

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Citizenship, Political Violence,  
and Democratization in Africa



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The denial of full citizenship rights to selected individuals and groups in Africa has triggered political violence. In many instances, these conflicts have slowed down the democratization process, which is essential for pulling Africa out of poverty and placing it more firmly on the path of stability and sustainable development. This failure to democratize has implications for national, regional, and global governance.

During the current wave of democratization, incumbents bent on prolonging their stay in power have used exclusionary notions of citizenship to bar their most challenging rivals from the electoral process. The best-known examples of this practice are the disqualification of former president Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and former prime minister Alassane Dramane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire from presidential elections in 1996 and 2000, respectively. Because one was a founding father and the other had served as head of government under the venerable Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the incumbent regimes felt compelled to resort to constitutional gymnastics to justify their political exclusion on the basis of citizenship.

In the Zambian case, that Kaunda's parents had migrated from Malawi when both countries were British colonies was held against him. Because his parents were not indigenous to Zambia, he was prohibited from running for a presidential seat that he had occupied for twenty-seven years (1964–1991).<sup>1</sup> The Ivorians were more sophisticated in their legal arguments. Conscious of the legal complexities of indigeneity in a territorial entity whose political boundaries had shifted and that was home to millions of immigrants, they excluded Ouattara from the presidential race not because he was not a citizen or had dual nationality, but on the grounds that he had in the past "availed himself of another nationality" by carrying a diplomatic passport from Burkina Faso.

The violent repercussions of these politically motivated acts of exclusion are well known. State repression of Kaunda's supporters and the general climate of violence resulted in numerous deaths, including that of the son of a former president. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ouattara's exclusion led to the boycott of presidential elections by his political party and to acts of ethnic cleansing on both sides of the political/religious divide between southerners and northerners and between Christians and Muslims. The crisis has escalated to full-scale civil war, whose solution is being sought through the involvement of peacekeeping forces from France, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the United Nations.

More detrimental to democratization than the reluctance of incumbents to leave office is the political manipulation of exclusionary notions of citizenship, reinforced by competition over scarce resources and socioeconomic opportunities in crisis situations. Two of the most compelling cases in this regard, which also present a regional and global challenge, are the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and ethnic cleansing in Mobutu's Zaïre in 1992–1994.

In the case of Rwanda, the Hutu Power regime originally established on the basis of the anti-Tutsi pogrom of 1959 had consistently discriminated against the minority Tutsi since independence in 1962. The Tutsi in Rwanda were denied their full citizenship rights, and those in exile in Uganda, Congo, Tanzania, and elsewhere were denied their right of return to Rwanda. Under the leadership of Tutsi exiles in Uganda, some of whom were prominent members of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) and the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) launched a military campaign against Kigali in October 1990. Regional and pan-African efforts to end the resulting civil war culminated in the Arusha Accords of 1993, which provided for power sharing between the incumbent Hutu regime, the Tutsi-dominated RPF, and moderate Hutu.

Radically opposed to this accord, Hutu Power extremists in the government did their best to undermine it. Their hate propaganda in favor of keeping Rwanda as a Hutu republic in which the Tutsi had no full citizenship rights, combined with a situation of worsening economic conditions, triggered genocide. David Newbury has identified two major and interrelated variables that contributed to violence. The first was the drastic fall in the world market price of coffee—the country's main export—which deepened the economic crisis and increased the number of jobless. The second was the increasingly large number of unemployed young men in both the modern and traditional economic sectors. In the modern sector, educational opportunities and jobs were limited.

In the traditional sector, land scarcity and the lack of money made it difficult, if not impossible, for young men to establish themselves as land-owning farmers and thus meet the customary requirements for marriage.<sup>2</sup> With nothing to do and no hope for the future, Tutsi youths joined the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) in Uganda, whereas the more numerous Hutu youths were vulnerable to the anti-Tutsi propaganda and many joined the regime's death squads.

