

Singing the Struggle: The Rwandan Patriotic Front's ideology through its songs of liberation

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Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the Aegis Trust's precious help of this research through financial support and guidance. Particular thanks go to Dr Felix Ndahinda for providing us with very helpful comments along the way and to Dr Phil Clark for his careful reading of the text and useful suggestions. Finally, thank you to the Iriba Centre and its team for the safeguard of these precious songs and more generally of important audio-visual material for understanding Rwanda's history.

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Executive Summary

- The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) articulated before reaching power a coherent ideology that helps to understand how it made sense of its environment and the issues it faced, how it envisioned the proper order of society, and how such order was to be achieved.
- Such ideology is analysed through 20 songs of the liberation composed by RPF members and supporters between 1988 and 1994.
- The RPF mission is presented as an attempt to end Rwanda's century of shame when the Rwandan eternal values had been profaned by colonial powers and subsequently by Kayibanda and Habyarimana neo-colonial regimes.
- The article shows that the RPF articulated early on a consistent ideology that has endured over time and continues to shape its current policies.
- As a consequence, NGOs, donors, foreign countries, and any other actors, when interacting with the RPF-led Rwandan Government, should take its ideology seriously. It embodies the conditions to ultimately improve mutual understanding and render the interactions with the Rwandan Government more productive.
- Policy suggestions should be framed in a way that account for the RPF ideological stance in order to increase the likeliness of their adoption.

Introduction

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)'s ideology has played a significant role in shaping Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory. Its impact has been recognised as substantial on social and economic policies, its relations with the international community, and its project of national reconciliation. Yet systematic analyses of the RPF original ideology remain limited. The present policy brief aimed to fill this gap by exploring the RPF ideological project as articulated before and around the genocide using songs of RPF members and supporters.

In doing so, the brief provides a new empirical contribution to the understanding of Rwanda's ruling party by translating and analysing songs that supported the movement in its early days. It also opens the possibility to explore the evolution of the RPF ideology over time, as the period of analysis is precisely bounded in time (1988-1994) and can serve as a basis of comparison with the RPF current ideological discourse, and assess consistency.

Ideology can be broadly understood as “the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured.”¹ As it is not possible to observe directly people's mental models, ideology can only be observed indirectly. In the large absence of RPF ideological statements before 1994, as noted above, we propose to take the liberation songs of the RPF and its supporters as a window on the RPF ideology.

We selected 20 songs we identified as revealing in terms of ideological content and/or because they were especially renowned, composed between 1988 and 1994. Songs are a good window on the RPF ideology because they were an especially powerful vehicle to propagate ideas in the RPF for two main reasons. First, they occupied a central place in the strong RPF apparatus of political education. Second, songs were a powerful means of expression for the RPF and its supporters because they are traditionally a crucial form of artistic expression in Rwanda.

¹ Denzau, A. T., & North, D. C. 1994. “Shared mental models: Ideologies and institutions.” *Kyklos*, 47(1), 3-31, p.4.

Ideologies in songs

Several key ideas transpire in the songs of the RPF before 1994. The most striking, when analysing liberation songs, is the obsession about the idea of unity. Unity is the most conspicuous theme across the 20 songs analysed. It appears as the most important goal of the Front, before others such as military victory, liberation of Rwandans, or development of the country. Unity, however, is not something to be created by the RPF, but merely reinstated through the liberation struggle. It is an immanent characteristic of an idealised Rwanda, momentarily undermined since colonisation, and waiting to be fully recovered.

The Front also portrays itself as an inclusive, a-ethnic movement, fighting for the good of all Rwandans. The RPF also emphasises its commitment and professionalism in fighting for the common good. In doing so, it offers an obvious counter narrative to the Habyarimana regime's, and Hutu extremists' representation of the Front as a Tutsi movement of thugs, coming to loot Rwanda and subjugate the population. Through reference to traditional practices of warfare, the RPF asserts its full Rwandan character and the legitimacy of its fight for the refugees' return, and implicitly celebrates an idealised Rwandan epic past of great feats.

Songs are also revealing about how the RPF conceptualised the enemy. The contrast between how each opposing side portrays the other is stark. Whereas the Hutu extremists systematically degraded and dehumanised the RPF and the Tutsi, viewed as their natural supporters, the RPF and their followers did not resort to similar methods. Depiction of the enemy operates through a great deal of restraint. A distinction is made between Habyarimana and his entourage, and the wider (and, de facto, mainly Hutu) population. The blame in songs hardly falls on the population. The real enemy is Habyarimana and his akazu. The enemy is never blamed for who he is, but only for what he does: sowing divisions and corrupting the country. Furthermore, songs evoke warfare as a tool against the enemy; they do not reveal a fascination for violence that the enemy, especially the Hutu power, demonstrated at the same time. The language of violence is often subdued and indirect, coated in an epic and heroic language.

