

## RWANDA UNDER AFRICAN PEER REVIEW'S SURGERY

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The decision by Rwanda to be among the first two countries to come under the peering eyes of the African Union's "peer review mechanism" was as bold and historic as her challenging Nigeria for the headship of the African Development Bank and winning that diplomatic boxing bout. It was a statement that the country has turned the corner from wallowing in the macabre image of being a massive killing field, to one where leaders and their people are engrossed in the daring imagination of a new and healing society.

The wise elders of the African Peer Review team must have gone into Rwanda with a touch of disbelief to look under earlobes of the country's social, political and economic conditions and their interface with the governance performance of President Paul Kagame and his team or rulers.

It is not clear if these wise PR Elders were looking out particularly for new roads to a new Rwanda. Their report, however, talks, with unrestrained delight, about novel policy initiatives now afoot in that country. Their delight would not be unexpected considering a melancholy backdrop emphasized by the fact that "in 1994, there were two million Rwandans in exile, one million dead due to genocide and another one million internally displaced". So what did the PR team find?

First, that while severe social dislocation had in 2001 yielded an estimated "between 400,000 and 500,000" street kids, by 2004 the number had fallen dramatically to seven thousand. For a country with an underdeveloped capital, Kigali, 7000 "street kids" is a frightening number. It is, therefore, a gigantic achievement by the government of Paul Kagame that the situation had climbed down from that of a societal nightmare. As part of its rehabilitation programme, school fees are not paid by genocide orphans; and "compulsory universal and free primary education is being provided". Students in secondary and tertiary education are, in 2005, benefiting from a loan scheme conceived in 2003.

On the issue of gender, the Peer Review team are ecstatic. They report that 50 per cent of senators in Rwanda's two chamber parliament are women. 49 per cent of "the seats in the Chamber of Deputies are held by women". Women also hold five vital positions in government, namely: the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, the Gacaca process, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, and the Minister of Justice. A law is in place which has set up "Women Councils" which exist at national, provincial, district and village levels. The councils "provide a forum for analysis and advocacy on issues affecting women". Also to be noted is that Rwanda has achieved "an equal balance of girls and boys in primary schools". By the record of most African countries, these are historic achievements.

The Peer Review team, however, kept watchful eyes on the existential conditions of the majority of Rwanda's women and found a few important warts. Among these are cultural practices which deny women unequal access to land and other economic resources. Moreover, as in certain parts of Nigeria, women "perform much of the work in the agrarian sector".

The Peer Review team was clearly unprepared for the innovative measures taken by Rwanda to reconcile its communities through crafting political practices to conform with that primary task. In the area of politics, for example, political parties are allowed to practice their competitive impulses at the national and provincial level; but are not allowed to operate at the village level. The PR team considers this a "denial of much political activity of citizens", but provides no creative alternative to Kagame's scheme for avoiding political activities which would reignite murderous ethnic emotions at the village level where "most people reside".

Rwanda's Electoral Commission has also borrowed the voting practice pioneered by Namibia and Nigeria by which secret voting in elections at local levels is replaced by voters lining up in the open and during daylight hours behind the candidates or their choice.

The PR team is convinced that this system does not "protect citizens from the likelihood of intimidation and other forms of undemocratic and blameworthy practices". The PR team does not, however, provide a mechanism for assuring Rwandans that without the hysteria of genocidal mobilisation "Hutus" can vote for a "Tutsi" on the basis of merit, and Tutsis can vote for Hutu candidates on the basis of merit.

Clearly the visual demonstration of this social chemistry is vital for healing the terrible wounds the country desperately seeks to transcend.

Moreover, without this visual demonstration of cross-ethnic partisan choice, it would be difficult to contain possible conflict-fanning rumours about Tutsi candidates winning elections because secretly cast ballots had been tampered with by election officials. It were better if the PR team had planted alternative seeds of social imagination and social engineering.

The PR team also failed to consider the merit of Mwalimu Nyerere's proposition that "two party" politics is grounded on a view which sees politics as a "civil war" by which the political party in government is permanently in antagonism with the political party in opposition. Nyerere's view has been confirmed by scholars who found that the notion of being in political party opposition is interpreted in most African languages as being "the enemy" of those in the "government party". For a country whose population has gone through horrendous traumas carried by genocidal opposition multipartyism, it is clearly insensitive and cavalier for the PR team to recommend a voting tool which actively keeps those behavioral propensities alive. Their position gives intellectual laziness and fixation to an electoral model lifted from European traditions of politics a philosophical dignity it does not merit.

On the judicial plain, the Peer Review team found refreshing creativity. Rwanda's leaders have turned inwards to borrow models from ancient traditions of community action. Through practices like "ubudehe" (or community participatory planning), and "Omuganda"(or communal work), Rwanda's leaders found that of "Gacaca". Gacaca rests on judicial practices organised from the cell level upwards. Under this judicial practice, the village sits together and conducts a dialogue with itself which is also an open exploration of a crime as well as its punishment and modes of compensation for victims. That the system is not elitist compared to legal systems inherited from colonial rule all over Africa, is indicated by the fact that "instead of training a few judges, 400,000 traditional judges have been ELECTED BY THEIR PEOPLE and trained and are being

given the power to bring justice to their own communities". Clearly here is yet another case of 'something new always coming out of Africa'.

The African Peer Review Mechanism is conceived of as a novel tool for bringing good governance to Africa. It is interesting that President Obasanjo, the current head of the African Union, proposed in a speech to a conference on corruption held in Abuja, his country's capital city that the mutual interrogation of each other's performance in governance should be extended to cover top civil servants who head government ministries and parastatals. What needs emphasizing is the need to open up for public discussion and interrogation the contents of reports compiled at the end of each country searchlight conducted by the African Peer Review Mechanism. Africa's media, intellectuals, professional groups, trade unions, cooperative societies, community association and civil society would thereby be enabled to participate in building the continent's future.

<http://www.utexas.edu/conferences/africa/ads/999.html>