the northern hills of Rwanda, where the rebel army had established positions after invading the country in 1990. The RPF created a policy apparatus while still in the bush, with commissions on social, economic and political issues, each made up of RPF representatives from each country with a substantial refugee population—especially Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania and Uganda. “Everything that we have now we prepared at that time,” Denis said.

The organization was funded through the same network of expatriates. According to Aloisea Inyumba, the organization's finance commissioner, the RPF had a number of funding sources; individual supporters gave contributions and support in kind and organized events and sold items to raise funds. The RPF had a transparent and simple accounting system in place, which enhanced confidence in the supporters, Inyumba said. Sometimes supporters would visit the fighters and interact with them to boost their morale and express their appreciation for the sacrifice they were making. "There was no embezzlement, no cheating," Inyumba said. "People knew donation was a sacrifice."

Between 1990, when the RPF first invaded Rwanda in order to force a change of government policy toward Tutsi refugees, and 1994, the organization's army and civilian corps were camped in Rwanda's northern mountains, along the border with Uganda. International mediation efforts led to a cease-fire during much of the interim and established a demilitarized zone between the RPF's mountain positions and the rest of the country. The RPF was relatively free to organize in that zone, and the group used the opportunity to experiment with its own structures as a form of government. When the Rwandan president's plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, Hutu extremists took control of the government and adopted genocide as a tactic to defeat the RPF, which they believed had infiltrated the Tutsi civilian population. The RPF responded by crossing the demilitarized zone and sweeping through the country, seizing territory as quickly as possible.

### GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Each time RPF forces captured territory within one of Rwanda's eleven prefectures, it put one of its political cadres in charge of administration. In three prefectures in particular, experienced political cadres applied the RPF's

system of recruitment and organization to the task of post-conflict governance.

Kayumba, the RPF regional coordinator for Burundi, was put in charge of the northwestern prefecture of Byumba. Kayumba had edited an RPF journal in Burundi and had led mobilization efforts in the demilitarized zone, where the RPF first tried its hand at governance. Rugemintwaza worked under him.

Musoni, who had been the RPF's secretary-general in the early 1990s and later led Rwanda's decentralization effort from the Ministry of Local Government, took charge of Kibungo, in the east of the country. Musoni had joined RANU in the organization's infancy and had been its director of political mobilization for years before becoming secretary-general. Rutaremara and Denis remained high leaders in the civilian wing of the RPF and worked closely with Musoni, continuing to help determine policy in RPF territory during and after the genocide.

Kabuye, who later became director of protocol in the office of the president, was made prefect of Kigali, which included both the city and the surrounding rural areas. Kabuye, a charismatic leader who had helped negotiate the so-called Arusha peace accords (named for the Tanzanian city in which the agreement was signed) that temporarily ended the conflict in the early 1990s, was based in Kigali as part of an RPF contingent when Rwanda's president was assassinated and the genocide began in April 1994. (Kabuye survived because she was stationed with several hundred RPF troops in Kigali, and other RPF troops were able to reach the capital relatively soon after the beginning of the genocide.)

Upon entering a cell, political cadres, working in groups of seven or eight, introduced themselves to the cell's citizens, who typically gathered outside in the aftermath of a battle. "People came out of their houses, and we would explain what happened," Denis said.

Rugemintwaza said his team usually called a general meeting for the next day. At the meeting, he and colleagues described their agenda and asked questions. “We asked about social injustice problems, said, you need to elect your own leaders,” Rugemintwaza recalled. “They’d ask, leaders for what? They’d list problems and we’d say they should elect people for these problems.” Denis stressed that he and his fellow cadres worked hard to enlist the sympathy of the population. “We said, ‘We don’t want to push you around,’” Denis said. “We explained our accusations against the regime, and people agreed.”

Rugemintwaza said the country’s history of authoritarian government had left people unaccustomed to participation. “There was a lot of training,” he said. “We had to show how to participate. We had meetings seminars to say, ‘You are free, you have voice.’”