The liberation songs also reveal a deep anti-imperialist ideology. The misfortune of Rwanda, of the Banyarwanda refugees, and more generally of Africa, is ultimately presented as an evil brought by foreigners. This anti-imperialism is paralleled by both a pan-Africanist and nationalist ideology. The RPF nationalism consequently relies on an interpretation of the world highly historicised and mythicised. The RPF objectives appear as an attempt to end Rwanda's century of shame when the Rwandan eternal values had been profaned by colonial powers and subsequently by Kayibanda and Habyarimana neo-colonial regimes.

The impact of pre-genocide ideology on post-genocide policies

Overall, this analysis reveals a strong continuity between the ideology of the RPF as a rebel movement and its later ideology as a ruling party. All pre-genocide themes identified in the songs are still present in the RPF current discourse: emphasis on unity, reference to a mythical and idealised Rwanda, vision of the RPF as a professional and inclusive organisation fighting for the common good and destined to restore Rwanda in its great status, and, finally, suspicion towards the external world. These, in turn, have profoundly impacted the RPF post-genocide policies.

For example, the much commented on ban on public reference to ethnicity emanates from the same understanding of unity that transpired in the songs. The idealisation of a supposed eternal Rwanda also has ramifications in current policies. Reviving Rwandan values appears as the antidote to the country's fate, as the way to redress an aberration of history. Yet the ideology is not reactionary. The value extolled is pride in Rwanda's pre-colonial history, but the RPF stays clear of conservatism. There is no reference to the pre-colonial political order, and especially to the monarchy. Overall, this helps to understand the peculiar mix in post-genocide Rwanda of fast-paced modernisation with the extolling of Rwanda's pre-colonial practices. This is epitomised by the myriad of neo-traditional policies, the so-called "home-grown" solutions.

Ideas related to the RPF's vision of itself and of its enemy are also consequential in Rwandan post-genocide governance. In songs, the RPF considers itself as the descendant of Rwanda's mythical fighters. It has a manifest destiny: to give the country back "her title of Rwanda." Such ideas help to better make sense of the "high modernist" or "social engineering" drive that is the hallmark of Rwandan post-genocide governance. Characterised by a fast-paced, top-down, at times coercive, development, they are the powerful tools to transform Rwanda and give it back its greatness.

Finally, current policies in Rwanda bear the hallmark of the RPF original anti-imperialism. First, the suspicion towards external actors sheds light to a certain extent on the capacity of the RPF to deploy significant agency when interacting with donors. Despite its high dependence on aid, the RPF Government has regularly opposed donors' preferences when they did not fit the RPF's. Second, suspicion towards external actors helps to better appreciate the emphasis put on self-reliance in post-genocide discourse and policies. The ideology of the PRF makes aid a double-edged sword, useful for restoring the country's greatness but also a potential conduit for neo-colonial domination.

Implications and policy recommendation

Liberation songs help to understand how, before reaching power, the RPF made sense of its environment and the issues it faced, how it envisioned the proper order of society, and how such order was to be achieved. They show that the RPF articulated early on a coherent ideology that has endured over time and continues to shape its current policies.

The paper consequently invites consideration of the RPF as a political organisation in which ideology plays a critical role as a motivation for action. It nuances the commonly held view of the RPF as an organisation using ideas only as tools of power or manipulation. While its ideas may well have served the organisation's interests, they are also a mental model through which these interests are identified and articulated.

As a consequence, NGOs, donors, foreign countries, and any other actors, when interacting with the RPF-led Rwandan Government, should take its ideology seriously. It contains the conditions to better identify the RPF's interests and preferences, to ultimately improve mutual understanding and render interactions with the Rwandan Government more productive.

In particular, policy suggestions should be framed in a way that engages with the RPF ideological stance in order to increase the likeliness of their adoption. If not, the risk is for the government not to engage with otherwise helpful suggestions because it would fail to rapidly see their value. Highlighting policies' benefits in a way that echoes the RPF ideas is more likely to receive traction and constructive engagement in policy circles. For example, before advocating a programme or a policy, stakeholders should endeavour to identify the contribution it may make to foster independence from Western countries, or to the revival of certain pre-colonial institutions, to subsequently be able to highlight it when engaging with the government.

Similarly, criticisms of the government's actions are more likely to be productive if they are framed in accordance with the RPF worldview. When criticising a policy, showing the tension with some RPF ideological themes, rather than mobilising some general theoretical arguments, is likely to better move the discussion forward. For example, highlighting the lack of a bottom-up mechanism in a certain policy will be more impactful by showing how this may hinder inclusiveness or the national project of self-reliance rather than by mentioning that it is not democratic enough.

This is especially true if external actors keep in mind the suspicion with which they are regarded. This is based, as shown in the paper, on the RPF ideology about pre-colonial Rwandan society, reinforced by the international community's inaction during the genocide. As a consequence, the suspicious and sometimes difficult relationship with the international community should not be solely seen as a power-play or a will of manipulation. It also stems from entrenched ideological models. Overall, a better understanding of the RPF ideology is the condition to making engagement with the government more constructive.