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**Project Report: Backfire Theory and the Rwandan Genocide**

*Invisible Insights*, 24 October 1998, p.13

**Massacres Backfire in Rwanda**

By Hum N. Tarian

It has been four years since 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans were murdered by their friends and neighbors and finally, retributive justice is imminent. This week, in the small highland town of Nyamata, six prisoners were publicly executed, reaffirming the legitimacy of the UN war tribunal initiated four years ago. All six were charged with crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity, but had been living at home since their sentencing. The execution, the first of its kind, shows that the murderous actions of Hutu citizens have finally backfired against individual attackers.<sup>1</sup> The process of backfire, however, has been happening since the murderous pogrom began in early 1994.<sup>2</sup>

The backfire framework, as used by nonviolent scholars such as Gene Sharp and Brian Martin, is an excellent tool for the analysis of violence and violent regimes. The two most important conditions for backfire are the perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences, both of which are satisfied by the Rwanda case.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article, having taken place in 1998, lacks the knowledge of further hindsight. In fact, this execution was the only of its type to take place in Nyamata and therefore only personally backfired against the six executed here. The rest on “death row” in Nyamata are either still sitting in jail or have since been released. Information on justice proceedings from Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, New York; Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Backfire as an end in itself is distinguished from the process of backfire. An action can still be analyzed according to the backfire framework as long as some of the five methods of inhibiting outrage apply. In the case of Rwanda, however, both types of backfire are present.

<sup>3</sup> Two conditions taken from Brian Martin, Iraq attack backfire, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 16, April 2004, pp.1577-1583.

A perception of injustice is automatic when 800,000 people of the same ethnic group are systematically killed at the same time<sup>4</sup> and international communication imminent when killings are of this scale.<sup>5</sup> The precise motivations for backfire, however, are represented by the actor's use of five criteria that inhibit outrage, the first of which is an attempt to cover up the action.<sup>6</sup>

Hutu officials covered up details of the civil war and genocide simply by not talking about them. Information regarding the assassinations of President Juvenal Habyarimana and Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana are still kept from public knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Secrecy is strong in a culture of fear, and many internal sources would rather die than release crucial war secrets.

The second criterion is devaluation of the target, which took place via domestically broadcasted Hutu propaganda against the Tutsi minority. The radio station RTLM and Newspaper Kangura ran discriminatory stories on Hutu Power and the broadcasted the call of all Hutus to "defend your rights and rise up against those who want to oppress you," often referring to Tutsis as "devils" and an "alien race".<sup>8</sup> This blatant propaganda infuriated the international community when it was leaked to the public in 1995, invigorating the global backlash.

National and local Hutu governmental officials, the leaders of genocidal action in Rwanda, also reinterpreted the action through propaganda, claiming the massacres were an "inevitable excess of a war situation". This reinterpretation is the third method for

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<sup>4</sup> Death tolls are from Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge; University Press, 2002. Other figures include 500,000 Tutsi and 50,000 Hutu (UN Commission of Experts), 657,000 combined deaths (Human Rights Watch), and 1 million Tutsi deaths (The Rwandanese Patriotic Front, Tutsi government leaders).

<sup>5</sup> Though, arguably, realistic accounts of the slaughter did not begin appearing in international media until months after attacks ceased. In personal communication with Dr. Robert Figueroa, a leader in the American environmental justice movement and professor at Colgate University, I received more information about the delay of information (Interview held Wednesday 19 October 2005). At the time of the genocide, most international information came from the UN, who was conducting a peacekeeping mission and had an obvious agenda to make the violence appear contained. Thus, it wasn't until after the UN pulled out of Rwanda (late 1994) that true accounts of the horror were reported. Therefore, though the claim in this article that communication of Rwanda's atrocities "is imminent" is true in the long run, it is false in the sense of immediate reporting.

<sup>6</sup> Five methods of inhibiting outrage taken from Brian Martin, *The beating of Rodney King: The dynamics of backfire*, *Critical Criminology*, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> More discussion of the assassinations and long-running cover-up can be found in Robin Philpot, Rwanda: The 11-year cover-up, *New African*, Iss. 439, April 2004, p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2001.

inhibiting outrage, and produced the first personal backfires of the genocide. Stanislas Mbonampeka for instance, former Rwandan minister of justice, said in an interview in 1995, “Personally, I don’t believe in the genocide. There were massacres within which there were crimes against humanity or crimes of war. But the Tutsis were not killed as Tutsis, only as sympathizers of the RPF. 90% of Tutsis were pro-RPF.”<sup>9</sup> Two years later, he was charged as one of 414 commanders and organizers of genocide by the Kigali Supreme court.

The fourth criterion is the use of official channels to falsely portray the process of justice. In Rwanda, Hutu officials set up fake courts in rural towns and “sentenced” those guilty of murder or conspiracy only to run out of room for them in local prisons.<sup>10</sup> Neighborhood murderers were allowed to roam the streets just weeks after the massacres, a fact that infuriated Human Rights Watch who pressured the government to enforce stricter punishments, resulting in last week’s execution.

