

Understanding the Polarization of Responses to Genocidal Violence in Rwanda

av

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Abstract

Theogene Bangwanubusa (2009). *Understanding the Polarization of Responses to Genocidal Violence*. Doctoral dissertation, Peace and Development Research, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Övre Husargatan 36, Box 700, SE 405 30, Göteborg, Sweden.

ISBN: 978-91-628-7974-7

<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/21376>

This doctoral dissertation is concerned with identifying factors that are important in explaining popular support for genocidal violence in Rwanda. It focuses on former communes, Giti and Murambi, to investigate why Giti successfully resisted the genocidal violence, while Murambi fell prey to large-scale violence. It addresses the question of why such a phenomenon could occur, given that Giti and Murambi were allegedly homogenous on cultural and socio-economic grounds.

The theoretical standpoint, according to which there is interplay between the top leaders, middle-range leaders and the grassroots leadership, to bring about social change, was empirically supported. Moreover, there is strong recognition that the middle-range level of leadership remains the most important catalyst for engaging the common citizenry in both peaceful and violent processes. The empirical findings establish that both the genocide, and the absence of genocidal violence, were attributable to actions of the then burgomasters (local leaders). In this respect, the study highlights a historical aspect of the non-violence and violence, respectively, in Giti and Murambi, identified to be the result of alternatively efficient and inefficient leadership. Efficiency and inefficiency were understood as an indication of a gap between the central and the local institutions that also depended upon how strong was the political network of the top-level of leadership. Therefore, the response to genocidal violence was strongly linked to the strength of the political network. Referring to a weak political network, the case of Giti showed that the top-down style of command does not necessarily translate the will of the elite and, hence, of the common citizenry under their leadership. In this respect, the study highlights the crucial role that the informal elite played, particularly in Giti, to translate this will.

The pattern of popular behavior in Giti led to the conclusion that vertical powers between the intermediate leaders and the common citizenry are a necessary condition for popular support, but are not of themselves sufficient. To expect popular support, the empirical findings established, grassroots thinking is a strong base from which ordinary people might transform into violent or non-violent agents. Grassroots thinking drove the perceptions and a set of shared beliefs about the 'other' until it led to the dichotomy of identity into 'us' and 'them' (or polarized ethnic relations) in Murambi, and to the mixed ethnic relations in Giti. As a result of popular support, the material showed that the middle-range leadership had ascendancy over the common citizenry with which it identified. This was an indication of a meeting point between the middle-range leaders and the common citizenry, whereby a minimum level of shared grassroots thinking drives the interactions in a mutually accepted direction.

Keywords: Popular support, Obedience, Genocidal violence, Grassroots thinking, Elite, Informal elite, Social power, Ordinary people, War-displaced people, Immigration, Social taboo, Social pact, Mixed ethnic relations