The Rwanda-Uganda Border Closure: When Love Turns to Hate...and Rebels Become Tyrants

Well into its fourth week, the bewildering showdown between Rwanda President Paul Kagame and his Ugandan counterpart, Yoweri Museveni, had predictably produced a heart-rending headline. The news reports said that a woman several months pregnant, an Elizabeth Mukarugwiza, had been chased across the border from Rwanda into Uganda by either the Rwandan army or police.

Eye-witness reports said that Ms. Mukarugwiza, 37, just about beat the Rwandan security to the border. Whatever it was had driven her, and we can only speculate (a prenatal visit to a clinic?), would have been that urgent. Had this episode occurred inside Rwanda itself, what happened next would not have been reported. Were we to hear of it, it would have come as rumor, a thing said of a closed country that without voices or images to back it up, quickly loses steam.

Take the story of three sisters:

As reported in The Observer newspaper, the sisters, daughters of a pastor Deo Nyirigira who lives in Mbarara in Western Uganda, had completed their studies at Ugandan universities and then returned to find work in Kigali. Their father, part of the group extruded from Rwanda in the 1959 upheaval that brought Paul Kagame himself to Uganda, had one time returned to the country after the genocide. After only a handful of years, Mr. Nyirigira realised that he could no longer live in his country. For a second time, he left Rwanda for Uganda. Given his influence as a pastor, the authorities in Kigali grew weary of him and wanted him back. Attempts at kidnapping him are said to have led to the shooting death of one of the suspected Rwandan kidnap squad.

Eyewitness reports said that Ms. Mukarugwiza, 37, just about beat the Rwandan security to the border. Whatever it was that had driven her, we can only speculate that it had been urgent (a prenatal visit to a clinic, perhaps?). Had this episode occurred inside Rwanda itself, what happened next would not have been reported. Were we to hear of it, it would have come as rumour – a thing that quickly loses steam without voices or images to back it up.
Back in Rwanda, and back in the present, with the rise in political tensions now, Mr. Nyirigira’s daughters, because the government could not touch their father, have reportedly been stripped of their jobs. In Rwanda, children may be punished for the infractions of parents; in the worst of times, the unborn were not spared either. One sister was already married with a child. The husband was ordered to divorce her. It was when their father sent them sustenance money that they were apparently taken into custody. But we hear of these events secondhand.

The fate of Ms. Mukarugwiza too would have been rumor were it not for the Ugandan media. But alas, escaping the Rwandan forces counted for naught. No sooner had Ms. Mukarugwiza made it across the border than she collapsed and died, she and her unborn baby.

A moment crackling with significance; there you had the picture, shared across social media, of what appear to be two Red Cross responders, white latex gloved hands, stooped forms, shocked, horrified faces wanting to have a look. The body covered in red, green, then blue and red Maasai blankets. The scene is slopping ground, a wooded glen, heavy jackets giving an idea of altitude and weather. Armed men hounded the expectant mother to death; just like in a gothic, B Movie, the fetus must not be born. It was as if 1994 were reclaiming the soul of Rwanda.

Trying to see it from the perspective of a Rwandan, to not miss-judge the act, however carking, was hard, the central question refusing to go away; in what way does the death of a pregnant woman contribute to the greater good of Rwanda? At 37, Ms. Mukarugwiza would have left behind other children. They will remember, so does that now make them targets to a regime that lives in fear of its victims? (“He who kills Brutus but does not kill the sons of Brutus,” a researcher once quoted the mantra to me). How many times in that country was it justified by saying that the child will be born an enemy? Too rebarbative to contain, and yet human sacrifice, after thousands of years, has still not lost its repugnance. Fascism, the conclusion went, had sunk deep roots into Rwanda, its president, irretrievably fallen to the dark side.

**Ugly underbelly**

The one link I could use to comprehend what happened to Ms. Mukarugwiza was two decades out of date. The first and last time I was in Rwanda, a few years after the genocide, was March 2003. The first thing I did in Kigali was look up my old
classmates who had returned home post-1994. But the once humble, amiable schoolboys of the late 80s and early 90s, I failed to find in the men they had become. In turns brash, and rude, then commanding, suddenly distant, then calm, then uncommunicative, their mercurial, unstable character had caught me off guard in 2003. I took it with whatever fortitude I could muster at that age, rationalizing that few peoples had endured what the Rwandans had gone through.

