Africa: Rwanda and Burundi in comparative perspective

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Module 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, often 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 adopted 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. What was the role of ethnicity in state formation in Burundi and Rwanda?
2. What explains the differences in Rwanda and Burundi’s post-war political and economic governance?

Seminar discussion (see readings at the end of the guide)
How do political memories shape contemporary politics in Burundi and Rwanda?

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- these are very detailed, but you can skim through them):


Additional general readings:


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, political parties, identity**

**Core readings**


**Additional readings:**


Stef Vandeginste (2009), ‘Power-sharing, conflict and transition in Burundi: twenty years of trial and error’ *Africa Spectrum* 44(3), 63-86.


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:


**Seminar: How do political memories 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.


