Africa: Rwanda and Burundi in comparative perspective

Lecturer and supervisor: Devon E. A. Curtis, dc403@cam.ac.uk
Office hours: please email me for a virtual meeting

Note: All lectures and the seminar will be online.

Course description

Rwanda and Burundi. In contrast to their larger neighbours, these two small countries in the Great Lakes region of Africa do not always receive much attention from outsiders. When they do, they are often viewed through the lens of genocide and mass atrocities. Studying Rwanda and Burundi certainly provides us with insights about the use of violence in politics, but the two countries also elucidate a number of other themes in comparative politics, including state formation, identity politics, governance and economic development. In some ways the experiences of Burundi and Rwanda challenge dominant theories of comparative politics and open up new theoretical angles and concepts.

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 violence, expressed ethnically, 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 former rebel parties.

At the same time, Rwanda and Burundi 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. Until the 1990s, the Tutsi minority dominated the state apparatus in Burundi while it was the Hutu majority that dominated in Rwanda. 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 engage with challenging and timely political questions:
How did different understandings of ethnicity influence 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 are current governance practices in the
two countries related to the ideologies of the former rebels who are now the rulers? What are
the lasting effects of political memory?

**Supervisions and Seminar**

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

The **two supervision questions** are:

1.  Was mass violence in Burundi and Rwanda the result of state strength or state
   weakness?
2.  To what extent is ethnic identity a relevant feature of post-conflict economic and
   political life in Burundi and Rwanda?

**Seminar discussion (see readings at the end of the guide):**

**How do political memories and scholarship shape contemporary politics in Burundi and
Rwanda?** (on zoom- please sure you can put on your computer camera and mic)

Group 1, Monday Nov 23, 3-5pm
Group 2, Tuesday Nov 24, 10-12
Group 3, Tuesday Nov 24, 3-5pm

**Readings:**

Readings are divided into core and additional readings. Core readings provide the necessary
context to the lectures and basic information for the supervision questions. The additional
readings provide further information, which you can select depending on your interests.

**General background reading (core readings- but you can skim through them):**

(covers Burundi’s history from independence until the civil war).

Publishers (mostly about the Rwandan genocide).

**Additional general readings:**

history of gendered violence in Burundi, focusing especially on 1993-2005)


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


**Lecture 1: Pre-colonial and colonial structures of political authority**

**Core readings:**


**Additional readings:**


**Lecture 2: State and nation formation after independence**

**Core readings:**


**Additional readings:**


**Lecture 3: Democratisation, identities and mass violence**
Core readings:


Additional readings:


Lecture 4: Post-conflict governance and identity

Core readings


Additional readings:


Antoine Kaburahe, Hutsi: In the Name of us all, Editions Iwacu 2019. (a personal account)


Lecture 5: Post-conflict economic trajectories and international involvement

Core readings


Additional readings:


Mann, Laura and Marie Berry. 2016. ‘Understanding the Political Motivations That Shape Rwanda’s Emergent Developmental State’ New Political Economy 21(1): 119-44.


Seminar: How do political memories and scholarship shape contemporary politics in Burundi and Rwanda?

Please read the following items before the seminar. After you have done the readings, please write two questions or observations that have been sparked by one or more of the readings. Please email these to me (dc403@cam.ac.uk) at least 24 hours before your seminar.


Seminars (on zoom)- please ensure you can put on your computer camera and that the mic is working
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