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On Leadership
Rwanda's president leads an inspiring turn-around

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President Paul Kagame invited Nicolas Sarkozy to Kigali last week. This was the first visit by a French president to Rwanda in a quarter-century. It comes just months after Rwanda joined the United Kingdom's Commonwealth of Nations and confirmed it would no longer use French as the main language in its primary schools, thus making a clear break with its Francophone past. As President Kagame has said, "Sometimes, the best strategy is reconciling what others believe are opposites."

Kagame's critics say that he foments the war in Eastern Congo and suppresses opposition parties. These views are inconsistent with so much about Kagame, and their attributions strike me as caricature constructed out of a collage of past African autocrats. I have known President Kagame since 2000 and seen him succeed where so many other leaders have failed. I find him to be as inflexible as a Jesuit on moral principles, even as he is open-minded and creative on tactics.

He applies this strategic, contrarian attitude to the environment, justice and economics; but in a very specific way. Paul Kagame builds modern institutions on top of traditional values.

Everywhere you stand in Kigali provides a long view of a peripatetic group of Africans, cooking fires, farm animals, and small, expertly cultivated farm plots, an immaculate nation. There isn't a mango peel on the roads. The president made the importation of plastic bags illegal; he wants clean streets, and the bags are not biodegradable.

The last Saturday morning of each month, bus service is suspended and businesses close. All citizens, irrespective of class, gender and including the president himself, sweep the area in front of their homes. The tradition is called [Umuganda](#), and means, "We work together."

In the aftermath of the genocide, modern courts were incapable of handling the hundreds of thousands of perpetrators. International legal advisers were flummoxed. Kagame introduced the traditional [Gacaca system](#) to give the perpetrators of the genocide the opportunity to tell the truth and ask the community for forgiveness.

President Kagame even asked those who took farms from killers who fled to return them. Some say they will because the president asked them to do so; others say they will because God would not have spared them from the genocide to do otherwise.

The economy was a priority from day one. The economy shrunk for five years before the genocide. The president explained to me, "When economic scarcity occurs, human values deteriorate: with poverty comes mistrust, impatience, and intolerance."

Many international advisers told him that exporting green coffee was impossible because the Vietnamese and Brazilians were flooding the market, and Rwanda's logistics made it hard to compete. Still, there were 500,000 subsistence farmers whose traditions and lives would be ruined if Rwanda gave up on coffee. Kagame decided that Rwanda would invest in washing stations, advanced transportation logistics, and new distribution relationships. Recently, they exported some of the finest coffee in the world to Costco and Starbucks.

His own tourism operators insisted that he lower the price of admission to the game parks to compete with the Kenyans. Kagame, instead, raised prices to attract only the world's best tourists, and then built roads, lodges and invested in guides so they could create a one of a kind experience.

The facts speak for themselves: The economy has grown at an average of 8 percent since 2001, grew at 11.2 percent in 2008, and around 7 percent in the throes of 2009. More important, wages in these sectors increased by up to 30 percent each of the last nine years.

Kagame remembered his own situation in 1994 and didn't wait for the industrialized nations to move. He made Rwanda the first country to send peace keepers to Darfur. Working side by side, many of the Rwandan soldiers are children of either perpetrators or victims of the genocide. Kagame understands the implicit power of his successes; he told the Kenyans when that nation was tearing itself apart, "A responsible army will not tolerate another genocide," and fighting ceased.

Rwanda is one of the few nations in the developing world spending more on education than on the military. Kagame re-wrote the constitution such that his party cannot have more than 50 percent of the seats in parliament. Though Kagame is from one ethnic group, his Prime Minister and 70 percent of his cabinet are from the other. Thirty percent of elected officials at the level of municipality, parliament, and cabinet are required to be women; and a world-leading 56 percent of parliament is now women. The country is secure and [the World Bank's Doing Business report recognized Rwanda](#) as the greatest reforming nation in the world last year.

Nelson Mandela will go down in history for his capacity to forgive and work with his oppressors. Nyerere was a genius who built great social schemes while translating Shakespeare into Swahili. Kagame might find his place in history next to the Saint and Scholar. Ever the strategist, this contrarian is building a modern society on traditional values, and welcoming the French back into the heart of Anglophone Africa.

By Michael Fairbanks

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