The last method of inhibiting outrage employed by the Hutu regime was intimidation of Tutsis, both during and after the massacres, to prohibit leak of information to outside sources. Intimidation was a local phenomenon in Rwanda, sprung from a culture of fear and distrust and executed by black arms gripping machetes. Tutsis were forced to flee in the night to neighboring Uganda or Burundi or be violently murdered the next morning by their friends and neighbors. The ultimate silencing of information came not from verbal pressure but from elimination of targets: who will speak out if there is no one left? Perhaps the most chilling of Hutu pogroms, this philosophy created outrage towards the culture of Hutu Power and added more heat to the backfire flame.

The genocidal Hutu regime, then, exercised multiple methods to inhibit anger that silenced the domestic population but failed on an international scale. The backfire process created such an enormous political and social backlash<sup>11</sup> that previous court

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<sup>9</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, p.196.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Hatsfeld, *Machete Season*, New York; Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> As in the case of the War in Iraq, outrage towards violent actions resulted mainly from the *disproportion* of action of one group against another. The Tutsi-favored Rwandanese Patriotic Front did nothing remotely as violent at the Hutu civilians (displacement and occupation, yes, but massacres and death squads, no), making the genocidal tendencies not just wrong but egregious. Egregious injustice creates more backlash than proportionate violence, which is why the backfire against Hutus was so popular and widespread.

decisions are now being overturned in Rwanda, as in the executions at Nyamata last week. Personally and collectively, the genocide has backfired, burdening the consciences and lives of reckless murderers.

## Backfire? Or Successful Genocide?

According to Tarian's article, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda backfired against the attackers. But backfire only applies to perpetrators who hide their devious activities and are fearful of retribution. The murderers in Rwanda had no intent to mystify as they raised their machetes in broad daylight.

**B. Lunt, Wagga Wagga**<sup>12</sup>

The Rwanda article last week focused solely on backfire against Hutu "officials" and "murderers". What about the international backlash against those who sat and did nothing? I would think failure of the UN peacekeeping mission deserves reference in a discussion of genocide and backfire.

**Watch Dog, Whampera**<sup>13</sup>

A glaring omission was made in last week's discussion of the genocide in Rwanda. Intimidation via execution was named as one of five weapons Hutus used against Tutsi civilians, but there was absolutely no mention of rape. In fact, thousands of women were raped and murdered and their killers never brought to justice. These predators never even warranted attention, let alone suffered personal backfire. Such omissions are an embarrassment to our informed and open society.

**Frus Trated, Wollongong**<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> B. Lunt is again making the distinction between backfire as an end and backfire as a process. Though the international backlash against the genocide may not have affected each and every murderer's personal life, it did create a process of backfire in which the international community took steps to promote outrage so as to expose the inhibition of outrage plotted by the attackers.

<sup>13</sup> Watch dog raises an issue discussed in Romeo Dallaire's book *Shake Hands With the Devil*, published in 2003. Last year I met Dallaire, commander of the 1994 UN Peacekeeping mission in Rwanda, and was fascinated and appalled that UN cadets were ordered not to do anything while they stood and watched innocent Tutsis being murdered by their neighbors. This reaction and subsequent passion for the subject is what motivated me to choose this topic for my project report.

<sup>14</sup> Frus Trated is a pseudonym for my friend Fiona Mulligan, who raised this point with me in discussion over my news article. I had her formally read the article and respond to it so I could get unique source information for my project, and was ashamed when she pointed out my glaring omission. Though I cannot do the issue of rape justice in this footnote, some referencing materials I found are as follows: Margaret Lyons, Hearing the cry without answering the call: Rape, genocide, and the Rwandan Tribunal, *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*; Summer 2001, p.99; and L.R. Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, London; Zed Books, 2000.

## Dialogue between Hum N. Tarian and Frus Trated<sup>15</sup>

Frus: Why did you choose the Rwandan genocide? Isn't that depressing?

Hum: But would it be fair if we ignored all the depressing things in life? Just because we don't like the facts of the genocide doesn't mean it didn't happen. I'm really passionate about awareness, particularly of this issue after I met Romeo Dallaire last year at Colgate. He came to deliver a lecture and promote his new book, *Shake Hands With the Devil*, and I was appalled by the UN's lack of force against the slaughter. Since then I've read numerous books but hadn't done a research paper. Hence, I chose that for my project report.

Frus: Yeah, I remember his talk – isn't he the one who said Rwandans are barbaric?

Hum: Not in so many words, but yes he did refer to the barbarism of the murders. It's absolutely astonishing the things one neighbor did to another – you should read *Machete Season*, it's all firsthand accounts of the killing from the killers themselves, tough to read but good.

Frus: Is that where you got all your information from? First-hand accounts?

Hum: No, that was just one source. I used that book for insight into the types of murders (which wasn't addressed in the article for lack of space), how they devalued their targets, and who intimidated who to do the killing.

Frus: Wait, what?

