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## Responsible Citizenship in a Post-Conflict Context

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### Article at a glance

- Rwanda's history is being dangerously re-interpreted and the freedoms of its citizens are at risk.
- Youth are forced to accept the government's position that Rwanda is "on the way forward," regardless of unclear and questionable government policies.
- Young Rwandan citizens must take responsibility to overcome the past and actively contribute to building a free and open future.



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*Democracy and citizenship go hand-in-hand, and usually, where there is no democracy, citizenship is also at stake. The current situations in Rwanda (my home country) and South Africa (where I live in exile) provide contrasting pictures of the relationship between citizenship to good governance, and how citizenship is developed in young people. Rwanda has been profoundly shaped by its past conflict, though there is much to be proud of in current developments. Rwandan youth can take a strong role in building democracy by aspiring to true citizenship.*

## Rwanda

Citizenship in Rwanda has for many centuries been clouded by practices that encouraged the exclusion and/or maltreatment of “the other” between Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups. There are different understandings of the nature of the treatment of the majority Hutus under the Tutsi feudalist monarchy before 1959, when the king and many Tutsis were forced into exile following a Hutu revolution. Some say the monarchy enslaved the Hutus, while others characterize it as a “cultural” practice unique to Rwanda. Hutus insist that they were generally considered inferior. After the 1959 Hutu Revolution and independence in 1962, the policies of the two successive Hutu-dominated regimes diminished the rights of the minority Tutsi. Furthermore, the exiled Tutsis (following the 1959 revolution) were refused the right to return as Rwandan citizens under the pretext that they would “overpopulate” the country.

These exiled Tutsis began to form a rebellion, under the banner of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), and invaded the country in October 1990 despite negotiations that were underway with the Rwandan Government to repatriate them. Under pressure from the international community and the raging war, President Habyarimana decided to open up the political space, introducing a multi-party system. Tensions between Hutus and Tutsis increased. Despite the peace negotiations and the 1993 Arusha Accords signed between the Government of Rwanda and the RPF, the situation was increasingly out of control. Then, on April 6, 1994, the plane carrying the Hutu President of Rwanda, his Burundian counterpart, and

their senior aides was hit by missiles while preparing to land at the Kigali Airport – ironically as they returned from a regional summit aimed at speeding the implementation of the Arusha Accords. The tragic Rwandan genocide was triggered, and the RPF successfully launched its final offensive to topple the Rwandan Government. Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered by extremist Hutus (massacres later qualified as genocide) while Hutu civilians were systematically killed by RPF fighters (massacres yet to be qualified).

Rwanda has no natural resources to fight over, and there has not been a major dispute over land. Instead, the killings were committed by those who considered the “other” as dangerous or worthless citizens; in most cases the “other” was dehumanized and explicitly called animal names to increase what seemed to be the passion of their killers. The new RPF-led government that was installed in July 1994 inherited a country in which more than a million people had been barbarically killed, with millions more terrorized, both in and out of the country.

Current government policy disguised as “de-ethnicized Rwandanship” in practice acts to distinguish between Hutus and Tutsis, despite claims that “there is no Hutu, no Tutsi in Rwanda, only Rwandans.” While the government has worked to erase the words “Hutu” and “Tutsi” in the new Rwandan sociopolitical vocabulary, there is an astonishing contradiction in current government efforts to find a word or a phrase that emphasizes the 1994 events as the Tutsi Genocide, because it is believed that calling it the “Rwandan Genocide” is confusing and diminishing. Tutsis are often referred to as “survivors,” while Hutus are heavily associated with collective guilt, both inside and outside Rwanda. While Tutsi (and sometimes “moderate” Hutu) victims are honored and remembered, Hutu victims of the Rwandan conflict are not discussed.

The Rwandan justice system (including the quasi-traditional *Gacaca* system that deals with the overwhelming number of post-1994 prisoners suspected of involvement in the genocide) unflinchingly seeks to judge alleged Hutu killers and accomplices, but consistently turns a blind eye to the (still unqualified)

systematic killings of hundreds of thousands of Hutus. The system actually criminalises any attempts to highlight the imbalances in criminal and social justice, especially when the words Hutu and Tutsi are used to demonstrate the difference in consideration.

