

**The specificity of Rwanda's democracy**  
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## **1. Introduction**

A number of authors have described Rwanda's democracy not as a fashionable democracy but a consensual, representative and inclusive democracy, providing different fora for discussions and dialogue and striving for development of all without distinction. The specificity of Rwandan democracy has been profusely discussed in the National Consultative Forum of Political Organizations and in many more national and global fora that it is no longer necessary to demonstrate it. Therefore, I will base my reflection on the premise that Rwanda has a specific democracy sustaining its visionary leadership.

## **2. Democracy and the people.**

There are usually two ways to look at democracy. Either from above or from below... It is argued that in a complex society, representative democracy is a critical way of translating the ideal democracy into practical institutions. However, a second conception of democracy has influenced both ideals and their practical realization: direct or participatory democracy in which citizens are directly involved in different ways shaping public policy and its implementation.

Direct citizen participation in democracy takes many different forms including, not exhaustively,

- **referendum** which assumes that professional politicians are likely to be beholden to special interests and ordinary people are in a better position to vote for public interest;
- (ii) **public issue campaigns** where citizens mobilize petitions and other means of communication to express their views on specific issues;
- (iii) **social protests**, rallies and demonstrations, sometimes expressed under form of civil disobedience causing disruption and disorder to

- demonstrate seriousness of commitment of a particular constituency and exert pressure to politicians to take action;
- (iv) and, finally, “**empowered participatory governance**” where some government activities are delegated to decentralized bodies in which citizens directly participate in decision making<sup>i</sup>. This is a form of bringing people inside of the decision making process of government in a regular and on-going way.

If and when the center is cognizant of the importance of **democracy from below**, they need to give the community “time and resources to organize itself and to create a representative community organization”<sup>ii</sup>.

In this form of empowered participatory democracy from below, to forge effective partnership, the community must be organized well enough to be an equal partner at the table, not just a junior partner. It must participate out of strength, so that it can pursue its own agenda and not be suffocated by the agenda of others<sup>iii</sup>.

### **3. How does Rwanda grasp democracy from below?**

Rwanda’s pragmatic and deliberate choice has been democracy from below. Rwanda has always involved people in democratic choices. Its approach to power exercise has always involved people’s say. The Rwandan decentralization policy is very eloquent and specific in this sense where it states that the policy prime objective is “*to enhance and sustain citizens’ participation in initiating, making, implementing, monitoring and evaluating decisions and plans that affect them by transferring power, authority and resources from central to local government and lower levels, and ensuring that all levels have adequate capacities and motivations to promote genuine participation*”<sup>iv</sup>.

While exercising their participatory rights, periodic consultations have been carried out in the aftermath of genocide against Tutsi, during which more often than not, people showed that they did not want to return to the kind of political contestations that they believed had played a role in facilitating a conducive environment for genocide. Instead, they opted for a kind of politics where power is shared and exercised in a non-confrontational way. They thus created a specific contour of democratic power exercise, where everything else came to reinforce these aspirations.

#### **4. Africa and the world: what model of democracy to emulate?**

The African democratic context, and even more at a global scale, shows little or no sign of the above organic character to democracy: building a home-grown political dispensation that responds to the aspirations of the people. It has been argued that genocide against the Tutsi became a determinant of this specific shape of democracy as, without the total destruction, it is unlikely that such democratic exercise would exist under today's form where it has a meaning for the ordinary person.

But we must admit that genocide is not the reason why the model works in Rwanda. It works because of another very important tenet: accountability. This is the corner stone of the exercise of political power in Rwanda. There would be no democracy to speak of outside the boundaries of accountability.

Paradoxically, in some of the Western (so called mature democracies!) cherished forms of democracy in Africa, accountability is a vain concept. Collective interest is superseded by individual gains and state property often mistaken for the office holder's. Rwanda does not pretend to be a model of democracy, neither should it embrace blindly any other so called model.

An ardent defender of African independence, President Kagame pointed out that there is no single model for nation-building and that at the root of any success are good choices: *"Every African country has to contend with [external] efforts to force us to live on someone else's terms. They demand that we replace systems that are working well for us with dogmas in which their own people are rapidly losing faith."*<sup>v</sup>

#### **5. The Rwandan democratic bedrock**

Political power – held by the ruling party and the opposition in coalition – is expressed through consensus. These two more tenets – power sharing and consensus - are provided for in the Constitution (*Article 62 and Article 10 respectively*) and institutions such as the National Consultative Forum of Political Organizations have been established as platforms to entrench the practice of these tenets<sup>vi</sup>.

Rwandan democracy is based on strong values including first and foremost patriotism which from time immemorial binds together Rwandans, protecting

their security, total dedication to the national cause and natural resources protection. Colonization, post-independence regime policies and the dominance of western culture in Rwanda did not much erode patriotism and heroism as far Rwanda is concerned. [...] Patriotism involves morality and loyalty; these are individually driven and shaped. None can be said to be born a patriot, he learns and grows to be that patriot, and the true sense is that it comes much from him rather than from propaganda. He values what he sees and believes and therefore vows to preserve and protect them passionately<sup>vii</sup>. These values have since been revived by Itorero (National Civic Education Commission) and regain a new momentum as driver of public dispensation.

It goes without saying that the corollary is collective responsibility, putting to account leaders and enhancing trust in the leadership and government systems. Putting collective interest over individual ones also is part of the deliberate effort to cater for the citizen before preserving individual gains.

Despite the people being circumspect after the collapse of the failed leadership of 1994 that perpetrated the genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda has opted to remain with a multi-party democratic system. Once again it was about putting the principles of power-sharing and political competition in the hands of the people. The current electoral system provides for regulations reinforcing political independence; the latter, otherwise, must be pervasive and permanent in all political decisions.

Putting citizens first, ensuring equity and overwhelming participation is a citizen's right and duty, it also instills ownership. This calls for constant large consultations and consensus before taking decisions. It has also been an act of faith that development will be sustainable when backed by Rwandan cultural values (home-grown solutions) which often have helped solving problems where other conventional methods had failed: *Inkiko-Gacaca*, *Umuwuny*, *Imihigo*, *Umuganda...*, to name but a few. This will go with an obligation of good neighborliness in mutual respect, always securing the national interests.

## **6. Democracy from below and civil society**

Civil society is often understood as voluntary action and participation through sensitizing citizens and channeling their voice into the system of

political representation<sup>viii</sup>. This is in line with mainstream political thinking, when discussing representation in parliaments and direct participation of citizens as mutually exclusive alternative modes of democratic legitimacy (Held, 1987<sup>ix</sup>; Plorke, 1997<sup>x</sup>). A trend in political systems in the West takes the civil society as the real representative of the people today deserting more and more the political arena.

Many insist also on democratic division of labour between institutional and non-institutional actors (Habermas, 1996<sup>xi</sup>). Civil society is also considered empirically to act as opponents of the elected representatives by mobilizing direct voice of citizens from outside or from below (Tilly, 2004<sup>xii</sup>).

Leaving to civil society its subsidiary role, Rwanda decided direct empowerment of the people, thus “enabling them to make decisions on issues affecting their welfare and mobilizing them to participate in affairs affecting them in a two pronged approach: one, sensitizing the citizens on their rights to participate, and two, mobilizing and obligating local government leadership to create conducive environment for citizen’s participation, dialogue and accepting criticism”.<sup>xiii</sup>

## 7. Democracy from below

Studies have proved that purely institutional approaches seem insufficient for facing the collective problems. Yet localized and purely grassroots initiatives do not seem to have either enough potency to trigger change. Drawing from works of renowned scholars, there is evidence that strategies for solving problems need to be diversified, because social innovation solutions at the local scale depends on resources that are both local and extra-local (Oosterlynck et al. 2013<sup>xiv</sup>). In this context, as existing studies have stressed (Eizaguirre et al. 2012<sup>xv</sup>), **a bottom-linked democratic perspective appears to hold promise.**

This approach recognizes *‘the centrality of initiatives taken by those immediately concerned, but stresses the necessity of institutions that would enable, gear or sustain such initiatives through sound, regulated and lasting practices and clearer citizen rights guaranteed by a democratic state-functioning’* (Moulaert et al. 2010: 9<sup>xvi</sup>). That is to say, a bottom-linked

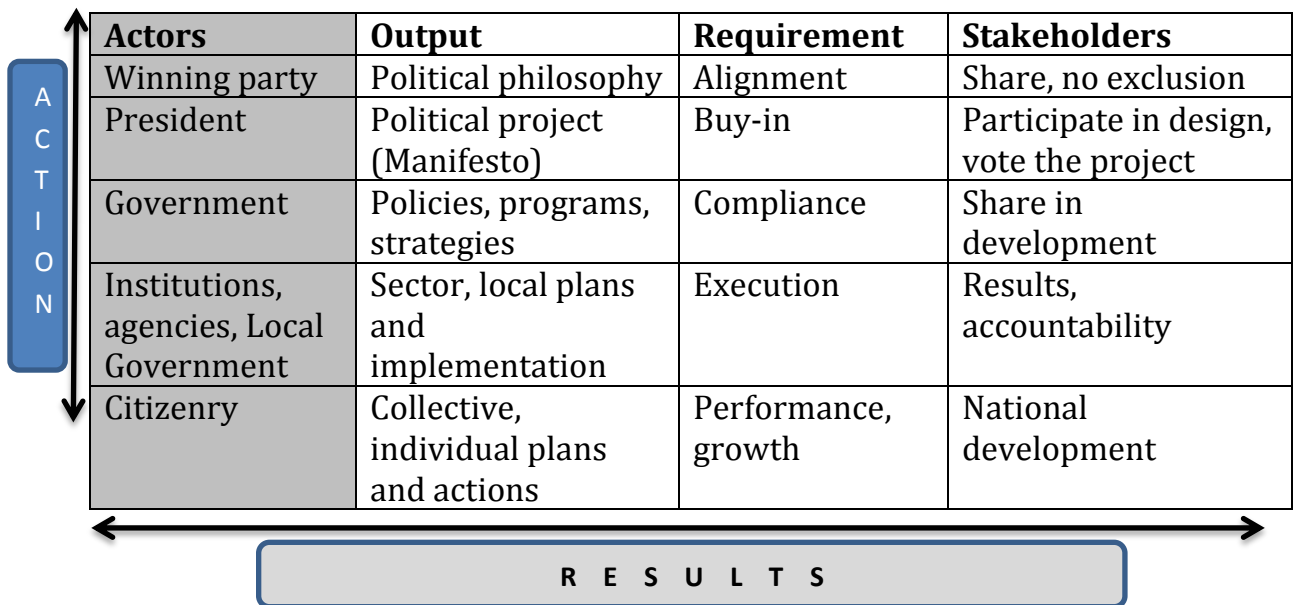
perspective stresses the importance of initiatives that combine both social and institutional innovation; initiatives that emerge at a community level, from below, but are linked to higher-level public institutions that enable them to be effective and scalable.

### 8. Rwandan specific democracy in action

The Rwandan political philosophy puts it that, in ancient times as well as it is today, one becomes a leader through the people’s choice, you serve the people and you give them strength and sense without which the people becomes helpless<sup>xvii</sup>...”*leadership is about results, it’s about problem solving and of course it’s about people because it’s people that produce leaders....*” (Paul KAGAME: Kigali, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

Walking the talk, Rwanda gave a large priority to the people in building a democratic leadership from below. An illustrative chart depicts the inextricable relationships between the Rwandan leadership and people:

#### Rwanda: People-centered democratic construct



### 9. A brief explanation.

The Constitution of Rwanda advocates total inclusion of all citizens to share resources and power. In case of political competition, even those who have lost elections are entitled to a piece of the cake. Shunning the sacrosanct

principle of *“the winner takes it all”*, Rwanda elegantly enshrined in its Constitution the contrary: *“the winner shares with all”*.

In a Rwanda multi-party system environment, parties enter in competition either stand-alone or in coalition. Initially, the winning party has its own political philosophy embedded into its constitution voted by party members.

Through different mechanisms, the party designates a candidate in elections, who in turn presents his/her political project or Manifesto. Very particular for Rwanda, this proposal is not the product of the candidate’s political party technicians in offices; rather, it derives from the aspirations of the party members from below in a large participative exercise.

Once the Manifesto has been bought in by voting citizens at large, it gives birth to the Government program, policies and strategies reflecting the very aspirations of the citizens. The program is then broken down into sectoral, local plans and these are implemented, always with participation of the people who have the ability to put their leaders to account in case of non-performance. Citizens collectively subscribe to the plans and get involved in the execution, which enhances ownership positively influencing performance, growth and national development.

## **10. Conclusion**

Many of the aspects described above are unique to Rwanda. This was once again driven by the sense of “the right to error” which was rather very high in the genocide aftermath, as systems were first tried out on the field below, before developing them into theoretical concepts to be disseminated across the country. Failures were recorded but corrected and adapted to prove successful in the long run. The system that saw the day in Rwanda is today still performing and is emulated by numerous foreign countries.

Putting the democratic power in the hands of the people who only two decades ago were lured into the destruction of their own country was a challenge. Yet it proved that there is reason to believe that looking at democracy from below, where the democratic exercise is conducted is most rewarding. This is the main aspect of Rwanda’s democratic specificity.

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