

Why France chose to be “blind” and not an accomplice to the genocide

Olivier Mushimire

Pan African Review, April 30, 2021

In a world governed by moral principles, one would ordinarily own up to one’s wrongdoing, especially when caught. However, France isn’t having any of that. Instead, it has chosen to trivialize its responsibility (read culpability) in the genocide against Tutsi. And for what reasons? I can think of two : racial prejudice and the pursuit of self-serving geopolitics.

France recently published a report in which it acknowledged to have actively provided support to the genocidal government before and during the genocide. Obvious France’s culpability was not news to anyone because survivor testimonies and historical research have consistently implicated France.

The only surprising part about the report is France’s denial of complicity while acknowledging “overwhelming responsibilities.” This is

France eating its cake and having it too. Indeed, the textbook definition of (white) privilege, as a fellow columnist on this platform has aptly noted in this phrase : despite all the damning facts, France is, miraculously, not at fault.

The miracle is that France finally concedes to the harm caused to Rwanda(ns) but without an iota of moral responsibility to go with acknowledging such harm. Apparently, in France’s view, morality isn’t applicable to these kinds of victims, and the fact that righteous France has recognized Rwandans as victims should be accepted as sufficient. It would be a sign of ungratefulness to suggest that acknowledgment isn’t sufficient, to suggest that France ought to use terminology that is commensurate with the harm it so acknowledges. How dare do the natives, the terminal ingrates, even dare question France’s enlightened concession! In

other words, Rwandans ought to be satisfied that France is already burdened by its “blindness.”

Dissent towards the dignity of Africans

It follows, therefore, that France’s refusal to use the terminology of “accomplice” despite the facts pointing to it constitutes dissent towards the human dignity of Africans. In fact, there is comparatively little difference in the Duclert Report’s denial of France’s complicity and Former President Mitterrand’s infamous statement that “in such countries [*i.e., Rwanda and other African countries*], genocide is not too important.”

These ideas, from two different times in history, point to the same strand of thought that remains as a key reference point of how the elites in France choose to relate with Africa. Then and now, guiltless French politicians have pursued the interests of France at the expense of the humanity of Africans. Just recently President Emmanuel Macron declared that France will not make any “apologies” for its colonial crimes in Algeria.

This should have been a sign that the Duclert Report had very little to do with clarity and accountability for France’s specific role in the ge-

nocide against the Tutsi. Mitterrand might be dead but Mitterrandism remains alive and well. Then, in 1994, France openly supported genocidaires to carry out the genocide while claiming to be on a humanitarian mission and now, in 2021, it is claiming “overwhelming responsibilities” while shamelessly denying complicity in the genocide. If Mitterrand had died with his ideological thinking, France would not have continued to support its genocidaire allies years after the tragedy of 1994 in which it was complicit.

In Rwanda, like in Algeria, France’s goal is to perform as many “symbolic acts” as possible without having to assume any real responsibility for its many crimes against the humanity of Africans. In other words, to bend only as far back as white privilege allows.

Geostrategic interests

The Duclert Report is reminiscent of Operation Turquoise in June 1994 as RPF was about to capture power. The stated mission of this operation was humanitarianism. However, it came to provide a safe passage for France’s allies following the hot pursuit of the RPA army that was in the midst of stopping the genocide. Most importantly, however, the mission aimed to reassure the rest of French-speaking West Africa that

France stays with its friends to the end and that it was still a relevant player in Africa capable of ramming resolutions through the United Nations.

Similarly, the Duclert Report aims to repair the perception of France in Rwanda and in Africa at large. It signals a new chapter of *Françafrique*, following almost half a century of colonial crimes, neocolonial exploitation, and complicity in the genocide against the Tutsi and many other (economic and political) crimes in Africa. France is faced with a generation of Africans that is increasingly bringing its past crimes into the open, although Macron himself represents a generation in France that is more willing than its predecessors to listen; if anything, to do this while blind.

Research shows that the majority of Africans consider France's presence in Francophone Africa as evil, and this perception of France will continue to deepen, as France discovers that although it is very present in Africa and its commercial interests thriving, its image on the continent has kept declining year in, year out.

"The continued erosion of France's image underlines the difficulty of effectively renewing the narrative of our [France's] relationship with Africa," the President of the Council of French Investors in Africa (Cian) lamented, as privilege couldn't allow

him to reflect on the nostalgic veneer of the time when France was one of the largest slave traders, colonizers, and most recently, accomplice in genocide and other crimes.

France now feels the need to do something about this negative perception, and declining soft power, on a continent that means much for France's standard of living. This must have been at the back of President Macron's mind when, on 4 December 2019 during a NATO summit in London, he publicly declared – in a rather undiplomatic way – that he had invited the five Sahel Presidents (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania) to go to France on 16 December 2019 to discuss the issue of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel region. Macron threatened that the outcome of the Sahel-Paris meeting would determine whether France continues or stops its military support to the Sahel countries.

Similarly, President Macron wasn't oblivious to France's imperative to restore its image when he established the Duclert's research commission in May 2019. Indeed, officials in Macron's office revealed that "the Duclert inquiry was not just about improving relations with Rwanda but with the whole African continent, since other countries also have questions about what France did at the time."

With that goal in mind, the fin-

dings and the conclusion of the Duclert inquiry, as expected, sought to help France hit two targets with one shot : to somehow come to terms with its role in the genocide against the Tutsi but to do so with its credibility intact ; this would send a tacit message to the rest of Africa that France wants “a new, fairer, way to engage with Africa.” In other words, that France is “born again,” but without the desire to fundamentally alter its character : the victims of the genocide against the Tutsi as well as the victims of France’s many crimes in other African countries must remain what they’ve been under France : pawns in its geopolitical games.

The political utility of impunity

Yet, France hopes to achieve all this while continuing to shield from accountability its officials who were part of these crimes because impunity reassures the current decision-makers and officials that they can carry out any order of their go-

vernment without considering consequences, including those to do with crimes against humanity. In other words, France wants to give with the left hand and take with the right. However, as long as this is the case there can be no reset of France-Africa relations since, like in the past, its diplomatic corps, military officials, and mercenaries can expect to continue wreaking havoc against Africans on France’s behalf while maintaining immunity through a policy of “blindness.”

The Duclert Report officially inaugurates this policy in the context of the new realities of FrancAfrique. For France’s foreign policy going forward, impunity is expressed through blindness. But one has to imagine that the values and standards must be very low for a country to plead “blindness” as a means of escaping accountability for a crime as heinous as genocide. Ultimately, however, France will realize that only accountability will refurbish its image in Rwanda and in Africa. Window dressing and blindness will not do for this generation of natives.