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The Weakness of Authoritarian Regimes:

Rwanda as a Difficult But Convincing Case

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Abstract

The lack of academic attention to the functioning of authoritarian regimes has allowed an erroneous impression that dictatorships are inherently strong and stable. Marie-Eve Desrosiers uses the difficult case of Rwanda, whose 1994 genocide against the Tutsi has widely been seen as a sign of state strength, to demonstrate the fragility of authoritarian rule. Looking at the First and Second Republics, which governed Rwanda from 1962 until 1994, Desrosiers explores both the vulnerability of the regimes and how they adjusted over time in attempts to strengthen control. Desrosiers argues for greater awareness of shifting strategies and changes in governance across time, what she calls “authoritarian trajectories,” to better understand how authoritarian regimes actual work and how the public responds to them. Although not focused on the 1994 genocide, Desrosiers’ analysis helps explain why genocide emerged as a strategy to shore up Rwanda’s failing regime.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Political Violence, Instability, Genocide, Rwanda

Political scientists have long explored the complexities and variations of democratic polities. In the 1950s, Robert Dahl developed the concept of “polyarchy” to take account of the

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multiplicity of factors that make up a democratic system in addition to the elections that dominated discussions of democracy.¹ Abundant scholarship has since explored the spread of democracy, democratic transitions, how democracies develop and consolidate, and, more recently, how democracies fail.² The functioning of democratic institutions is the subject of voluminous research, including scholarship on elections, the legislative process, the actions of presidents and prime ministers, the role of courts, the workings of the bureaucracy, and civil-military relations, among many other topics.³

As Marie-Eve Desrosiers argues in her important new book, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control before the Genocide*,⁴ scholarship on authoritarian regimes has had a more limited focus. Scholars struggle even to define authoritarianism as something more than, “a ‘residual’ category encompassing all regimes that do not qualify as democratic.”⁵ Much of the existing work focuses on typologies of authoritarian regimes, how they rise and fall, and the legacies that authoritarianism leaves, rather than seeking to explain how authoritarian governance actually work.⁶ Scholarship that does explore the operation of

¹ Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956). See also, Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Houchang E. Chehabi, Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, *Politics, Society, and Democracy: Comparative Studies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Larry Jay Dimaond, Juan J. Linz, Seymour Martin Lipset, *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy* (Boulder: L Rienner Publishers, 1990); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).

³ The literature on democratic institutions is too myriad to list, but it includes extensive work on individual presidents, parliaments, courts, elections, and bureaucracies in countries around the world and many works comparing these institutions in multiple countries. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, for example, sponsors and publishes extensive work comparing legislative bodies. See <https://www.ipu.org>.

⁴ Marie-Eve Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control before the Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

⁶ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Katherine Hite, Paola Cesarini, and Nancy Gina Bermeo, eds., *Authoritarian legacies and democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh

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authoritarian regimes tends to focus on the central institutions of governance while failing to explore how authoritarian rule is exercised outside the capital and within the population.⁷

Desrosiers seeks to make two primary contributions to the literature on authoritarianism. First, she suggests focusing on how authoritarian regimes change over time, what she calls “authoritarian trajectories.” She contends that by focusing on how authoritarian regimes rise and fall, the literature treats them narrowly as moving toward or away from democracy, rather than recognizing that their authority waxes and wanes across time and that they continually adapt their strategies to extend their control. As she argues, “Capturing a regime’s authoritarian trajectory is about looking more closely at the specific shifts the system makes over time as it tries to deal with the different forms of appeals and challenges eating away at its groundings and stability.”⁸

Second, Desrosiers suggests looking beyond the national leadership that is the focus of most literature to the ways in which regimes exercise their authority in practice. By using what she calls a micro-level analysis, looking at how local officials implement directives and how local populations react, we can gain a more complete understanding of the nature of authoritarian rule and the limits of dictatorial power. Surprisingly few scholars have applied this micro-level approach to authoritarian regimes, though the work by those who have looked at the local level has proven quite rich. Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject* argued convincingly that colonial rule empowered many local leaders to exercise unchecked power over their

Press, 1995); Valeria Resta, *Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring: Party Politics in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarians: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸ Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism*, p. 41.