But for a few years after that, and already disabused of my then, post-genocide, World Bank-sponsored naivety, garnished with western media manufactured facts about post-genocide Rwanda, I paid closer attention. I tried my best not to fall into the binary, this side good, that side bad routine. I read into each report, into each TV segment, the calamitous shift in the character of my old school friends. It was as if once you had seen into peoples’ souls, no mere shift in ideology nor mass media spin, can fool you.

We were not many in the newsroom, so on top of my other beats, I was dispatched to northern Uganda countless times where I spent time with refugees. Covering Rwanda and Congo was one of the most upsetting times of my career as a reporter. The end of the genocide had been heralded as a grand moment, yet in many respects, it signaled the beginning of other horrible events.

And then I paid too much attention. The years starting from 2003 would culminate with my departure from the media in 2006. They were the years of the unravelling of whatever post-Mobutu hiatus might have been in Congo. Congolese refugees were streaming out in all directions. And it seemed back then that the region was on fire. One of the worst massacres in the northern Uganda war came in that span of time. Sudan had just concluded its penultimate, bloody stage of civil war. Garang died in a plane crash. Back then, being a reporter meant that by default, you were a war reporter.

We were not many in the newsroom, so on top of my other beats, I was dispatched to northern Uganda countless times. I spent time with refugees. Of Rwanda and Congo, there began one of the most upsetting times of my career as a reporter. The ending of the genocide had been heralded as the grand moment. In many respects, it had been the beginning of the worst. In testimony after testimony, I heard something else besides what was said of the region. I was cruelly
disillusioned about where this region would end up. I met the ugly underbelly of what was a disturbing, ethno-racial war. The silence of guns, if that ever came, would mean this zero-sum war being fought by other means.

We were all in it, Uganda, Rwanda, Congo, Burundi, so that events in any part of Congo would have meaning in all four countries. Those stocking the flames of the northern Uganda war saw it as a continuum for the outcomes in Rwanda, Eastern Congo, etc. How, as a reporter taught to not identify subjects by race or ethnicity do you approach that without also withholding the truth from the public? Calculating that if the combatants and their invidious backers in Kampala, Kigali and who knows which other cities quietly believed in their own ethnic superiority, why should the rest of us watching in confusion not know their full intentions?

Because Rwanda could rely on it, it took Uganda’s friendship for granted. However, by 2017 something had gone amiss. Kigali, it seemed, had overstepped its boundaries by interfering with the power dynamics of Uganda at a sensitive time when Museveni was struggling to assert his power.

It is one thing to fight a war of self-defense. It is another to wage a war of hegemonic ambition. The one is understandable; the other is a crime. I went for it. I reported what was a parallel, darker narrative to the sanitised news routine; the common approach was not courageous enough to tell the truth; rather than tell the world what accounted for the blinding human cruelty being meted out for what the perpetrators saw as payment for past ethnic traumas, it endlessly asked in faux naïveté, why people could be so inhuman.

The backlash

It was then the backlash started. The war may have been in Congo, but doors began to be shut in my face in government offices in Kampala. Shielding behind media ignorance and international lack of curiosity had enabled them wage wars in four countries with the comfort that the usual tropes of reporting Africa would shield them. The furiousness with which the reactions came left me stunned. I began to hear of the moves to get rid of me from the newspaper long before it happened.

Back in the day, the newspaper I worked for had yearly run country supplements of Rwanda. After a series of stories, on the troubles in Eastern Congo, the
supplement hung in balance, the expected hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising threatened. As a reporter who may never earn that much money over a career, there is not much choice between your journalism and a paper merchant’s profits. I recollect the hostility at the paper itself, the kvetching from advertising salesmen who saw my reporting as financially ruinous. My notebooks disappeared. Journalist colleagues whose relationships to Kigali you had taken as a joke, took on a different character. Kagame’s reach, we understood, was everywhere, and newspaper offices are great places to plant eyes and ears. The failure of my paper to stand by me as a reporter, and the increasing telephone harassment, plus the decision I was reaching to become a full-time writer, led me quit the media. If your editor and publisher cannot stand by you, there is little you can do about such matters.