Unfortunately, the Rwandan regime has also managed to take hostage the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda based in Arusha, Tanzania, the functioning of which would be under threat if it even considered investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by any others aside from the currently alleged authors of the genocide. The Rwandan government threatens to stop cooperating should the tribunal pursue such investigations, despite its mandate to do so.

Imposed reconciliation (it is often unclear as to between whom this should be taking place) is based on an over-simplification of context, in which there are, on one side, [Tutsi] innocent victims and survivors of the genocide who must be looked after, and, on the other side, [Hutu] cold-blooded perpetrators. This is accompanied by a continuous and rigorous entrenchment of the victim mentality, and Rwandans are forced to agree with every policy of the government because it is “the only right way,” “unique to the Rwandan situation,” aimed at protecting them against “another possible genocide,” as is so often repeated.

Sadly, as Rwandans have no coherent version of their history, it is extremely difficult to understand the evolution of the Rwandan story, especially in terms of how citizenship will shape the future. History is being rewritten by the victors, erasing what was “known” before, and putting forward a new perspective. Glimpses of the current narrative show a total contradiction with what was taught before 1994. The contradictions are stark: where one speaks of three distinct ethnic groups sharing the same land over many centuries and eventually creating a nation, the other insists on three social classes distinguished by wealth. Where one speaks of slavery, the other speaks of sociocultural practices; where one speaks of Hutu revolution, the other tells of a popular uprising incited by colonialism; where one speaks of a referendum, the other suggests a colonial conspiracy to overthrow

the king. Even more recent events are intentionally distorted or diminished, such as the infamous 1994 missile attack on the presidential plane repeatedly referred to – and even taught – as a plane crash.

Yet, the astonishing shared aspect of the two versions of Rwandan history is the vigorous (and damaging) claim to *victimhood*. Every side (Hutu and Tutsi) wants history to make them victims of “the others,” to justify their subsequent reactions and absolve them of responsibility for their deeds. No one seems ready to reflect on their part in the course of events, which is precisely what a responsible citizen *should* do. Rwandans seem obsessed with the power of blaming, and constantly seek to sabotage the other. Rwandan society, then, is made up of those with no regard whatsoever for victims (and survivors) outside of the “official” narrative of the genocide (only a part of the long history of the Rwandan conflict), those who still shamelessly deny that the genocide ever took place, some who are totally indifferent, others who are passive by choice, and citizens who are constantly frustrated at being denied the space to reflect freely and participate in every aspect of their nation and national identity.

In Rwanda today, the lack of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly – prerequisites to a democracy – make this situation even worse. By the government’s definition, a “good citizen” passively adheres to the boundaries traced by the government in all aspects of life. There is no platform for criticism and/or alternative views. It is not allowed, for instance, to start this kind of debate at any level inside the country. Real citizenship is a taboo subject, implicitly rendered a serious criminal offense by those who define “citizenship” for the rest. Journalists, politicians, and others who choose to speak out are immediately labeled “genocidal ideologists,” and are often jailed or forced into exile. Non-Rwandans who criticize the regime are banned from entering the country.

There is no open political space. Political parties are forced [by the constitution] into a “consultative forum” which supposedly, among other responsibilities, “facilitates the exchange of ideas

by political organizations on major issues facing the country,” “advises on national policy,” acts as “mediator” in inter-party conflicts, and “assists in resolving” internal party conflicts; and by which decisions “shall always be taken by consensus of the constituent organizations.” Political debate – if it exists – happens behind closed doors, and the Rwandan people get only one perspective (that of the forum) and have no opportunity to comment or the right to criticize. This infamous forum was introduced in 1994 via the RPF Declaration, published after the RPF took power. It was later included in the constitution, and is now controlled by the party in power – the RPF.