The meetings were meant to enlist the support of the population, without which the RPF could not establish the order required for reconstruction. Rutaremara said that political cadres understood their task partly as one of defusing possible resistance before taking action. “The resistance wasn’t there because we started by sensitizing, sensitizing, mobilizing, discussing with these people, then telling them to do it afterwards,” Rutaremara said. “Because of course you could not go and tell them do this and this. You need ... to give the time to the political cadres to go around and assist the population.”

In each village, political cadres distributed food and medicine before they started teaching the RPF’s ideology of Rwandan unity and democracy. By solving basic practical problems, the RPF built support for its ideas. “If there is someone who is sick, very sick, doesn’t know how to go around, we would bring in our health people to come and help them,” Rutaremara said. “It is the work of the political cadre not only to teach but look at each life.”

After holding meetings and attending to urgent needs, RPF political cadres organized elections in each cell. The elections were simple, without time for campaigning or party organization, and the method varied by area. In some areas, candidates stood at the front of the meeting, and people lined up behind the candidates they supported. The candidate with the longest line won. In other villages, citizens voted by raising their hands, and in the larger cities the RPF used makeshift ballots. Elections were also “a kind of teaching session,” Rugemintwaza said, at which political cadres explained the functions of the executive committees.

The committees provided a link to the RPF hierarchy, allowing citizens to communicate their immediate priorities. “We were organizing them in such a way that they themselves, they elected their representatives who would be asking for anything that they wanted or needed,” Rutaremara said. “Say, if they needed a school, they have to get a representative to come out.”

The model was first tested in the demilitarized zone established by the Arusha accords between the RPF’s northern outpost and the rest of the country. Rugemintwaza said it took one to two weeks to organize a cell and hold nyobozi elections. The time varied from cell to cell; when it was raining, for example, the team sometimes postponed elections until the rain stopped. Between May and July 1993, the RPF had organized the section of the demilitarized zone that was within reach.

Later, when teams of political cadres organized cells in the northern and eastern Byumba, Kibungo and Kigali prefectures during the war, they did so more quickly. “During the genocide it was quick because the problem was critical,” Rugemintwaza said. “We had to bury the dead bodies; we had to take care of the old who had been wounded; we had to organize people.” In Kibungo between May and July of

1994, nearly all of the population was concentrated in camps for protection but organized along the lines of people's home cells. The committees established in the camps were used to resettle the internal refugees in July.

Although this system of temporary government was modeled on the RPF's structure, there were differences. In the RPF, a cell had 20 to 30 people; in the temporary government, cells had the same borders as those of the official government, and included between 150 and 200 families, each with five or six people. The temporary government retained the cell boundaries of the previous regime, and although the committees were elected at cell level, they were appointed by the RPF at sector, commune and prefecture levels. Each nyobozi had seven or eight members: a chair, vice chairs for social affairs and finance, and representatives for women, youth, security, information and mobilization.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The committees were asked to find solutions to their population's most pressing problems. In nearly every cell, burying corpses was a necessary first step. "The most urgent thing was to bury people, to take the injured ones to the doctors, to look for the young people and to create orphanages where they can put them," Rutaremara said. To prevent the spread of disease, the RPF emphasized cleanliness. "You were asking them how many times they were washing themselves, checking whether they are washing their houses, things like that," Rutaremara said. "First we had to force, to tell them to do it. But after some time, one month, people were used ... you force the first time but in the end they wanted to do it."

The committees not only allocated manpower but also acted as conduits for exchanging information with the RPF. The RPF passed its goals, such as cleanliness in every cell, to the committees. Conversely, the committees

passed on their priorities to the RPF. For example, Rugemintwaza said, "the social-affairs person registered problems and brought them to us." Women's representatives, meanwhile, called attention to their most pressing concerns—for example, Rugemintwaza said, a shortage of food and drugs for children.

This communication was a useful source of information for RPF leaders, many of whom had spent their entire lives in exile. Charles Munyaneza, who later became the executive secretary of Rwanda's electoral commission, stressed his own lack of familiarity with the country. "Most of us in the government shared this problem," he said. "We had either read about Rwanda or we had seen Rwanda, only for not many years."

Committees also prevented the spread of misinformation about the progress of the war. "In the war zone, we needed security and information to avoid rumors and make sure people are not displaced again," Rugemintwaza said. "The committee had someone listening to the radio and reporting back."