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communities, a political practice that helps explain the persistence of authoritarianism in Africa.⁹ In contrast to Mamdani's focus on what he calls "decentralized despotism," Karrie J. Koesel's work comparing China and Russia finds that local officials in authoritarian regimes sometimes find ways to avoid using the coercive power of the state. Exploring religion and politics at the local level in two communities each in China and Russia, Koesel demonstrates that regardless of national policy, local political elites generally seek to find accommodation with religious leaders in order to minimize conflict.¹⁰ In line with Koesel, Desrosiers argues that, "the authoritarian system may take different forms locally, suggesting the existence of space for local populations to deploy ambiguous engagements with the system, as they manage their existence within it."¹¹

Exploring authoritarianism using these two methods leads Desrosiers to observe something that most scholars overlook: authoritarian regimes are often less powerful and less stable than they appear. Because authoritarian regimes are defined in part by their use of extensive coercive force, they may seem more powerful and in control of their societies than they actually are. Armies and police are often visible and active, as they use force to stifle dissent and quell rebellion, giving the appearance of strength. Yet the need to deploy coercive force may itself indicate a government's weakness. Since they are not popularly chosen, autocratic rulers must adopt diverse and shifting methods to gain support and prevent challenges to their authority. The literature on weak and failed states from the late 1990s indicated not simply that weak states sometimes lose their monopoly on coercive force but also that states themselves turn to violence as a tool to gain public obedience when other less costly strategies have failed to

⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject : Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). Despite the wide acclaim Mamdani's book received, most scholarship on authoritarianism in Africa has continued to focus exclusively on central governments.

¹⁰ Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism*, p. 44.

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establish the state's control.¹² The appearance of strength is often a myth that masks weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The Rwanda Case

To prove her point about "authoritarianism's inherent fragility,"¹³ Desrosiers chooses a challenging case. Scholars have long regarded Rwanda as a highly centralized, tightly controlled state with powerful authoritarian regimes, capable of effectively mobilizing the population and shutting down dissent. The government's ability in 1994 to organize and carry out the systematic massacre of a tenth of its population presents an image of extraordinary strength, and nearly all the analysis of Rwanda in the subsequent thirty years has regarded the genocidal regime as having formidable power. Yet as Desrosiers convincingly argues, in reality, the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi was itself a demonstration of the inherent weakness of an unstable authoritarian regime that was struggling to find a way to survive in the face of serious threats to its authority, a struggle the regime ultimately lost, as it was driven from power. By exploring the trajectories of Rwanda's first two post-independence republics, Desrosiers shows how the apparently strong and stable regimes actually strained to extend their control and neutralize threats to their power.

Even prior to the extension of colonial rule in 1895, the Kingdom of Rwanda displayed the paradoxes of authoritarianism, on the one hand having highly centralized authority and the ability to conquer neighboring territories, while on the other hand challenged to assert control over dispersed populations and weakened by internecine struggles over power.¹⁴ Colonialism

¹² Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); I. William Zartman, *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of State Authority* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

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strengthened state capacities by simplifying and centralizing structures of authority, enhancing bureaucracy, and increasing coercive capabilities, yet even as the Rwandan monarchy cooperated with the German, then (after 1916) Belgian, colonial administrations, it faced regular challenges from rebellion and discontent.¹⁵ Both the colonial rulers and their Rwandan partners struggled to exercise authority, not least because they were both in collaboration and in competition for power. In 1931, Belgian authorities replaced the king with one of his sons in a display both of their strength and their concern over their ability to maintain control over the territory.¹⁶ Popular discontent culminated in an uprising in 1959 of the Hutu ethnic majority against the Tutsi chiefs, which led Belgians to shift power to Hutu, including the ousting in 1961 of the king that they had named three decades before. Rwanda gained independence in 1962 with a Hutu-dominated government led by President Grégoire Kayibanda, who orchestrated waves of anti-Tutsi ethnic violence over the next several years as a means of consolidating support from the Hutu majority.¹⁷ Another wave of anti-Tutsi violence in 1973 preceded a coup by military leader Juvénal Habyarimana, who then led the country for nearly twenty years. His death on April 6, 1994, served as the pretext to launch the genocide that killed more than half a million Tutsi in only one hundred days.¹⁸

Rwanda attracted disproportionate scholarly focus even before the 1994 genocide drew international attention. Alexis Kagame, among the most important African intellectuals during

¹⁵ Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Alison Des Forges, "The Drum is Greater than the Shout: The 1912 Rebellion in Northern Rwanda," in Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986), 311-331.

¹⁶ Alison Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

¹⁷ René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

¹⁸ Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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The Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes sought to justify their own rule by claiming that they were continuing the Hutu revolution against their Tutsi oppressors. The historical narrative of Tutsi as foreign conquerors whose rule oppressed and exploited the Hutu majority continued to be taught in Rwandan schools in both regimes, ensuring that the population was vulnerable to an ideology that treated Tutsi as a foreign threat.²⁹