The genocide was planned and carried out by state agencies, including paramilitary groups like the Interahamwe. It was presented in official propaganda as a civic duty against outsiders. According to Philip Gourevitch, "The work of the killers was not regarded as a crime in Rwanda; it was effectively the law of the land, and every citizen was responsible for its administration."<sup>3</sup> Those targeted for death were not perceived as citizens—in fact, they were not even seen as human. Demonizing the targets of ethnic cleansing and genocide allows the perpetrators to feel justified in that those being cleansed or killed are "insects" or "cockroaches" rather than human beings.<sup>4</sup>

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the denial of Congolese citizenship to peoples of Rwandan origin was closely linked to both the steady influx of Hutu and Tutsi as a result of the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda and Burundi and to the competition with the original inhabitants over land and other economic opportunities. Migrations from Rwanda to the DRC have been taking place for centuries. With great social mobility and strong solidarity among them, Rwandan immigrants succeeded in acquiring wealth and power, to the detriment of the indigenous peoples, particularly around Masisi in North Kivu.

National resentment led to the 1981 nationality law, which repealed Mobutu's presidential decree of 1972 granting Congolese citizenship to all immigrants from Rwanda and Burundi who had lived in what is now the DRC since 1950. Mobutu and his cronies then manipulated the anti-Rwandan feelings in eastern Congo to inspire ethnic cleansing in North Kivu in 1993 and the attempted expulsion of the Congolese Tutsi known as Banyamulenge in 1996. Rwanda viewed this as an opportunity to wage war in the DRC in 1996 and 1998, on the grounds of "preventing another genocide." In fact, the 1996 war was aimed at destroying the Hutu refugee camps in North and South Kivu, which served as bases for the army of the ancien régime and the Interahamwe. The 1998 war, on the other hand, was a war of partition and plunder for which the security of Rwanda and Uganda served only as a pretext for the invaders.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, ethnic cleansing in Katanga also had its roots in the greater social mobility and prosperity of migrants from Kasai in comparison to Katangans. Although no one disputed that both groups were

Congolese, advocates of the “authentic Katangans” had since 1958 maintained that the riches of the province ought to first and foremost be enjoyed by the sons and daughters of the soil of Katanga, thus privileging them over other Congolese. In 1992–1994, the Mobutu regime sought to exploit anti-Kasaïan feelings to divide and weaken the democratic movement. The result was massive ethnic cleansing; approximately a million Kasaïans were expelled from cities and towns where their families had lived since the early twentieth century.

More numerous than ethnic wars are cases of intercommunal violence that involve the denial of full citizenship rights to minorities. Like violent conflicts at the provincial and national levels, intercommunal violence has an adverse impact on the democratization process. The development of genuinely democratic local governance and the nurturing of a democratic culture of participation, tolerance, respect for diversity, and equity are impeded drastically without full citizenship rights for all residents.

Much of the violence stems from identity-based conflicts between different groups (national, religious, regional, ethnic) or ethnic fractions (such as lineages or clans) over the control of economic, political, or social space. The bone of contention is access to land or other resources, and so these confrontations are exacerbated by the growing poverty of ordinary Africans and the state’s declining capacities. Territorial disputes keep multiplying, particularly between pastoralists and agriculturalists and in areas where communal boundaries are either too difficult to establish or are contested.

Most cases of intercommunal violence in Africa involve nationals of the same country, but there are also clashes between nationals and foreign workers or refugees who are deemed to enjoy fewer rights than citizens. In January 2002, for example, police and soldiers were sent into the Joe Slovo residential area in Milnerton, South Africa, to end fighting between locals and Angolan refugees.<sup>6</sup> The locals’ grievance against the refugees—which is repeated all over Africa—was the perception that “foreigners were stealing their women and their jobs.” In this case, the foreigners had the full weight of international law behind them as legally registered refugees. One Angolan cut to the heart of the exclusion: “We are here legally and we have rights as refugees to work to support ourselves and our families.” They were not South African citizens, but they clearly had rights as refugees that were ignored.

Within some countries, the assertion of full citizenship rights by minorities has also triggered rebellions against dominant interests or groups. The ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta, who have been subjugated by the Nigerian state and such transnational oil giants as Shell,

Chevron, and Mobil, are a prominent illustration. The military rulers concentrated on oil exploitation to the detriment of other sectors of the economy—over 90 percent of Nigerian export revenues were derived from oil. The billions of petrodollars have not benefited the ordinary people of the area from which this wealth is extracted. In addition to remaining mired in poverty, they are prevented from enjoying even their pre-oil standard of living because of the resultant air, water, and land pollution. As one Ijaw community leader told a reporter from the Associated Press, “We, the owners of the Niger Delta have become its slaves. . . . We are oppressed, so we don’t mind fighting to the last woman or man alive.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, instead of making common cause against their oppressors, minorities frequently end up killing each other in endless quarrels over local resources.

