

# Easy narratives and lazy journalism betray Rwanda

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The trial of Paul Rusesabagina, the hotelier made famous by Don Cheadle's portrayal in the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*, began this week in Kigali. Hollywood made Rusesabagina a hero. Certainly, Rusesabagina did display heroism when he sheltered over a thousand Rwandans from a Hutu mob bent on their murder. But Rusesabagina's actions a quarter-century ago cannot excuse his subsequent actions.

As Bill Cosby, O.J. Simpson, and Robert Downey, Jr., have learned, Hollywood fame is not a free pass to break the law. The terrorism and murder charges against Rusesabagina are real, and Rusesabagina's own words are the most damning evidence against him. Ambition and arrogance can be a noxious mix. Defense lawyers, children, and advocates have argued the trial's illegitimacy on several grounds, each more logically askew than the last. They

argue, for example, that Rwandan President Paul Kagame fears Rusesabagina's political challenge and seeks to delegitimize him as an opponent. Simultaneously, though, both Rusesabagina and his supporters suggest that Rwanda has no jurisdiction to try Rusesabagina because he is a Belgian citizen with residence in the United States.

If Rusesabagina believes Rwanda has no jurisdiction over crimes committed against Rwandans because he renounced his citizenship, why did he seek to run for Rwanda's presidency? Likewise, do Rusesabagina and his supporters believe that criminal law applies only to citizens? Recently, a Belgian court sentenced Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi to 20 years in prison for planning a bomb attack. The fact that Assadi was not a Belgian citizen was not exculpatory. In Rusesabagina's sometime hometown San Antonio, tourists

do not get a free pass if they shoplift, let alone fund murder. Rusesabagina also suggests he was illegally rendered to Rwanda, kidnapped in Dubai, and flown aboard a private jet to Kigali. His lawyers say they are suing a Greek charter flight company for "aiding kidnap." That Rwandan or Emirati agents kidnapped him in Dubai is a claim repeated uncritically by journalists based on their own interviews with Rusesabagina's lawyers and daughter.

In its submission to the United Nations in Geneva on Dec. 21 to explain the circumstances of Rusesabagina's arrival and departure from Dubai, however, the United Arab Emirates has stated that, contrary to his family's claims, he spent just over five hours in the country. Beyond arriving at Dubai International Airport and then departing on a private jet from Al Maktoum International Airport, he checked into the Ibis Hotel, where he met with a Belgian of Rwandan ancestry. Neither was detained at any time, and Rusesabagina departed of his own free will. Rusesabagina's supporters have been unable to challenge any of the facts in the Emiratis' account.

Nor does Rusesabagina's story of traveling to Burundi to speak at a church hold up. Put aside the fact that churches, especially those in Burundi, one of the world's poorest countries, cannot afford to charter

private jets for guest speakers. Maria Malagardis from the French journal *Liberation* did what the *New York Times* did not or could not : She tracked down Constantin Niyomwungere, the pastor who had invited Rusesabagina, and interviewed him. The two had met in 2017 when Rusesabagina sought out Niyomwungere to use his influence in Burundi to win the release of some of Rusesabagina's men whom Burundian police had arrested. The two communicated sporadically over text message. When Niyomwungere asked Rusesabagina if his men were involved in a terrorist attack in southwestern Rwanda, Rusesabagina claimed responsibility. "He explained to me that dialogue was no longer possible and that armed struggle was the only solution," Niyomwungere told *Liberation*.

Rwandan security services later detained Niyomwungere and questioned him about his links to Rusesabagina. Niyomwungere offered to cut off ties, but Rwandan authorities instead urged him to turn informant. Another Rusesabagina associate, Calixte Nsabimana, has already fingeered the former hotel manager. Niyomwungere confirmed and had the communication records to prove that, rather than speak at a church, Rusesabagina's main mission was to reverse Burundi's decision taken after years of diplomatic pressure from the U.S. to stop allowing rebels to use

its territory to undermine the stability of its neighbors. Niyomwungere also said that Rusesabagina himself has insisted on a private jet "for security reasons."

Essentially, he walked into a trap of his own making, fell asleep with jet lag, and only realized he was in Kigali upon landing. Hollywood may rally around Rusesabagina, whom it knows only from the story it crafted, eliding a messier reality for the sake of a good story. Many activists, meanwhile, rally around Rusesabagina less because of his history and more because of their own antipathy toward Kagame. U.S. journalists, meanwhile, fall into a trap by relying almost exclusively upon a narrow set of English-speaking sources while ignoring Arabic and French-language work that is far more extensive. They may describe Rusesa-

bagina's trial as a travesty, but increasingly, it appears that Rusesabagina's claims about his motivations, agenda, and arrival in Kigali are demonstrably false while the evidence he faces is damning and watertight. The U.N., the U.S., and much of the Western world betrayed Rwanda in 1994 when they had an opportunity to prevent genocide against the Tutsi but failed to act. To excuse terrorism decades later because of a well-funded public relations campaign by one of its sponsors would be immoral, give a free pass for terror, and compound the tragedy that Rwanda has suffered.

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