Despite the focus on historical explanations for the genocide, the post-independence regimes have received surprisingly little study. The genocide itself has tended to distort historical analysis, as much of the scholarship starts with the genocide, then looks selectively back at history to locate the origins of ethnic violence. Scholars have prioritized colonial history, considering the First and Second Republics only insofar as they maintained colonial ideas about Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. This partial lens through which post-colonial Rwanda is viewed becomes even more limited in what David Mwambari calls the “genocide master narrative,”³⁰ the popular historical narrative promoted by the post-genocide government and its main supporters, the former Tutsi refugees who returned to Rwanda after 1994 and now comprise the country’s elite. In my book on memory in post-genocide Rwanda, I note that the official narrative about the genocide portrays ethnicity as entirely an invention of the colonial state and blames colonialism for the violence. While the official narrative critiques the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes for carrying out anti-Tutsi violence, it treats them mostly as pawns of foreign powers, guilelessly continuing colonial legacies.³¹

Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Le défi de l’ethnisme: Rwanda et Burundi* (Paris: Karthala, 1997); and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, ed., *Rwanda: Les médias du génocide* (Paris: Karthala, 1995).

²⁹ Elisabeth King, *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁰ David Mwambari, *Navigating Cultural Memory: Commemoration and Narrative in Postgenocide Rwanda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

³¹ Timothy Longman, *Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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The failure to study more fully the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes continues an omission in the literature that existed prior to 1994. Despite the voluminous writing on Rwanda, almost no studies of either regime have been published. Several texts appeared in the 1970s and 1980s that explored the ethnic violence surrounding transition.³² Lemarchand's *Rwanda and Burundi* covers the first years of the Kayibanda regime but explores it mostly in relationship to ethnic violence.³³ Excellent anthropological texts, works on development, and studies of issues such as birth control and land use were published during this period, but few of these provide analysis of the political system.³⁴ The only major study of either regime is contained in Filip Reyntjens's *Pouvoir et Droit*, a study of the development of Rwanda's legal system and its relationship to the political system from the beginning of Belgian rule through the end of the Kayibanda regime.³⁵ Claudine Vidal's *Sociologie des Passions* explores the sources of ethnic conflict in Rwanda into the Habyarimana era, including the role of the state, but the book does not look more broadly at the exercise of power.³⁶ Not a single scholarly study of the Habyarimana regime was published during its duration, and (quite surprisingly, given the amount of attention the regime's implication in the genocide has received) no studies outside of the singular focus on the genocide have been undertaken since 1994 – until Desrosiers's text, that is.

Although the subtitle of *Trajectories of Authoritarianism* mentions the genocide, much to its credit, this book does not seek to understand post-colonial governance only through the

³² Newbury, *Cohesion of Oppression*; Linden and Linden, *Church and Revolution*.

³³ Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*.

³⁴ Cf., Helen F. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900-1960: Based on Forty-eight Rwandan Autobiographies*, (Tervuren: Musée Royal De L'Afrique Centrale, 1973); Pierre Bettez Gravel, *Remera: A Community in Eastern Ruanda*, Paris: Mouton, 1968; Johan Pottier, "Stereotypes in the Service of Power: 'Three's a Crowd': Knowledge, Ignorance and Power in the Context of Urban Agriculture in Rwanda." *Africa (London. 1928)* 59, no. 4 (1989): 461–477.

³⁵ Filip Reyntjens, *Pouvoir et Droit au Rwanda: Droit Publique et évolution politique, 1916-1973*, (Tervuren: Musée Royal De L'Afrique Centrale, 1985).

³⁶ Claudine Vidal, *Sociologie des Passions: Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire*, (Paris: Karthala, 1991).

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limited lens of ethnic conflict. While not dismissing the brutality of Rwanda's anti-Tutsi violence – as well as periodic violence against regime critics – Desrosiers argues for a more complicated understanding of how power was exercised in the two regimes. She accurately points out that, “Claiming pre-genocide Rwanda was authoritarian, as many have done, does not amount to examining or explaining the shape of Rwandan authoritarianism in the decades prior to the incredible violence the country experienced in 1994.”³⁷ Although in chapter three Desrosiers provides a brief historical overview of the first regime, beginning with Kayibanda's rise to power in the last years of colonial rule, she eschews a traditional chronological approach, instead exploring various aspects of authoritarian governance in both regimes. As she points out, while coercive power was certainly an aspect of control, both the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes relied on building legitimacy and non-coercive tools to secure their power. Based on analysis of government documents, diplomatic cables, and press reports that have not previously been probed, as well as original interviews, she explores the ways each regime sought to gain popular support and control the population, including through the organization of political parties to mobilize and monitor citizens and the development of regime ideologies and use of propaganda to try to win their support.

