

# BOOK REVIEW

**Susan Thomson. *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace*.** New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. xv + 321 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Glossary. Index. \$30.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-300-19739-6.

In *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace*, Susan Thomson provides a critical examination of President Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) post-conflict reconstruction model. As an employee of the UNDP during Rwanda's 1994 genocide and a foremost expert on the country's politics, Thomson is particularly well-equipped to write this monograph. The wide scope of the book—from the colonial origins of the genocidal state to the possibilities of future violence—is testimony to Thomson's masterful knowledge of the country's many complexities.

Drawing on official reports, including the 1994 Gersony Report on the genocide, observations from several years of ethnographic fieldwork, and countless interviews with the elites who defend the Rwandan state as well as the ordinary citizens who feel trapped by it, Thomson provides a perspective that Kagame's supporters have largely missed. Far from being inclusive, she convincingly shows that Rwanda's rural majority has been left out of the RPF's vision of security, peace, development, and democracy.

The book is organized into four sections. Part I (Chapters 1–3) details the developments between the civil war and the genocide. Part II (Chapters 4–7) illuminates the particular ways in which the RPF sought to bring about peace in the wake of the genocide, prioritizing physical security above all else. As part of this goal, and so as to accommodate returnees from neighboring countries, the government uprooted hundreds of thousands of poor Rwandans from their homes. Officials also persuaded foreign donors to allow them to invade the DRC on “humanitarian grounds” (120) in order to prevent Laurent-Désiré Kabila from arming Rwandan Hutu rebels. Part III (Chapters 8–10) evaluates the Kagame regime's developmental priorities, including its aim to transform Rwanda into a middle-income country by 2020 as per its Vision 2020 program. Finally, Part IV (Chapters 9–10) highlights the contours of the post-genocide political system, a one-party state that so completely dominates the public and private lives of its citizens that it could only be threatened if an external actor similar in strength to the RPF insurgency were to enter the mix.

At its core, this book shows that the RPF's model for security, peace, development, and democracy is internally inconsistent. The regime maintains that peace can only be achieved via security, and that peace and security are both necessary for economic development. Yet, as Thomson argues, Rwanda's "precarious peace" is a coerced and patently negative peace, marked merely by an absence of active violence (199). Even more paradoxically, Kagame's "all hands on deck" approach to development has failed to produce results for the country's rural majority, who continue to struggle with economic insecurity (146).

In explaining these letdowns, Thomson highlights that Rwanda's elite rule-makers have little understanding of the lived, ground-level realities of ordinary citizens. Previous research, including Sara Jane Cooper-Knock's work on gender quotas ("Rwanda: Liberation by Numbers?" *Democracy in Africa* [5 April 2016]) has raised similar concerns. In spite of the fact that Rwanda's parliament boasts the highest number of female parliamentarians worldwide, the predominantly urban, Anglophone, and Tutsi women MPs have enacted few policies that actually benefit rural women. Rwanda's corruption-free reputation, moreover, hinges on an omnipresent state that empowers local officials to use discretion in providing social benefits, especially to poor and destitute citizens (153–54). Finally, while elites champion entrepreneurship, the state simultaneously treats ordinary Rwandans as children (152).

The book demonstrates that tensions are also rife in the RPF's proposed ideas about the relationship between development and democracy. For instance, few Rwandans in civic, academic, and student leadership positions have been able to escape RPF party membership (160). Furthermore, the country's 2003 elections took place with virtually no political competition (161). And while some international donors have recognized these realities, Rwanda has continued to be a donor darling. The book's concluding pages note that even after the 2015 referendum—which could potentially keep Kagame in power until 2034—in December 2016, the president stated that the RPF intends to rule until at least 2050 (254). Ultimately, then, the precarity of Rwanda's peace lies not so much in the uncertainty that could follow the end of Kagame's rule but in the unattainable goals, including the realization of upper middle-income status by 2050, that the regime has set for itself.

While the book mounts a compelling critique of the RPF's reconstruction model on several different fronts, Chapter 12, which discusses in part Kagame's use of doublespeak to inform citizens about what is expected of them, felt hurried. Thomson's previous work (*Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Postgenocide Rwanda* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013]), after all, has shown how ordinary Rwandans cautiously yet deliberately resist the state's efforts to interfere in their everyday lives. As such, this reader was left wanting to learn more about the conditions under which wordplay, as described in the book,

succeeds in generating obedience and the conditions under which it might fail to do so.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- King, Elisabeth. 2009. "From Data Problems to Data Points: Challenges and Opportunities of Research in Postgenocide Rwanda." *African Studies Review* 52 (3): 127–48. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0295>
- Matfess, Hilary. 2015. "Rwanda and Ethiopia: Developmental Authoritarianism and the New Politics of African Strong Men." *African Studies Review* 58 (2):181–204. doi: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/rwanda-and-ethiopia-developmental-authoritarianism-and-the-new-politics-of-african-strong-men/5F8AECD512D1A5B87B7A8F95A856C01C>
- Rettig, Max. 2008. "Gacaca: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Postconflict Rwanda?" *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 25–50. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0091>