I got busy finding ways of being a writer, including spending 3 years in Kenya. Rwanda receded from my mind. But I had gained a further insight. Legitimate, even useful scrutiny, let alone criticism, is not allowed in Rwanda, even if its well-meant. I immediately understood that Kigali’s temper tantrums would ensure that Kagame never ran out of enemies. Seeing enemies everywhere you look is not great leadership. There is a psychological term for it. I had not learnt anything new, really. I had merely joined the ranks of those familiar with the ugliness of our region’s politics, the people who expect any day to have to run into exile. I was not in bad company. I calmed down and moved on.

Till October 2017. That month, the big story (the month before Museveni had trashed the parliament) was that five Ugandan police officers had been arrested for the kidnap and extra-judicial deportation of Rwanda dissidents.

You had to have followed Rwanda closely enough, or been to school with some of the characters close to the show to have understood what that headline meant. There had always been much talk about the vaunted Rwandan security and intelligence, of their capacities and determination. I had always doubted that, particularly after enduring run-ins with a handful of them and taking note of how amateurish they were. I had also been in class with some, and they were not what you may describe as top of the class, as it were. They are good when you don’t fight back. When you do, they do precisely what Kagame has done; draw down the barricades and get nasty. Closer to the truth was that Rwanda is too small a country for others to spend energy worrying about. Some residual sympathy had perhaps led others to look the other way. It wasn’t that they were better; it was
that others were benevolent towards them.

**Toxic anger**

I doubted that when it came to it, Rwanda could match the intelligence capabilities of say South Africa. Or Uganda, when it came to it. Slinking about dark corners and spiking people’s tea, sticking knives into “enemies” is one thing. The net effect is to get you marked out as evil and untrustworthy. It is another to have the economic and diplomatic clout of countries dramatically bigger like South Africa, or even small ones like Uganda whose economy you actually depend on. The problem of toxic anger the junta is afflicted with means they fail to tell friend from foe.

Because it could rely on it, Kigali took Uganda for granted. Either way, by 2017 something had gone wrong enough. Kigali, it seemed, had overstepped its bounds at last. You easily guessed that they had interfered with the power dynamics of Uganda. At such a sensitive time over his hold on to power, Mr. Museveni would have been unhappy.

*This unease is to the extent that nearly everyone – not just politicians, lawyers and journalists, but even mobile money booth owners – is afraid to receive phone calls, especially from strangers, but also from anybody who is not an immediate family member. Friends are now suspecting friends. Like Rwanda, Uganda is an overripe boil.*

We still do not know the full details of the matter. But former Inspector General of Police, Gen Kale Kayihura, perhaps the most unqualified man to have ever held the post, was said to have inadvisedly played a role in the matter, as rumor had it, getting too close to the Rwandans. His erratic behaviour in 2017 may now be clearer in hindsight. In effect, the general had appointed himself the government of Uganda, making the kinds of commands way beyond his ken, as if he had become prime minister, speaker of parliament, chief justice and chief executioner. Not even president Museveni exercised that much authority. It remained for even his boss to join the dots, follow the lines linking him with Rwandan high command to smell something off. What did a police inspector need a political base for; why did he need a foreign policy? Was CID so inadequate that he had to have his own intelligence network? The drama of Kayihura’s downfall added to the political unease in Uganda.
We live in a state of fear. Phone calls bring unease; who might be listening, who is reading the emails? Friends suspect friends; colleagues in offices are unsure of each other. Like Rwanda, Uganda is an overripe boil. Rwanda appears to be falling over the cliff first. We are not far behind.

The central charge against the five officers, and which charge in reverse facsimile ricocheted from Kigali as “Uganda detaining Rwandan citizens without charge” – Kagame’s primary casus belli, was that they were arresting and extra judicially deporting Rwandan dissidents. 

