

# 2021 : When Rwanda, France took steps to revive ties after decades of animosity

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The New Times, December 27, 2021



President Kagame with his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron

By and large, 2021 will go down in history as the year when Rwanda and France turned a page following nearly three decades of animosity and a relationship whose pattern involved making up, then breaking up, and then making up again.

On March 26, a report by French historian Vincent Duclert which concluded that France played a key role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi was released in Paris.

During the genocide in which more than a million Tutsi were massacred in just three months, France, the staunchest ally of the

then genocidal Rwandan government, played a significant role in enabling a foreseeable genocide and did nothing to stop the massacres, according to another report produced by a team of legal experts from the Washington-based law firm Levy, Firestone Muse LLP, in April. This report details how France provided unwavering support to the Genocidal government during the massacres.

Duclert, on April 9, officially handed over a copy of his report to President Paul Kagame.

Duclert's report noted that France bore "overwhelming responsibilities" for the genocide because it remained allied with the "racist, corrupt and violent" genocidal regime as it prepared to massacre the Tutsi, but it cleared the French of complicity in the genocide.

Some activists wondered whether this was a way to avoid justice but congratulated the step taken.

In May, French President Emmanuel Jean-Michel Frédéric Macron visited Rwanda and said that the French Republic has a duty to face history and to recognise the suffering it inflicted on Rwandans by, for too long, being silent as far as facing and examining the truth

about its role in the 1994 genocide is concerned.

As regards how far, and which direction things go from here, only time will tell.

The relationship between Rwanda and France “will require time as well as actions and gestures of goodwill to once again work,” said Ismael A. Buchanan, a senior lecturer in the department of political science and international relations at the University of Rwanda.

“I think the political fallout from the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi will remain at the heart of relations for both countries for some time to come,” he added.

While speaking at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, Macron sought the forgiveness of the survivors of the 1994 Genocide, for what he admitted was his country’s historical and political responsibility in Rwanda.

He delivered the speech at the final resting place for more than 250,000 victims of the Genocide shortly after laying a wreath and honouring Genocide victims.

During and after the Genocide, instead of arresting ring leaders of the mass murders, French troops helped them flee, with many eventually being welcomed to stay in France where they remain up to now.

To date, France is home to dozens indicted Genocide suspects and hundreds of genocide deniers and revisionists.

Buchanan said : “If France wants to gain the [full] trust of Rwandans, France has first of all to combat genocide ideology and all deniers by arresting and extraditing those Banyarwanda who were involved in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.”

Next, the scholar believes, the existing bilateral relations need to be “honest and genuine” so as to foster strong ties.

In June, Kigali approved Antoine Anfré as the new Ambassador of France to Rwanda. The previous French envoy, Michel Fleisch, left Kigali in September 2015 due to icy relations.

According to Amb Anfré, considering developments in the past 12 months, there were “two main events concerning the relation between France and Rwanda,” publication of the Duclert report and the visit of President Macron in Kigali on May 27.

“The Duclert report based on 8,000 declassified official documents establishes the serious and overwhelming responsibility of the French Government of that period for what occurred in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994. In other terms the French Executive of the nineties made possible a genocide which was foreseeable,” Anfré said.

“There is now a common narrative between France and Rwanda. This was necessary since it’s impossible for two partners to build a common future together if one of them is not clear with the past. The historical truth based on serious research and evidence had to be acknowledged. Therefore there is a before and an after President Macron’s visit in Rwanda.”

During Macron’s visit to Kigali, Kagame noted that speaking the truth is risky. And, he commended his guest for taking a step that was, politically and morally, “an act of tremendous courage.”

The rapprochement is, among others, attracting French investments.

According to Anfré, the bilateral relation was normalized and is now intense in many fields : including arts and culture with the opening of the Francophone Cultural Center in Kigali ; cooperation with the establishment of an office of the French Development Agency (AFD) in Kigali ; and economy and commerce with the visit of Franck Riester, France’s Minister for external trade, accompanied by representatives of 40 French companies.

A week after Macron’s visit, the French judiciary set the trial date in the case of Genocide fugitive Laurent Bucyibaruta, a former Mayor in Southern Rwanda who was one of the key people who participated in the killing of more than 50,000 Tutsi refugees in Murambi, 27 years ago.

Earlier that month, on May 18, a French online publication, *Médiapart*, exposed three suspects under the ‘first category’ of perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide living in France, unhindered. The trio, whose whereabouts were previously unknown is Hyacinthe Bicamumpaka, a former presenter on Radio Rwanda who subscribed to the ideals of Hutu-Power, Joseph Mushyandi, a lawyer close to the most extremist politico-religious circles, and Anastase Rwabizambuga, a former furniture seller now running a car spare parts business.

In February, *Médiapart* obtained a document shedding light on how, during the 1994 Genocide, instead of arresting ring leaders of the mass murders, French troops helped them flee. In April, a French Prosecutor requested that Genocide suspect Philippe Hategekimana be referred to the cour d’assises, or Assize Court, a criminal trial court that handles

cases of genocide and war crimes.

The Paris Court of Appeal on August 30, ruled against the request by Former first lady Agatha Kanziga Habyarimana, widow of former Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, not to be brought to justice over allegations of involvement in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Kanziga is one of the core members of Akazu, a small elite group that orchestrated the Genocide.

On December 16, the country’s cour d’assises, or Assize Court, a criminal trial court that handles cases of genocide and war crimes, condemned Claude Muhayimana – the fourth Genocide criminal tried and sentenced in France in nearly three decades – to 14 years in prison over his role in the Genocide against the Tutsi.

## What the future holds

On what he thinks the future holds, considering all that transpired in 2021, Anfré noted that “France and Rwanda will continue to share views on global and regional subjects and to act for peace and stability.”

“The next EU-AU Summit on February 17 and 18 will address important issues for the two continents. President Macron and President Kagame met in Paris last Monday [December 20] to prepare for it since this Summit will take place during the French Presidency of the European Union. The fight against the Covid pandemic will remain a top priority. More vaccines worldwide with proper sanitary measures are necessary to control the virus and hopefully to eradicate it,” Anfré said.

“The French judicial system will go on with the trial of presumed genocidaires. After Claude Muhayimana who was sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment by the Paris Assize Court a week ago, Laurent Bucyibaruta former prefect of Gikongoro will appear before this Court for a trial which will last eight weeks from the end of May till the beginning of July 2022.”

The diplomat said he is confident the bilateral relations in every field will continue to intensify “and I can assure you” the French embassy in Rwanda is working on it.

However, a cloud of uncertainty hovers.

Even though there are no signs of disturbances right now, sources say, the continuity of the current rapprochement will very much depend on the next French President and his executive. France will hold presidential elections next year. A French president serves one term of five years, renewable once.

In early 2011, the appointment of Alain Juppe, as Foreign minister soured the rapprochement at the time when Nicholas Sarkozy was President.

In May, *Médiapart* published an article on how Juppe who held the same position from 1993 to 1995, and reportedly, strongly, supported the forces that committed the Genocide, poisoned Rwanda-France relations 10 years ago.

“What happened back then was more about French internal political reasons. And it could be the same in 2022,” said a French national who preferred anonymity.

Macron, who has served since May 14, 2017, is said to be still popular. Even though he has not yet announced his intent on running for a second term he is widely expected to do so.

How feasible is the re-election of the incumbent? Those in the know say that the French presidential election is very unpredictable.

For 2022, sources say, Macron’s re-election is by no means guaranteed, but neither is his exit. There are people who believe that he will be a candidate again.

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