Furthermore, while Rwanda has held “democratic” elections, political party activities in public are explicitly prohibited. During presidential elections, there are educated and duly trained “helpers” who stand with the voters to “help” them use the ballot paper correctly and enforce the use of fingerprints. It is, of course, common that these “helpers” force people to vote in a certain direction. For local elections, the candidates introduce themselves directly to the people in an open-air mass meeting, then stand in front while voters queue behind their candidate of “choice,” usually under the watchful eye of scattered military officers and government officials. These elections are proclaimed successful, free, and fair. The RPF inevitably wins in a landslide, the West applauds, and donors pour in more money.

Adding to this illusion, foreign visitors are shown tall, shiny buildings springing up along the clean streets of Kigali. Very few realize how much this spectacle is costing the Rwandan poor population. Those foreigners who do visit rural areas are often taken to a carefully-prepared show, where reality is disguised by a glossy exterior. Everything is hidden behind or justified by the 1994 genocide. The emotional tourists hear that there is unity, reconciliation, and democracy.

For Rwandan citizens, there is generally limited information about the intentions of the leadership of the state. The top-down management of all social and political policies and the active crafting of a new ideology stamped on everyone without distinction continue to strangle the already shy voice of young

Rwandans. The most vocal civil society movements are those concerned with the Tutsi victims and survivors of the 1994 genocide. Other issues go unchallenged, creating a perception of consensus and “evidence” of democracy and stability.

Youth are channeled onto a narrow path, with no chance to engage as citizens or challenge systems in which they find themselves. For example, all candidates of tertiary institutions are obliged attend the “Unity and Reconciliation” Camps, which focus on basic military and guerilla training, intensive ideological/political education, and the “correction” of history. There is no debate or discussion beyond a few questions from students (in full military uniform) to the carefully chosen presenters at the end of their usually exhaustive lectures. The sermon-like teachings pose that previous models were wrong, that what was taught in history is incorrect and dangerous.

In these camps, there is very little mention of national pride, and there is no space for alternative thinking. Further, there is no opportunity for participating youth to share experiences or their feelings about the past and the presented information. The state model is imposed as the only one supporting good governance and true reconciliation. In meetings where similar teachings take place for the general public, any “negative” comments or questions are followed by a now infamous reminder that all people knew before was to kill Tutsis or stand and do nothing. Rwandans sit and learn how to be “good citizens,” in what appears to be a massive brainwashing operation. According to the current government, only “negative forces” question the state position that Rwanda is on the way forward.

This is the climate in which young people in Rwanda grow up. Rwandans are forced to abandon an already fuzzy heritage and accept a carefully crafted perspective of history. Many people are now convinced that no good future can come without the tight control of the government, characterized by a heavy use of the army in the administration of the country. The pain of the past and unexplored feelings are continually and systematically suppressed, creating more anger and frustration. Human rights taken for granted elsewhere

are non-existent in Rwanda. This is a situation that alarmists would call a time-bomb.

## South Africa

Many Rwandans now live in exile. Those in South Africa can witness and admire elements of a democracy in the making: freedom of expression, independent media, freedom of assembly, healthy political activities, strong trade unions, functioning institutions, separation of powers, a wide and representative civil society, and a free and critical academic community, among others. All this is of course against the background of the fallout of the apartheid system, such as social and economic inequalities, poor education among many black people, and so forth.

Still, young South Africans often do not know or appreciate the value of the opportunities for citizenship available to them, compared to elsewhere on the continent. Despite the [reportedly under-performing though well-intentioned and resourced] Youth Commission, support initiatives, public and private sector opportunities, and many student financial aid systems such as the National Financial Aid Scheme, many young South Africans still complain about the lack of opportunities. Rural schools often suffer from neglect and there is a lack of information about opportunities after high school – leading to a lack of motivation on the part of students.

The current broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) system, which seeks to remedy the imbalances of the past, is essential to advancing effective transformation. However, the current model of the BEE is unfortunately often politicized, and its success largely debatable. To be politically correct is to approve of the BEE. More important, however, is maintaining high standards of integrity and transparency. Worse, overemphasis of or the prolongation of the BEE and similar systems may end up creating an excessive sense of entitlement among previously disadvantaged youth (an attitude that is already creeping up in some situations). Entitlement is a disempowering attitude. It can lead to resentment and does not inspire young people to take responsibility to be active citizens.