Hum: Hutu government leaders, or figures of power in local villages, were the ones who orchestrated the genocide. After the April 6<sup>th</sup> assassination of the President, they told every Hutu to kill every Tutsi so the government would stabilize. They would gather people into the town square and tell them to get their machetes, run into the forest after their Tutsi neighbors, and slaughter them. And they did! It was madness.<sup>16</sup>

Frus: That's *horrible*, why didn't anyone resist?

Hum: They did. And died. But the majority went along with it, because the hatred between Tutsi and Hutu was so deeply engrained in their culture. Or worse than hatred,

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<sup>15</sup> Based on dialogue between author and Fiona Mulligan, undergraduate student at Colgate University, Thursday 20 October 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Summation of first-hand accounts in "How it was organized", a chapter in Jean Hatzfeld's *Machete Season*, 2003, p.10-20.

fear. Every Hutu man feared his Tutsi neighbor would kill him if he did not kill first, so the Hutus killed first.<sup>17</sup>

Frus: Where does Hutu and Tutsi come from?

Hum: Censuses were held in the 1930's when Rwanda was under Belgian control, and ID cards were given out to distinguish ethnic Tutsis (minority) from ethnic Hutus (majority). Both are Rwandanese and have lived side-by-side for over a century. But deep divisions fermented over the years, culminating in the Civil War of 1990. During the war, Tutsi rebels (the Rwandanese Patriotic Front, RPF) began occupying parts of the country, evicting Hutus and spreading fear. Retaliation came in April 1994, when Hutus assassinated the moderate Hutu President and ordinary civilians were encouraged to kill their Tutsi neighbors. Three months later, 800,000 people are dead.

Frus: I heard that as many as a million died.

Hum: Yeah, RPF reports have those figures but UN and Human Rights Watch figures are much less, closer to half a million.

Frus: But, still.

Hum: Yeah, Unbelievable.

Frus: So we have the *Machete* book, what else did you use?

Hum: I had four other texts on the history of Rwanda and details of the war, a few articles about international intervention, and I conducted an interview with Rob Figueroa about his remembrances of the genocide and international response to it.<sup>18</sup>

Frus: Oh yeah, what did he have to say?

Hum: Well, he was very focused on the issue of human mindset and motivation for committing something as horrible as the Rwandan genocide – and given his background in philosophy and environmental justice he was very helpful in adjusting me to the concept of neighbor murdering neighbor. He also had great things to say about backfire –

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<sup>17</sup> This is also a major component of the mass domestic propaganda sent out through radio and newspaper. Because Rwanda is so small (less than the size of Maryland), these threats spread like wildfire. When the assassinations occurred, ordinary Hutus generally believed Tutsis were responsible and feared for their lives. In reality, it was masterminded by Hutu extremists.

<sup>18</sup> Interview held at Rob's house in Keiraville on Wednesday 20 October 2005.

how ordinary people react to getting caught versus politicians who get caught, the inter-workings of official channels like war tribunals and gacaca -

Frus: What's gacaca?

Hum: That's the Rwandan community trials, kind of an informal sentencing with all your family and neighbors around pointing and accusing one another.

Frus: Sounds helpful.

Hum: Yeah, it's not. Hutus involved in the killings often got off the hook, so they're living with their terrified neighbors and intimidating them during these meetings. No one is going to speak up against an attacker, especially if you're a woman who was raped, if your attacker is standing right in front of you, flanked by the rest of his gang. He knows where you sleep.

Frus: While on the topic, why didn't you put rape in your article?

Hum: In all honesty, I forgot. None of the book references I used mentioned rape and it only came up once in my conversation with Rob. Thanks for pointing it out though, it needed to be included.

Frus: No worries.

Hum: Any questions about the backfire framework?

Frus: Kind of...I understand how the five methods of inhibiting anger create outrage, but how does this get transformed into action?

Hum: When one side attempts to inhibit outrage, the other side takes parallel steps to expose those inhibitions, thus promoting outrage in a way. While one side is covering up, the other side is exposing; while one side is intimidating, the other side is encouraging freedom of speech. They counter-balance each other. If the second party outbalances, the action backfires. If they're unsuccessful, it doesn't.

Frus: But what about the difference between process of backfire and backfire as an end?

Hum: Well done! What I just said was referring to the latter. The process of backfire can be applied to virtually any violent action with more than one side.

Frus: Who uses this stuff anyway?



Hum: Mostly scholars and academia...the backfire idea generated with Gene Sharp, a scholar of nonviolence and activism, but I think the framework comes from my professor Brian Martin. He's a pretty big deal when it comes to nonviolence writings.<sup>19</sup>

Frus: Well, lucky you!

Hum: I know! It was a great class. I'm going to miss snack time!

Frus: Mmm, snacks? I'm hungry.

Hum: Yeah, let's go eat something.

THE END.

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<sup>19</sup> Two backfire papers of note are The beating of Rodney King: The dynamics of backfire, published in *Critical Criminology*, 2005; and Iraq attack backfire, published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2004.