Once the nyobozi had decided on the priorities for their cells, they depended on the advice of the RPF political cadres for many technical tasks. "We had short meetings with the executive committee on how to build roads, obtain clean water, identify people for tasks, and organize people to cultivate the land," Rugemintwaza said. "You make sure that people are working, because if you're working, you're recovering. Idle people create rumors."

While addressing practical problems and helping the RPF communicate with citizens (and vice versa), the nyobozi were also charged with resolving disputes in the absence of courts. Most disputes involved land, and many arose between new-case and old-case refugees. The RPF devoted considerable effort to the repatriation of new-case refugees—those who had fled in 1994—even though related issues were often thorny and solutions were difficult. Musoni, the first prefect

of Kibungo and the former RPF director of political mass mobilization, said that disputes related to repatriation often presented him with a dilemma: “You get a situation where they are saying, ‘Whose property is this?’ Is it the one whose family owned it before ’59 and left it because he was just away? Is it for this one who is returning to the land he owned in 1994?”

These problems came to a head during the mass repatriation of new-case refugees in 1996, and Musoni relied on the committees in Kibungo to find a solution that was later adopted throughout the country. “I used the participatory method again and put the question, described it and said, ‘What should we do?’” Musoni said. “We blocked them into groups, said go and discuss, come back and tell. It was interesting. All the committees came back and said no, no. Let’s convince people to share. This is our country. There’s no other country for Rwanda, so let’s tell the populations to share.” Of course, the sharing did not occur without problems, and committees were asked to mediate disagreements.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

Although the system of elected cell-level nyobozi was implemented in only three of Rwanda’s 11 prefectures and lasted just three months to a year in each, those involved recall the election of nyobozi as a crucial measure for the maintenance of order in an uncertain time. In the rest of the country, cell representatives were appointed by the RPF government, just as they had been appointed by the previous regime. Beginning in 2000, Rwanda’s decentralization program would bring formal local elections, but in 1994 that moment was still far off.

It is difficult to measure the results of nyobozi as a temporary substitute for formal local government. The measures of success identified by RPF leaders were basic: The population cooperated with the new government, and, at least according to RPF leaders, food was distributed as quickly as possible, while committees organized

the burial of bodies and exhorted people to clean themselves and their houses.

Protais Musoni, the RPF’s director of political mass mobilization at the time and the first prefect of Kibungo prefecture, said that he knew the system had been successful when RPF officials began to be seen as representatives of the state. “The first time you visit a village, you see people running away,” he said. “The second time, they begin talking to you, and finally they start bringing complaints.” Népo Rugemintwaza agreed. “Without strong authority—police, courts, prison—you need to have consensus building and social sanctions,” he said. “You need to build a local social consciousness.”

Rose Kabuye, the first prefect of Kigali, said she thought the basic principles used in the establishment of committees were the key to success. “If you are a leader in a time when things are not set, where you are beginning to put things together, where you have those huge, huge problems including security, ... you would find it difficult to just sit in your office and imagine how can I help this area, this area, without knowing from the population what is happening,” she said. “So the consensus building and the easy coordination and communication were very important. And the fact that when you are setting up policies you are setting up policies for the problems that you know, problems that are linked to the people themselves.”

Others argued, however, that the close identification of party and state by the RPF—including the education and “sensitization” programs of its political cadres—reflected the organization’s lack of tolerance for political opposition. Indeed, in the aftermath of the genocide, human-rights groups frequently criticized the new Rwandan government for intimidating and arresting opposition politicians. Frank Habineza, the head of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, said that the RPF exaggerated the degree of participatory influence it allowed people at the grassroots level.

“Institutions are decentralized, but control is not,” he said.

All of the officials interviewed agreed that the long-term consequences of the system were difficult to gauge. Musoni said he thought the consequences were mostly short-term, though he argued that the resolution of land disputes and the institution of formal local elections were easier in

areas familiar with the election of informal nyobozi. Others thought the consequences of the system remained visible, if difficult to separate from other factors. In the former demilitarized zone, in Rwanda’s Northern Province, Rugemintwaza said the legacy of RPF organization was still noticeable in mid-2010. “It’s different now, but the spirit is there,” he said.

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