Still, there is no doubt that “South Africa for All” is a dream already proved feasible. A strong platform on which all South African citizens can move forward is already in place, and the way back is unlikely. Young South Africans must take hold of the opportunities already available to them.

## What Can Young Citizens Do?

Anywhere in the world, citizenship is essential to building a strong country. Where there is democracy or even the foundations of a democracy, decent citizenship implies awareness of one’s rights and responsibilities, and a patriotic exercise of these rights and responsibilities. In countries where there is no democracy, active citizenship may be more challenging, but still, good citizens keep alive a vision and hope for a better future.

Regardless of where young people find themselves, in a democracy or not, they can learn to practice good citizenship. In Rwanda, South Africa, or anywhere else, young people can be good citizens by taking on the following:

- **Consciousness of self worth in the national context and the value of individual input.** It becomes practically impossible for a young person to actively participate as a citizen when they think, “Who am I to change this or that?” To this the answer is, “If not you, then who? And if not now, when?” One must stand up to be counted.
- **Interest in current affairs and the condition of the country.** Young people should be aware of what is happening in their country or region, and, equally important, of why it is happening. They should ask, “What is my role in this? How is this affecting me, and what can I do about it?” Reading newspapers and magazines, watching the news, and listening to the radio all help young people to be informed. It is also important that they are concerned about what they learn and that they are proactive as citizens.
- **Interest in and knowledge of history.** Young people should know the history of their country,

not to fuel resentment over the past or to justify an attitude of victimhood or sense of entitlement, but to be able to put the present into context. This is essential for those who want to make a better future or correct a current course.

- **Refusal to place blame.** Personal empowerment is at stake when blame becomes one's only argument. Placing blame leads to not taking responsibility, not recognizing one's contributions to problems and solutions. Like victimhood, the attitude that it is the responsibility of others to address problems is the opposite of good citizenship.
- **Sense of purpose.** Finding the passion of good citizenship is not enough. Knowing what to do and how to do it is the key to success.

There are many practical ways to harness youth's sense of citizenship. Mentorship programs or public resource centers can help direct active citizens. It is not a lack of resources that is the problem, rather, it is not using what is already available to its full potential. All it takes is a clear goal and creative thinking.

Youth in Rwanda, South Africa, and elsewhere can benefit from active engagement with others in their communities. The following are a few examples:

- Successful businesspeople or politicians could inspire and encourage youth by dedicating one afternoon a month to mentor a young person and share their experience.
- Leadership training workshops and debate platforms can stimulate youth to interact with each other and with their broader societies. Such an initiative at the local level could go far toward showing young people that they have important contributions to make as citizens and would counter society's lack of faith in youth and consequent tendency to control them.
- Life skills trainings have benefits for individual young people as well as society as a whole; productive young people become the leaders of tomorrow.

- In countries where division and resentment have eroded the cohesion of society, it would be useful to have reconciliation workshops to let young people express their feelings and voluntarily offer their commitment to the country – instead of a forced process with hidden agendas.
- Entertainment events such as concerts can be a good way for getting out a message. For societies that have low literacy rates, this type of communication can be very effective.

Citizenship a personal, conscious choice. It is an advanced sense of belonging, concern, and gratitude. It is accompanied by a deep ownership of the life of a society or country. It can not be imposed or taken away by outsiders. It is a natural dimension of humanity. Furthermore, regardless of where a young person might live – in a democratic state or not – there are always opportunities to ask, “What is required of me, now? What is my role as a citizen?” Young people do not have to wait passively until they are “empowered;” they can actively make a decision to truly be citizens.

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*CIPE's 2007 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Pie-Pacifique Kabalira-Uwase's essay, which won an honorable mention in the 'Citizenship in a Democratic Society' category, was written in response to the question: What needs to be done to develop a sense of citizenship in young people and help them find their role in a democratic society? To learn more about the essay competition, visit [www.cipe.org/essay](http://www.cipe.org/essay).*

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