

Burundi has, so far, escaped the genocide visited on Rwanda. But with more than 100,000 people killed in Burundi the last three years, there is growing concern because, as Jean-Pierre Chretien argues, "the fate of the two countries [has been] parallel, as in a game of mirrors in which each reflects the fantasies of the other."

Burundi: The Obsession with Genocide

JEAN-PIERRE CHRETIEN

In September 1961, the nationalist, broadly representative Union for National Progress (UPRONA) triumphed over parties manipulated by the Belgian colonialists in the pre-independence elections in Burundi. At the same time in Rwanda, the Hutu People's Liberation Party, or *PAROEN*, was victorious—the consequence of a socioethnic revolution brought about by Catholic missions and European administration. A generation later in Burundi, from October 1993 to the end of 1995, more than 100,000 people perished in an ethno-political crisis involving Hutu and Tutsi. A half century of colonial administration exercised according to the principles of a racial ideology that opposed "Bantus" and "Hamites" had not been able to destroy Burundi. But after 30 years of independent political administration, Burundi joined its neighbor from the north in the horror. The current crisis is the result of this recent evolution, which can be understood as having several stages.

THE STAGES OF ETHNIC AWARENESS

The assassination of Prince Louis Rwagasore, the charismatic leader of UPRONA, in October 1961, and the personal quarrels that immediately destroyed his party, favored the spread of the Rwandan model in Burundi. The ethnic ideology in these two countries, whose cultural and historic unity was strong, relies on a confusion between concepts of race and class. The Rwandan revolution between 1959 and 1961 was provoked by a

Hutu counterelite dissatisfied with the privileges of the former Tutsi elite, and reinforced by the Belgian administration's indirect rule. This tension spread progressively across the entire population: the Tutsi were collectively denounced as a race of feudal conquerors, and the Hutu were defined as the only true Rwandan people.

Burundi society had traits that enabled it to avoid this dynamic: the aristocracy of princes (the *ganwas*) distinguished itself from the Tutsi and the Hutu, with the former more highly represented in the governing milieu than in Rwanda. Yet political calculations favored the spread of the Rwanda model in Burundi: Hutu politicians quickly saw that they could profit from the defense of the minority Tutsi. This confrontation between two forms of logic, a "majority-based" Hutu one and a "security-based" Tutsi one, together with violence of an increasingly serious nature, characterizes the evolution of the country to this day.

The first major crisis began in 1965. After the assassination in January of Hutu Prime Minister Pierre Ngendandumwe, legislative elections in May showed an increase in ethnic solidarity, and 7 of the 12 ministers in the new government were Hutu. In October, an attempted coup was accompanied by the massacre of Tutsi peasants in the region of Muramvya (in the midwest of the country) by a militia organized by Paul Mirerekano, a Hutu UPRONA leader. The repression was terrible. Mass violence had become a political tool in Burundi. The importation of Rwandan revolutionary methods introduced fear into the Tutsi people, leading to the mistrust and the growing marginalization of the Hutu in the army and government, which was not the case at independence in July 1962.

JEAN-PIERRE CHRETIEN, research director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, is the author of *Burundi: L'histoire retrouvée* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), coeditor with Gérard Prunier of *Les ethnies ont une histoire* (Paris: Karthala, 1989), and coauthor of *Rwanda: Les médias du génocide* (Paris: Karthala, 1995). This article was translated from the French by Amy Billone.