Desrosiers also explores the ways in which the two regimes struggled to maintain a monopoly on coercive force. Both regimes faced external threats. In the early 1960s, some of the Tutsi who had fled into exile mounted raids against Rwanda, which retaliated by encouraging attacks on Tutsi civilians still living in Rwanda. After more than a decade of relative calm, the Habyarimana regime faced a more organized armed refugee threat from the Rwandan Patriotic Front beginning in 1990. Both presidents also faced struggles over control within their own

³⁷ Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism*, p. 149.

regimes, as various officials, particularly within the military, jockeyed for influence and position. Threats and rumors of possible coups d'état were common, and the presidents regularly reorganized their administrations, seeking to advance allies and suppress possible threats to their rule. Desrosiers argues that these external and internal threats show the fragility of authoritarian power, demonstrated by the reality that Kayibanda was ultimately deposed by a military coup, led by his defense minister, Habyarimana.³⁸

In her final substantive chapter, Desrosiers explores the exercise of state power at the grassroots. She challenges the idea embraced by many casual observers of the country that Rwanda's population was particularly deferential to authority, a point that, as she notes, scholars of the genocide like Straus and Fujii have also debunked.³⁹ Desrosiers argues that despite the highly centralized bureaucratic system that both the First and Second Republic implemented on paper, in practice, local officials had considerable latitude in exercising their authority. Although corruption in Rwanda may have been less pronounced than in many other African states, some local officials used their positions for personal gain. At the same time, many officials also found ways to exercise their rule in a manner that blunted the authoritarian goals of the central government and gained support from the local population. Desrosiers finds that, while most people felt quite distant from the central government, "Many of the Rwandans interviewed for this book conveyed a sense of contentment with authorities under the two republics, with minor variation across regions and ethnic groups."⁴⁰ The variation in attitudes toward local officials demonstrates, Desrosiers argues, that officials had much more latitude in how they functioned than the usual portrayal of centralized authority in authoritarian states would recognize.

³⁸ Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism*, pp. 210-264.

³⁹ Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*.

⁴⁰ Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism*, p. 324.

In discussing how the Rwandan population reacted to authoritarian rule, Desrosiers could have gone even further in recognizing the ways in which Rwandans often showed obedience in public while simultaneously finding means to resist state dictates. A number of works show that even going back to the pre-colonial and colonial eras, the increasingly centralized authority of the Rwandan state existed alongside regular rebellions.⁴¹ My own research on the period leading up to the genocide (which Desrosiers cites) found numerous ways in which people quietly resisted state directives in the early 1990s, from refusing to participate in required community labor to burning state-owned tree plantations that were not available for public use.⁴² This tradition of private resistance masked behind public obedience helps make sense of the reality that in 1994, many people simultaneously participated in the genocide while hiding and protecting Tutsi in their own homes.⁴³

In her conclusion, Desrosiers recognizes that many people will be interested in her work only insofar as it helps to explicate the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. In fact, her exploration of the inherent weakness of Rwanda's authoritarian governments does shed considerable light on how authorities came to the strategy of genocide and how it was ultimately implemented. By focusing more broadly on how authoritarianism functioned in Rwanda, rather than seeking to understand the first two republics exclusively through a genocide lens, Desrosiers provides a more robust, complete, and useful understanding of how the organization of ethnic violence, both in 1994 and before, served as part of a broader strategy to secure the power of central authorities.

⁴¹ Iris Berger, *Religion and Resistance: East African Kingdoms in the Precolonial Period* (Butare: Institute National de Recherche Scientifique, 1981); Alison Des Forges, "The Drum is Greater than the Shout: the 1912 Rebellion in Northern Rwanda," in Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1985), pp. 311-332.

⁴² Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*.

⁴³ Jennie Burnet, *To Save Heaven and Earth: Rescue in the Rwandan Genocide* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), discusses the problems with a neat categorization of Rwandans into victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and resisters, as people shifted their roles across time and context.

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While *Trajectories of Authoritarianism* is an important text for helping to illuminate how genocide could take place, the Rwandan case also usefully demonstrates Desrosiers' key theoretical points about the fragility of authoritarian regimes, the ways in which they change and adapt across time, and the variation in how power is exercised across both time and space. While a regime able effectively to carry out genocide may seem incontrovertibly strong, such a violent strategy grew in fact out of efforts to reassert authority in a context of major internal and external challenges. As Desrosiers shows, the violence of authoritarian states often shows their tenuous hold on power. The fact that the current Rwandan regime that came to power in 2000 uses very little overt violence today may be a reflection of its much more complete control over the state and its population. As one friend who was a strong supporter of the current government told me, "We are much better dictators than they ever were."⁴⁴ Still, as Desrosiers would caution, studying the variations of how authoritarian power is exercised over time and in different parts of the country remains key to understanding how the current government functions. In the end, what Desrosiers leads us to understand is that to say that a state is authoritarian tells us very little. We need a much more complex and nuanced analysis of how authoritarianism actually functions in practice to understand its real impact.

⁴⁴ Personal communication, Kigali, 2002.