

Marie-Eve Desrosiers. 2023. *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control before the Genocide*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 386 pp.

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, more commonly known as the Rwandan Genocide, is perhaps one of the most researched topics within the African Great Lakes region. The sheer scale of the genocidal massacre, over 800,000 Tutsis and non-extremist Hutus killed within one hundred days, and the nation's post-genocide reconciliation brought Rwanda significant attention by genocide and transitional justice researchers. Since the Genocide, a disconnect has developed between academics who question Rwanda's reconciliation, human rights, and development from those in the private sector, practitioners, and international leaders who praise Rwanda's development. Often lost in these debates and research is Rwanda's previous history.

Desrosiers's book examines the First (1962-1973) and Second (1973-1994) Republics under the leadership of Grégoire Kayibanda and Juvénal Habyarimana respectively. This history is often either missing in much of the existing academic literature or minimized to showcase how events during this period led to the Genocide. The book focuses on this period to provide a more holistic understanding of everyday life in Rwanda. It attempts to disrupt current understandings that portray these republics as simply dictatorships with a general focus on period elites rather than the experiences of most Rwandans.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of nine chapters. The first two chapters provide a theoretical examination of authoritarianism, which benefits the later exploration of Rwanda before the Genocide. Chapter Two begins to connect the theory to the case study and African politics more generally. The following chapter explores Rwandan history outside the typically normative constructs to illustrate Rwandans' often complex relationships with their government. Specifically, this chapter examines the Belgian colonial period and the 1959 Social Revolution. Chapter Four continues Rwanda's historical path with the Coup of Gitarama and the creation of a "soft authoritarian state" (p. 16). Establishing this Rwandan authoritarianism framework allows Desrosiers to better examine both Republics' authoritarian strategies and tactics. Rather than focusing chapters on specific periods, Chapters Five to Nine instead focus on topics and how both regimes engaged them.

For instance, Chapters Six and Seven examine how internal and external security threats impacted perceptions of both regimes and how they engaged with the threats. However, Chapter Seven also discusses the breaks within the authoritarian systems because of these security and destabilising threats. The following chapter focuses on the political and economic systems that influenced public policy and how state officials engaged with Rwandans. Notably, the author stresses in Chapter Nine how many Rwandans did not engage with the national authoritarian government officials. Rather, they would engage with the "antennas" of the system (p. 317), which were often local officials responsible for implementing national policy at the local levels. However, many, such as in Remera, acted more like minor chiefs (p. 318). The conclusion attempts to classify the current political system as more authoritarian than before but also harms the book's central argument.

The book's central purpose is to provide a more in-depth and holistic understanding of Rwanda's first two Republics. It decries the academic norms of generalizing these periods to

suit one's understanding of how Rwanda's Genocide occurred. Its conclusion significantly harms the desire to problematize existing historical understandings. Throughout much of the book, Desrosiers warns the reader not to believe generalizations about Rwanda but then falls within the same trap to discuss present-day Rwandan politics and development. She does not attempt to provide a holistic understanding of current challenges as she did for the previous regimes. This leads to several questions about the real goal of the book.

A fundamental question arises of whether the writing of this book was to problematize our understanding of Rwandan history or another outside political motivation. Much of Rwanda's post-genocide government policies are designed to oppose past mistakes, corruption, and persecutions found in the previous Republics. However, Desrosiers argues that life during those periods was not significantly difficult despite the vicious anti-Tutsi policies, pogroms, persecutions, and exclusions. Thus, by arguing that these periods were overall liveable, it deprives the current government of any form of moral authority beyond being responsible for ending the Genocide. If we discount this assessment, we are left with the unbalanced conclusion that providing a holistic understanding of authoritarianism is acceptable in some periods but not others. While there are other minor issues with the book, such as the underutilization of its Rwandan informants, nonetheless this book will be a welcome addition to understanding Rwandan history.

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