

Double legitimacy: A danger to African governance

Alphonse Muleefu

The New Times, June 3, 2024



Rwandans and friends of Rwanda during Rwanda Day in Belgium on June 10, 2017.

Forbidden Stories, an international network of journalists issued a statement, on May 27, announcing that it was going to start broadcasting ‘the hidden face of the Regime led by Paul Kagame: assassination plots, intimidation, cyber surveillance, secret war and online harassment’, in their ‘unprecedented collaboration with 50 journalists from 17 international media.’

This announcement attracted the attention of any person interested in Rwanda’s progress 30 years after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

It was interesting because Rwandans will be – in about two months – at an important political phase combining parliamentary and presidential elections.

It is not unusual that governments can be accused of human rights violations. The fact that countries have human rights commissions, offices of the ombudsman, and judicial institutions, can be interpreted as an acknowledgment that sometimes violations do occur, and those institutions are meant to bring whoever is responsible to account. However, what is troubling with this Forbidden Stories’ ‘Rwanda Classified’ is the acceptance of those individual journalists and media organisations to associate themselves with a poor-quality endeavor, making unqualified conclusions about a country, and a people, basing on anecdote evidence and biased testimonies.

I do not want to believe that money alone can be their motivation.

I want to argue that this is a paradox of double legitimacy.

I will argue that just like missionaries served colonial interests at the expense of exploited communities, it is not very difficult

to prove the role of international media and organisations in exacerbating divisions that exist among African communities.

I agree that African governments are to blame, for either discriminating against certain communities or simply relegating their responsibilities of providing basic needs such as health care, education, sanitation and poverty eradication to those organisations. Thousands of international organisations and media operating in African countries have, for too long, been surviving on the claim of being the voice of those marginalized communities, even when those communities have not asked them to do so. Therefore, it is arguable that Rwanda's governance approach of being people centered, providing basic needs to communities and demanding transparency and accountability to all actors including international organisations is seen as threatening to the status quo.

In the process of perpetuating dominance, international organisations and media have been using naming and shaming as a coercive approach to compel African states to behave in certain ways, requiring them to observe certain values and standards, some of which are contrary to their national interests and contexts. This approach has been combined with a call to countries in the 'global north' to condemn the less behaving countries in Africa. In fact, ignoring external influence has been very costly to some governments.

Until recently, France has been using its 'military as a hammer to install leaders it deems friendly to French interests and to remove those who pose a danger to the continuation of the system.'

Legitimacy here is understood as the acceptance of the right of the government to govern. Rwanda has been struggling balancing the desire to engage the international community (mainly 'the West'), and keeping it away from influencing its internal matters. The struggle between internal and external recognition is a reality for all governments. Governments are mindful of both the internal acceptance, from their populations, and external acceptance from international community. Double legitimacy becomes a challenge to governance when internal expectations contradict external interests.

It is an undeniable fact that post-genocide Rwanda's struggle of building a united, dignified, and developed country, has come at the cost of offending certain actors.

Rwanda's diaspora comprises, among others, people who either participated in the genocide, their children and accomplices in media, international organisations and academia. French generals and government officials who supported the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 under François Mitterrand, and their role in the creation of the current mess in eastern DR Congo through the genocidal militia known as FDLR will never stop undermining Rwanda.

I can also understand the desire of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaborating with the individuals and organisations producing ridiculous justifications that can help it to establish an international opinion supporting its recent diplomatic misstep of refusing to accredit Amb. Vincent Karega. In this situation, a whole list of dissidents and opportunists make it easy to create rumours,

exaggerations and misinformation.

I would like to argue that ‘Rwanda Classified’ failed to meet the basic ethical standards of any investigative journalism. Ordinarily, an investigation is a process of collecting information (evidence) that is helping in constructing a coherent story, or theory. It is often true that whenever something happens, there is too much information to analyse, and sometimes it can be difficult to separate reality from perceptions and lies. That is why an honest investigator will attempt to use credible sources, deploying a rigorous mechanism to separate witnesses from those with a motive to misinform.

In responsible journalism, we expect accuracy, fairness and independence. We believe that journalists ought not to influence their sources, manipulate or misrepresent facts. ‘Rwanda Classified’ fails on all of these minimum standards.

Most of their sources are biased because of having a motive to lie, authors used leading questions and sometimes refused responses from authoritative sources. It is not the first time that Rwanda has had to deal with unfounded allegations resulting from incidents that are either wrongly interpreted or simply fabricated.

As Roelof Haveman noted, there is a time “Dutch parliamentarians asked the Minister of Development Cooperation for information about the rumour that the Rwandan government had taken 466 prisoners from the ‘élite Hutu’ from the central prison in Kigali, brought them in lorries to a remote place in the eastern part of the country and killed all of them, except three who had escaped.” He

concluded that that rumour “can be traced back to the diaspora, disseminating rumours in order to destabilise the country.”

Engaging in a conversation with people that are full of mistrust makes it difficult to convince them through logical explanations.

Let me conclude from where I started. International media and organisations have convinced a sizeable number of Africans into believing that all norms and standards developed in the West are the best values compared to those developed elsewhere. This is not very different from missionaries who, during the colonial period, convinced Africans that the latter’s belief systems were barbaric, and that the white man’s knowledge and beliefs was more civilized and supreme.

‘Rwanda Classified’ should be seen in that same context of external influence, choosing for us the heroes and villains. Like many other obstacles, this will also come to pass. And Rwanda will continue building a different narrative for herself.

It is simply a reminder that this journey of transformation is not supported by everyone. And that is alright. Rwandans need to understand that the future of their country cannot be left to chance. The peaceful co-existence and economic progress achieved in the past 30 years will depend on their collective vigilance, sacrifice and dedication to speak truth to each other.

The role of government will remain that of providing a conducive environment, using a combination of strategies including the use of legitimate coercive force, persuasion and political dialogues. Otherwise, accepting external influence without moderation will un-

dermine our ability to build a governance system that is based on values, norms and standards capable of responding to our societal challenges and contexts.

The author is a senior lecturer at University of Rwanda's School of Law.