For over two decades, Mr. Kagame had won wars in which the other side was not really shooting back, and waging undeclared espionage wars others weren’t too interested in. The risk of going too far was always there, of waking up governments with vaster reach and resources.

And that is what has happened. The blowback started in South Africa. We do not as yet know the extent of this drama unfolding in Uganda, but the alacrity with which Kigali reacted (remember the adage – whatever you do, don’t make any sudden moves) would seem to indicate that the Ugandans knew exactly where to go and which tender spots to touch. By barricading himself and the people he leads in, a move with serious repercussions, no matter which way this story heads, Mr. Kagame has betrayed his state of mind. What he has done is beyond serious. He has drawn unkind attention from the world, who read in this move, not sophistication, leadership, cool-headedness, but cruelty. It behooves a leader not a drop of good to be seen as cruel. It’s not the time to build walls, or close borders with countries to north and south of your country. You remind the world of what and who it wants to forget.

That’s the wider world for starts. In East Africa, this has drawn the scrutiny of people in Kenya and Tanzania for whom Rwanda was far away, a country to be sympathized with. The interruption of regional trade is touching constituents that once could be counted upon to remain distant and unconcerned which way things happened over there. In Uganda itself, Kagame’s action is bringing up sentiments that had plateaued into disinterest. It has also curiously given Mr. Museveni some boost of badly needed sympathy in Uganda. It’s a strange thing, nationalism. Now some of Mr. Museveni’s opponents suddenly understand that it is okay for them to criticize him; they don’t like it that much when a foreign president does the same. Kagame is attacking, not just the Museveni government, but their Museveni.
We can’t tell how it’s going down inside Rwanda itself. But there, the issues are immediate. Rwanda needs Uganda for education, for health, for food more than Uganda needs Rwanda. The drama has been coloured by stories, such as that of the three sisters, whose lives have been imperiled by the closure of borders.

Then, in the middle of it, word came that Mr. Kagame had also closed the border with Burundi.

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Whichever way these reactions go, it is still early days, the opening pages of a book of raw emotions. The real story is still to hit its stride. Part of the reason we cannot tell where it will end is because we may be too horrified to begin thinking of it.

**Rwanda’s relationship with Uganda**

But do we not lose perspective by getting caught up in the moment of the drama? Do we care enough to know the story of Rwanda?

Rwanda’s relationship with Uganda is centuries old. As with the current character of Uganda, the bits of the ancient story we understand start with the narrative of the ancient empire of Bunyoro-Kitara, when at the height of inter-Africa migrations, peoples ran into each other. Scars from the dim mists of time fester today, with broad implications for inter-ethnic divisions in Uganda and beyond. The peoples of Rwanda-Burundi, including bits of Eastern Congo, played parts in the stories of the formation of Ugandan kingdoms, and they did not emerge winners. But that is ancient history. Of immediate relevance is how Rwandans ended up living in Uganda in such numbers.

The colonial wars that the British fought in Uganda were some of the most serious in the region, along with the wars the Germans brought to Central Tanzania. By the 1920s, it is reported, the population of Uganda had been growing negatively
for three decades. The religion-inflected civil wars in Buganda (which were actually class wars), the Bunyoro genocide, the wars of conquest in the East and North, and the collapse of pre-colonial medicine, along with the interruption of agriculture, more Ugandans had died than were born for close to three decades.

Nothing new; all of it very British. They simply did not care that black people were dying because of their imperial strategies. It is what they did in the Americas, in Australia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, etc. Hence, the introduction of the cash crop economy foundered under severe shortage of labour. The British actively encouraged immigration from Belgian holdings. There are dramatic pictures taken at the time of the way stations doling food, medicine and shelter along the migration route from the Rwandan border into central Uganda. Shirtless, barefoot Rwandans, their beddings rolled up on their heads, are captured in grainy images making the two week walk from the border to central Uganda.

