Africa: Rwanda and Burundi in comparative perspective

Convener: Dr Benjamin Chemouni, bc500@cam.ac.uk

Lectures: Thursday, weeks 3-8, 14:00–15:00, Alison Richard Building, Room SG1
(24 October, 31 October, 07 November, 14 November, 21 November, 28 November)

Course description

This module aims to give students an understanding of state formation, identity politics, economic development and political evolution in Rwanda and Burundi.

These two countries constitute rich cases for comparative analysis given their many shared characteristics and key differences in their trajectories. Often referred to as “false twins” in the literature, the neighbouring countries are of comparable size and have similar ethnic make-up. Ruling over a densely populated territory, their pre and post-colonial states have had significant infrastructural power reaching deep down into society through densely stratified administrative structures. Rwanda and Burundi were part of the same administrative unit during Belgian colonial rule. Since independence, they both have experienced recurrent ethnic violence that resulted in the civil war in Burundi (1993-2005) and the civil war and genocide in Rwanda (1990-1994). Both countries are currently headed by rebellions-turned-ruling-parties.

At the same time, they bear significant differences. The salience of pre-colonial, and colonial ethnic identities in the two countries differed significantly. These identities produced different paths to independence that had lasting implications in the post-colonial era. Both states were ethnically dominated by a particular group, yet in an opposite manner. The Tutsi minority dominated the state apparatus in Burundi while it was the Hutu majority in Rwanda up until the 1990s. After the war, a symmetrical shift occurred: Rwanda became ruled by a Tutsi-led party and Burundi by a Hutu-led one. Yet, while ethnicity has been a significant factor underpinning political processes, it has not been the only one. Class and regional identities have also played an important role in the history of both countries.

Since the end of conflict, Rwanda and Burundi have also followed markedly different political, social, and economic trajectories. Rwanda has embraced an ambitious developmental agenda underpinned by a high modernist social engineering project while the government in Burundi has not engaged in such a transformative path. In terms of identity politics, the regimes have followed opposite approaches as well: Burundi has recognised ethnic identities as an integral part of formal powersharing institutions, while the government of Rwanda has promoted the disappearance of ethnic categories from the public sphere.

This module will provide students with a firm empirical grasp of these countries’ trajectory and contemporary politics. It will prompt students to engage with challenging and timely political questions: How might the different understanding of ethnicity have influenced
political competition over-time, and vice versa? How can we explain the resemblance and divergence of state formation process in Rwanda and Burundi? How can we understand the differences between each country’s developmental project after the war? To what extent the nature of each rebellion turned ruling party, and their respective ideology, can explain current politics?

**Supervisions**

There will be two supervisions for this module. The first question corresponds with the first three lectures, and the second with the last three. The two supervision questions are:

1. To what extent the colonial experience can explain cycles of violence in Rwanda and Burundi until today?
2. To what extent the nature of the rebellion that captured power after the war and the genocide can explain differences between Rwanda and Burundi’s trajectory?

**Readings**

Students are encouraged to skim through the general readings to get an overview of this module’s two case studies: Rwanda and Burundi. Weekly readings are divided in essential and additional readings. Essential readings are compulsory as they give the necessary context to the lectures and the basic information to answer the supervision questions. The additional readings provide further information to students to answer the supervision questions and might be referred to in the lecture.

**General background reading:**

Kimonyo, Jean-Paul. 2019 *Transforming Rwanda: Challenges on the Road to Reconstruction*. Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner. (book mainly centred on the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)’s efforts to rebuild the state. Good section on the history of the RPF.).


**Lecture 1: Pre-colonial and colonial rule**

**Essential readings:**


Additional readings:


Background readings on pre-colonial history


Lecture 2: state and nation formation after independence

Essential readings:

Desrosiers, Marie-Eve. 2014. « Rethinking Political Rhetoric and Authority during Rwanda’s First and Second Republics ». *Africa* 84(2): 199-225.


Additional readings:

Lecture 3: Mass violence and reconciliation

Essential readings:


Additional readings:


Lecture 4 : Post-conflict developmental ambitions

Core readings


**Additional readings:**


**Lecture 5: State and Politics**

**Core readings**


Additional readings:


Lecture 6: Longue durée and political agency: making sense of Rwanda and Burundi today

Core readings:


Additional readings:


