

Rwanda's Role in an Emerging Africa and Uncertain World

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Paul Kagame

Dr Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to join you here today. I am happy to be back in an institution that encourages these important conversations.

Next year, the modern international system, which began with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, will be 70 years old.

Three generations after the horrendous destruction of the Second World War, we live in a world transformed for the better. The pace of economic and human development has never been so rapid, or touched so large a share of the world's people.

Some of the fastest gains are being recorded in East Africa, to which Rwanda belongs. In the region, we are responding with concrete steps to deepen our common market, and build the infrastructure we need to compete globally.

This progress comes, because accountable governance and free markets, increasingly allow the benefits of science and technology, to reach almost anyone on the globe.

The cooperation and partnership facilitated by the international institutions have continued to contribute greatly to these trends. There is, in short, a lot to be optimistic about.

So why, then, does the world seem to be spinning out of control?

The headlines have indeed been grim. But the accumulation of bad news, in and of itself, does not adequately explain the anxiety.

The world has always been turbulent and dangerous, much more so than it is today, in fact. But there was also a sense that frameworks were in place to address global challenges, however imperfectly. That confidence has been shaken.

For example, we have seen states collapse into violence, even though their success was a strategic priority for powerful members of the international community, as reflected in the tens of billions of dollars spent to build them up.

We have seen that peace, even in the heart of Europe, can no longer be taken for granted. If that is the case, then what other bedrock assumptions of the international order might be open to question?

We have seen that eliminating individual terrorists, or defeating terrorist organisations, does not signal the end of terrorist ideologies. On the contrary, terrorism has grown more decentralised, brutal, and transnational, with an increasing ability to capture the hearts and minds of youth, even in the most developed countries.

Even so, there is still sometimes a reluctance to label some terrorists as such, hampering coordinated action.

And now we see the panic of Ebola. For months, it was assumed that the outbreak would remain a local problem, as it always had in the past. Now, it is a global threat, and there is still lack of clarity as to how it will be brought under control.

With all this, it is no wonder that some commentators have gone so far as to question whether the global order is beginning to unravel.

I do not share this pessimism.

Today's turbulence is not really new, at least not for those of us, on what is still sometimes referred to as "the periphery". And international action has always been better at containing problems, than at solving them.

The falling cost of transportation and communication means that containment is no longer an option. A problem can arise in a small place, and quickly affect the entire world.

But solutions can also be found in such places, and go on to benefit others.

To make clear what I mean, allow me to say a few words about how Rwanda approached the task of rebuilding after the genocide in 1994, not only economically, but also, and actually more fundamentally, socially and politically.

Rwanda is always in the spotlight, because our tragic history became closely intertwined with the reputation of the international system itself. It is not only Rwandans who feel they have a stake in how our story is told. Sometimes, this results in an endless blame game about the past.

But more and more, we have seen that there is also a positive side to the scrutiny. It is helping to bring the story of Rwanda's recovery to wider attention, and generate curiosity to know more about how exactly we went about solving our problems.

Let's recall where it started. Two years after the genocide, more than two million Rwandans, among them many perpetrators, returned home to a deeply fractured nation. Living side by side with those who survived, the urgency of national reconciliation and justice was clear.

One million people lifted themselves out of poverty in a five-year period, and we now welcome more than a million visitors a year to our country. We offer universal health insurance, and have recorded the fastest ever declines in child and maternal mortality. Rwanda is also the fifth largest contributor of international peacekeeping.

But it is misleading to highlight such achievements on their own. For one thing, we still have a long way to go, compared to the goals we have set for ourselves. The bigger issue is that statistics do not convey the most important part of the story.

Rwanda's economic and social development is built on political development and strong institutions. We have emphasised the importance of consensus-building, national unity, and accountable public institutions.

A strong capacity for popular mobilization at all levels of society was also essential, as we worked to transform mindsets. Everyone matters. Each citizen needs to be convinced of the direction for change, and each one must be afforded the opportunity to offer input to the process.

In the late 1990s, a series of meetings were convened every Saturday in the president's office. The participants, included all political parties, even those who had a hand in the genocide, but also leaders from business, academia, civil society and the legal profession.

The task was to work out a consensus about the real historical causes of Rwanda's tragedy, and from there identify how to move forward.

It was here that some of the most important decisions that shaped the country were taken, after exhaustive and respectful debate, that lasted for more than a year.

The day after each session, a few participants would go on public radio to bring the discussion to the population at large. This helped Rwandans to see that there was a serious effort underway to resolve our problems, and encouraged public debate about matters that directly concerned them.

The Gacaca system we established to try genocide cases was able to hear two million over ten years. But before we got to the point of actually implementing the system, the idea was discussed extensively in different settings by a wide range of Rwandans, starting with these formal talks in 1998 and 1999. Meanwhile, this effort was opposed by outsiders even though they offered no alternatives.

At the same time, in the course of these discussions, the necessity to restore trust in public institutions and public servants became clearer than ever. Since then, the fight against corruption and abuse of office has been firm and consistent, to the extent that, at times, it even became a source of friction.

Well-organized political organizations are an important part of nation-building. The RPF and its coalition partners came to the table with a well-developed programme of action, derived from progressive ideals. But the outcome of these dialogues reflected a wide national consensus, not just our own.

It is sometimes said that Rwanda's economic and social achievements are somehow offset by a lack of democracy and popular voice. The truth is exactly the opposite. What is commonly perceived as Rwanda's biggest weakness, is actually its greatest strength.

We would have gotten no where without robust mechanisms that enabled major changes, based on popular participation.

Inclusive politics and accountable governance are the reasons why Rwanda is not just secure, but stable. They explain why external financing for Rwanda's public institutions produces measureable development results, year after year.

They explain why Rwandans express high levels of trust and satisfaction with the quality of governance in independent surveys.

And just as crucially for a society that was as divided as ours, Rwandans increasingly trust each other. Back in 2007, a Gallup survey found that 36% of Rwandans believed a stranger would be likely to return a lost wallet to its owner. And 88% believed that a neighbour or a police officer would do so. These were some of the highest rates recorded in that survey.

Rwanda's successful Eurobond offering in London last year showed that the trust Rwandans express, is shared in financial markets, as well. It is a key component of our economic growth and investment strategy.

As Rwandans travel and get connected through ICTs, the world's curiosity about Rwanda, is being matched by Rwandans' curiosity about the world. And we are finding that our country's story means something positive to people, beyond Rwanda. We are no longer just the country of Genocide; perhaps we even have something to offer, as a nation, to others.

There are no shortcuts. Nation-building, by definition, cannot be externally-led. The solutions that Rwandans developed through consultation, cannot just be transposed elsewhere. Neither can the solutions that other nations, poor and rich, big and small, have used to achieve success at nationhood, at various times in their history.

But without greater understanding of the political and institutional basis for resolving the problems of social cohesion and public trust, we, meaning all of us, will continue to struggle to find our way through this period of global uncertainty.

Rwanda's history has taught us how fragile the foundation of human flourishing can be. As a small country, in a turbulent region, which is also an integral part of a rapidly changing world, our national interest lies in making our best contribution, alongside others.

Thank you.