Writing in his book, Kampala-Uganda in 1951, the late American anthropologist, Edwin S. Munger, who died in 2010, wrote that “For thirty years, the principle labor (sic) migration route has been that travelled by the Banyruanda and Barundi from the Belgian mandates into Buganda. Historically, Ruanda-Urundi’s high, steep-sided hills have produced more people than food to feed them. In many years the issue was blunt: go or starve...a carryover from the old days of hardship is the attitude in Ruanda-Urundi that one mark of manhood is a trip to Uganda. The traditions of battling with lions and elephants, of fighting bandits, living off the country, and surviving where many died still give the emigrant prestige on his return home.”

The image in Uganda from the 1920s onwards of Rwandans and Burundians (the difference was subsumed under the generic “Banyarwanda”) that emerged was unfortunate and unfair. Xenophobia in Uganda, particularly in Buganda, served to see these immigrants not as victims of cruel colonialism as the Ugandans themselves were, but as peripatetic, woebegone itinerants who worked for a meal. There were many eager to blend in, to become integrated, if only to avoid the unkind stereotype.

Life in Belgian territories was unpleasant, even by the unpleasant standards of colonialism. Arriving in late colonial Uganda, with somewhat better amenities, was for other reasons beside just food and work. “Perhaps here is partial confirmation of the physical hardships of the route from Ruanda-Urundi to Mengo
(now greater Kampala) District,” Munger goes on. “Whole wards of Barundi and Banyaruanda are hospitalised with tuberculosis and general malnutrition.”

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Particularly in the metropolitan Buganda, where a mix of aristocratic and racial hierarchy (not unknown in Rwanda) had created a caste system under the British, the immigrants, penniless and ill, were despised, and the timidity this produced is to be found today, three generations later. And as Munger notes, intermarriage tended to happen mostly at the social margins, because the Rwandans (and the women later followed the men), meant lower dowries demanded at nuptials.

The Buganda government, under the indirect colonial rule which left it in charge of broad swathes of its subjects, viewed the arrivals ambivalently. They were refugees; they were badly needed labour. After a few years, the Kabaka’s government began to tax them as its other subjects, a tacit act of admission. Those who could, integrated swiftly, taking on new identities and names.

The more urgent immigration into Uganda, of Rwandans and Burundians, was yet to come. But it resulted in a multi-layered extra-Rwandan diaspora. There are the integrated, who bare Ugandan names, have Ugandan parentage and are largely unhappy about the way the later immigrants served to tarnish their image, to say nothing of complicating hard-won relationships.

Amongst those that broke off from the Ugandan army and returned to Rwanda, the spearhead group were not from this earlier exodus. This group of latter immigrants came in 1959.

Throughout, the Ugandans had not behaved well towards their guests. The country had not come without its share of pain. The love was not bottomless. And today, the integration is so profound that any Ugandan saying anything anti-Rwanda, may well be insulting a grandmother. They had learnt that not being
accepted was not the worst that can happen. Keep your head down and blend in. Loss of identity was not the worst. And the worst did come. The 1959 migrants did not keep their heads down. The entire region paid a steep price for their indiscretion.

The second wave of migration and its consequences

With agricultural reform, by chiefly terracing the hills to stem soil erosion, the Belgians had managed to rein in famine in Rwanda. But the Belgians had ruled by *divide et impera*, elevating to the dangerous levels of ethnicity, what some have described as a class system, “Hutu” and “Tutsi”. They had favoured the “Tutsi”, for much of their colonial rule, with the “Hutu” treated as underdogs, who for instance were not allowed to acquire higher learning. By the racist means of the time, anthropologists and sociologists had said were non-African, non-negroid. But it was a difficult question. Nazi conquest and racial theory was so repugnant that the Belgians themselves abandoned the racialist bifurcation of their Rwanda-Burundi colony. Unfortunately, rather than create a level, unifying policy, they started to favour the Hutu instead. So that when it came, they handed over independence to the majority Hutu.

