

How Rwanda dodged the bullet of international NGOs

Alphonse Muleefu

Pan African Review, September 4, 2021

I previously had high hopes in the role of International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) in bringing about positive change. However, the more I interacted with them and reflected on their reporting on Rwanda, especially when it comes to the efforts the country has put into resolving the consequences of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the more I became disillusioned and started questioning their purpose. While I blame this initial trust in INGOs on my naïve understanding of the way the world operates, I am still intrigued by Rwanda's bad relationship with most of these organizations and the activities of the civil and political rights 'activists' representing them. Given the complexity of the causes of this bad relationship, it is fair to argue that the conflict is too deep to be resolved anytime soon. Here is why.

First, post-genocide Rwanda star-

ted rather stubbornly. In less than five years after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda expelled about 40 INGOs that were deemed redundant. The decision left all members of the INGOs industry in utter shock. Some had not even opened their briefcases when they were made to pack and leave. In parallel, Rwanda decided to forcibly repatriate over two million refugees that were held hostages in refugee camps by the defeated genocidal forces in the Eastern DR Congo (Zaire then), a move which deprived these organisations of their raison d'être and milking cows. In light of this, one can safely assume that these are "offences" Rwanda committed that INGOs are still unable to forgive.

Second, Rwanda has an unorthodox way of governance. For instance, it is common that, in post-conflict societies, groups of international "experts" in human rights and transi-

tional justice are invited for endless conferences and meetings to discuss approaches to resolving the legacies of the violent past. For Rwanda, the reflection meetings held in the Office of the President from May 1998 to March 1999 (famously known as Village Urugwiro Meetings), which set the foundation upon which the country is governed, were internally driven. These meetings led, among other things, to the establishment of the Gacaca courts (an indigenous justice mechanism) to address the issue of hundreds of thousands of genocide suspects held in prisons. The INGOs' disapproval of this inward-looking approach – which rendered the international “experts” redundant – is demonstrated by their rejection of the Gacaca courts. This rejection was expressed even before the mechanism was understood. Again, Rwanda ignored INGOs' criticisms. Today, the Gacaca courts system is studied as one of the most genius human inventions in the justice sector. It demystified the process of access to justice and substantiated the idea of rendering justice in the name of the people : men and women of integrity, selected by their neighbours, were able to resolve about two million cases in 10 years while providing a combination of punitive and reconciliatory justice. This, too, will never be forgiven by INGOs. For instance, Human Rights Watch has relentlessly

ly voiced its hostility to the Gacaca Courts and has exploited the world's ignorance of this system to advocate against the extradition of genocide suspects.

As if the Gacaca Courts weren't unorthodox enough, Rwanda's constitution provides for a system of governance that is based on power-sharing. As per article 62 of the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda of 2003 (as revised in 2015), the President and the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies cannot be members of the same political organization. It also stipulates that “a political organisation holding the majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies cannot have more than fifty (50%) per cent of Cabinet members.” The same provision requires the Parliament to reflect all various social categories of people in Rwanda. In addition, Article 59 of the said constitution provides for a National Consultative Forum of Political Organisations, allowing all interested political organisations, including those not represented in the Parliament, to contribute to ongoing debates on matters of national interest. This power-sharing arrangement has, to a large extent, left INGOs with no option but to start courting individuals with fringe ideas, especially those peddling genocide denial and promoting violence, which became the conveyor belt of INGOs' politically charged advocacy.

Moreover, it is well-known that the legitimacy of INGOs, especially those operating in Africa, feeds on governments' failure to connect with the people. In the past 27 years, the Government of Rwanda has been different; it has been building a welfare state that is critical of itself, transparent and accountable. All government officials and actors are expected to perform their responsibilities by observing the highest moral standards, and citizens can report even minor transgressions to any of the annual forums such as the National Retreat, Imihigo or Umushyikirano, or through a mere tweet to the President. This has left INGOs with no choice but to scratch for the potential hidden truth through rumours.

To make matters worse, the Government of Rwanda has adopted a combative approach towards the multiple attempts to discredit its choices, policies and actions. This means that Rwanda will rebut every uninformed or ill-intentioned criticism levelled against it. This, to INGOs, makes Rwanda too harsh to its critics, especially when it points out their inaccurate and malicious reporting, which results from either certain limitations of these organisations, such as their limited number of staff on the ground and the lack of knowledge needed to contextualize Rwanda's choices, or their determination to discredit the government.

Similarly, Rwanda will prosecute, through all means possible, whoever crosses the line of criticism and chooses violence as a means to express dissent. Remarkably, the resentment from members of INGOs and their aforementioned flirting with fringe elements have led them to justify violence against ordinary Rwandans, which they view as an acceptable way to express political dissent.

Rwanda's refusal to allow unchallenged reporting makes members of the INGOs nervous since such an approach undermines their credibility whenever their reports are inaccurate, as is often the case. Ironically, they have never considered that their contemptuous and confrontational approach, which also undermines the government's credibility, warrants a similar attitude on the part of their target.

This situation has left INGOs focusing on frivolous and controversial criticisms. One such criticism is that Rwanda's stability is a result of its tight control of the media, civil society and political parties. This idea fails to factor in Rwanda's commendable socio-economic achievements, which might be the best explanation as to why no insurgent group has been able to gain the requisite popular support to challenge the government. It also fails to acknowledge that wherever such control or influence over the activities of the media, civil society and

political parties was left to INGOs, it invariably led to instability.

Another frivolous claim of INGOs is that the promotion of national identity, Ndi Umunyarwanda, is contradictory to the idea that the genocide was committed against the Tutsi as if Rwandans are incapable of understanding nuances. Or that the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa identities are banned in Rwanda, which is a misrepresentation meant to paint the government's deliberate and intentional efforts in pursuing unity as forcing reconciliation upon Rwandans.

All these and many more criticisms rotate around the alleged absence of freedom of expression, which brings to mind an anecdote that is illustrative of the persisting misrepresentations of Rwanda. There was a small exchange between two Rwandans, a participant in a transitional justice study tour and a speaker to the group, who happens to be a strong supporter of Ndi Umunyarwanda. Paraphrased, the point put forward by the former to the latter was : "You know, when you see in Europe, after the Holocaust, it is the majority, the Europeans, who decided to never kill the Jews (and other minorities) again, and adopted several measures. But in Rwanda, we do not see the collective majori-

ty voice, expressed as Hutu, to give the assurance to Tutsi ('the minority') that the genocide will never happen again." The speaker responded thus : "When we achieve Ndi Umunyarwanda, we will not have majority or minority anymore. We will all be Rwandans, and the protection will be extended to all nationals instead of being a sort of treaty signed between two groups or a promise from one group to another." The reason I am bringing this story is to demonstrate that the idea that Rwandans are not asking each other hard questions by exercising their freedom of speech is a myth propagated by foreigners. This constant and internal conversation is not meant to attract international media, and, sometimes, it takes place in forums where INGOs are not involved.

Rwanda might not be providing space for street battles to visualize our freedom of expression, but we live in the assurance that all its government agencies will respond to a mere tweet reporting an injustice. And as long as this connection exists, INGOs will remain hostile to any positive development in Rwanda as the connection denies them the space to operate – supervise and arbitrate the disputes – in Rwanda as they do in some other African countries.