With respect to fighting dominant groups within a country, the best example is the conflict between Nigeria’s indigenous minorities of the Middle Belt region and the dominant Hausa-Fulani group.<sup>8</sup> Much of the violence that has occurred in this area since 1999 has been portrayed as religious hostility between Christians and Muslims. However, this is a surface manifestation of a much deeper cleavage between the minorities, who embraced Christianity under colonialism as a way of marking their cultural differences with the mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulani. The controversial imposition of the *sharia* by the governors of the northern states clearly violates the rights of the Christians; nevertheless most of today’s conflicts are over the distribution of political power and resources.

There are also cases of intercommunal violence arising from quarrels about land and chieftaincy rights. The key factor is identity construction, with the group who has rights to land and power being considered as freeborn and indigenous to the territory in dispute, whereas the group denied full citizenship rights is said to be originally made up of migrants or slaves. The Ife-Modakeke conflict in southwestern Nigeria and the Dagomba-Kokomba conflict in northern Ghana fall into this category.<sup>9</sup> Because community land rights are entrusted to traditional rulers as representatives of ancestors, the recognition of chieftaincy titles in areas where two or more groups compete for land has been a major source of conflict. In the Ife-Modakeke case, the fact that both groups are ethnically Yoruba has not prevented the conflict from becoming violent nor from becoming vulnerable to political manipulation by rival political candidates in the Osun State.

These and similar confrontations revolve around the full exercise of citizenship and its implications for contemporary economic and political life. In such cases, marginalized peoples fight for a group’s right to emancipate itself from social relations of bondage from the precolonial

and colonial pasts. The creation of separate chiefdoms or local government councils and the granting of land rights to hitherto landless groups is a possible solution. Setting aside the question of the validity of designating groups as former slaves versus free people, or strangers versus *indigènes*, there is no reason why people who have resided in an area for decades, and sometimes for a century or more, should be denied economic and political rights on the basis of politically opportunistic definitions of citizenship.

The UN has not yet codified the rights of indigenous people to hold on to their ancestral lands, but this should not prevent states from taking measures to institutionalize the peaceful resolution of conflicting claims and interests. More important, they should ensure the political and economic rights of minorities in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. 🌐

## Notes

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1. Opponents of the then incumbent president, Frederick Chiluba, argued that he too should be disqualified, since his father was allegedly a Congolese.

2. David Newbury, "Understanding Genocide," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 1 (April 1998): 73–97.

3. Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1998), p. 123.

4. In Katanga, the Kasaians were called *bilulu* (insects) in Kiswahili; and in Rwanda, the Tutsi were known as *inyenzi* (cockroaches) in Kinyarwanda.

5. For the background to both wars, see Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 215–240. On the plunder of Congo by both the invaders and Congo's allies in the war that began in 1998, see United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2003/1027 (23 October 2003).

6. *Cape Argus* (Cape Town), 4 January 2002, available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200201040006.html>.

7. Glenn McKenzie, "Nigerian Oil Dispute Threatens Vote," Associated Press, 19 February 1999, available online at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

8. For a comprehensive look at intercommunal violence in Nigeria, see Onigu Otite and Isaac Olawale Albert, eds., *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management, Resolution and Transformation* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books for

Academic Associates Peaceworks, 1999); and Rotimi T. Suberu, *Ethnic Minority Conflicts and Governance in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1996).

9. On the Ife-Modakeke conflict, see Isaac Olawale Albert, "Ife-Modakeke Crisis," in Otite and Albert, *Community Conflicts in Nigeria*, pp. 142–183. Information on the Dagomba-Kokomba conflict was obtained in March 1999 in Accra, Ghana, during a preparatory consultation for International IDEA, "Enhancing National Capacity for Conflict Management in West Africa."