Almost immediately, the Hutu began to persecute the Tutsi. And it this crisis that led to the second wave of migration, in 1959. They were a different group now, not really peasant, but with a grudge in their hearts. In Uganda, Mr. Museveni recruited many from this group into his rebel army that fought against the Obote II government in the early 1980s. When Museveni overthrow the sclerotic Tito Okello junta that had itself overthrown the Obote government just six months early in 1985, he appointed many Rwandan refugees into government and the army. There was uproar in Uganda over the inclusion of foreigners in sensitive positions. Kagame himself had been head of a spy agency in Uganda.

Under pressure from Ugandans, Mr. Museveni understood he had to let them go. Hence, when they broke away in 1990, after helping set fire to Uganda, there was something of doom about it. They clearly weren’t coming back. But the worst was at the other end. Much as it has always been said that Mr. Paul Kagame, who inherited leadership of the Rwanda Patriotic Army rebel group after the death of its leader, Fred Rwigyema. After four years of fighting, which started in 1990, hardliner Hutu leadership unleashed the 1994 genocide. The militarization of politics in Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Congo, has meant that the four
countries have been in one form of warfare or the other for nearly 60 years.

The matrix of governing a country with sharp divides, and doing it by force, is not one that Mr. Kagame’s temperament seems suited for. It may be gratifying to defeat your enemies. But you have to be a Nelson Mandela to win them over. You must win them over, for these conflicts are circuitous. Soon the other side can, and will, rise to power. It’s a question of time.

Increasingly intolerant governments have characterised Uganda and Rwanda, at a time when all over the continent, countries are settling down to stable governance. What is the point? What plans do Messrs. Museveni and Kagame have this region? Much as it is clear to all who pay attention that the unfortunate weaponising of ethnicity has perhaps trapped both men in power, it is still puzzling because there seems to be no end game in sight, except endless corruption and more militarization, which will require even more corruption to maintain the patronage system, and more militarization to fend off the disaffected. We have become trapped in a loop without exits. Decades ago, the citizens waited patiently because it seemed that real change could come. But if after these many years a pregnant woman has to sneak across a border, that begs the question, as Oliver Cromwell once asked of the British Parliament; have you not sat here too long for any good you can have done?

Shutting down the border is symbolic of the increasing pointlessness of the two regimes.

They came into power at the time that the cold war was ending. The period of rapid coups and countercoups in Africa, funded by the rival capitalist and communist power blocs ended then, with the result that whoever had been in power at that time, tended to remain so for a bit longer. Put simply, the power balance that might have kept the two men honest was not there. Crucially then, these quakes we now feel in Uganda and Rwanda, are not casual. They are the deep rumblings from shifting global tectonic power plates. In the past, when they were at loggerheads, the British Foreign Secretaries jetted in to knock their heads together. Agony “Aunts” Lynda Chalker and Claire Short, British ministers of the 1990s and 00s, would have been here already. But the British now have their hands full back home, and need benevolent foreign secretaries to go knock their heads together, enduring the cruel reversal of the foreign policy technique they so perfected, of keeping countries they wished to rule at each other’s
The absence of steadying British and American hands right now, in this conflict, has exposed the lack of political and management skills in Kigali and in Kampala. It has exposed the fact that Uganda and Rwanda have for decades now been run as client states. In the absence of the Anglo-Saxon *power-meisters*, Museveni and Kagame are learning cruelly the difference between monkey and organ grinder. It is left to the East African Community states, Tanzania and Kenya, to try and sort the situation out. But it takes a fool to bet on that strategy working. Twice, first in 1985, then in 1994, both Kenya and Tanzania attempted to sort political problems in Uganda and Rwanda out. But the rebel leaders then merely inked their names to agreements reached in Nairobi and Arusha, whilst using the interim to move their forces closer to the capitals. With spectacular disasters. Those rebels? They are now called President Museveni and President Kagame.

How does that now happen? Did Nairobi and Dar es Salaam ever forgive the slight? Do they trust the two men? But, that is the wrong question. The question is, what power backdrop are the two men now banking on? If we can answer that question, maybe we can predict how they plan to plunge us into new rounds of war. Global power dynamics have eroded the neoliberal economic system they had learnt to game. What is emerging now requires skills beyond wearing military fatigues and firing AK 47s at target boards.