Twenty years after the genocide, a generation of Rwandans has come of age without war. They live in a country described as a beacon of security. But has progress come at the price of freedom?
The city of Kigali hums like a well-oiled machine. Police in smart uniforms conduct a tranquil ballet of pedestrians and vehicles and traffic flows through expertly manicured avenues. The cab drivers all wear seat belts, and every motorcycle rider wears a helmet. Everyone obeys the traffic rules and no one honks their horn.

Dapper Rwandans mingle with casually dressed westerners strolling along flowered pathways. They gather in posh cafés to sip cappuccinos - made with Rwandan coffee of course - and use the readily available high-speed internet. In stark contrast to its regional neighbours, there is no loud music blaring from shops and there are no messy street vendors crowding the pavements. The city is kept free of dust, rubbish and the inconvenient signs of poverty: beggars and thieves. For many, Kigali is an African utopia.

‘Kill me now – but please don’t hurt my babies’

“They said they must concentrate on the men and the boys,” a young resident of Kigali told me one evening. “They didn’t want to kill all of the women and girls because they wanted us to become their ‘wives’.”
Twenty-five-year-old Blandine is unemotional as she describes the defining period of her childhood. Sitting in an elegant restaurant overlooking the rolling skyline of Kigali, she speaks in quiet spurts, occasionally pausing to look down at her lap. She smiles as her face is lit by the glow of a smart phone. She taps a message and waits for a reply. Watching this young genocide survivor in a pose so emblematic of her generation, it is hard to imagine that 20 years ago she and her country were in the throes of unspeakable violence.

Blandine says she feels fortunate to have survived. Like many others she endured a series of horrors during the 1994 Rwandan genocide and narrowly escaped with her life. Now the scenes from that time are what make up her earliest memories.

Death was everywhere during the genocide. There was little food or water. People were so busy either killing or trying to survive that the just harvested crops were left to rot. The wells were fouled with rancid, rotting corpses.

Her family’s humble compound was nestled in the hills just outside of Kigali. It sat between a Hutu-led Rwandan army base and a camp of Tutsi-led rebels. Mortar rounds regularly shook the tiny house where they lived, and every few days, a group of soldiers and militiamen would visit.

The men would pull Blandine’s mother from the house and beat her for the crime of being Tutsi. Then they would rape her in the presence of her children. “It would be better if you killed me now,” her mother would say to the men when they started. “But please, don’t hurt my babies.”
No one expresses the notion of modern Rwanda more forcefully than President Paul Kagame, the country’s idiosyncratic leader who is credited with ending the genocide, but whose policies are increasingly being questioned [Getty Images]
Those scenes, and others like it, were repeated in varying forms throughout much of Rwanda as an unbridled massacre swept the country. The slaughter went on for 100 days, until the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) finally took control in July. By then, at least 800,000 people had been killed.

The 1994 Rwanda genocide would become known as most efficient human carnage ever recorded.

**A shining city upon the hills**

There are specific attributes repetitively used to describe modern Rwanda. It’s hard to find anything written about the country that does not mention the pristine streets, the ban on plastic bags, or the fact that Rwanda is the first country in the world with a female majority in parliament. The success of Rwanda’s national healthcare system as well as the astonishing reductions in both HIV and infant mortality rates are often celebrated. In addition, media reports regularly recite Rwanda’s aim to become a middle income country by building a service based, digital economy by 2020.

The rapid progress this tiny country has made in a short period of time is often called a miracle. Indeed, immediately after the destruction of 1994, it would have been hard to imagine that Rwanda could become a beacon of security and progress on the subcontinent.
But one man had that vision and now he refuses to allow anyone to interfere with Rwanda’s ambitious goals.

**The warrior’s way**

No one expresses the notion of modern Rwanda more forcefully than President Paul Kagame. The idiosyncratic leader is credited with ending the genocide and, by all accounts, he has been the most powerful person in the country for each of the last 20 years. For many, Kagame symbolises the potential of a modern African head of state.

From his early years as a child refugee to his life as a guerilla fighter and then intelligence chief in Uganda, Kagame has always defied expectations. He is known for being extremely effective, having powerful friends and being utterly intolerant of criticism and political dissent. His leadership is marked by an open refusal to be measured according to what he terms the “hypocrisy of Western detractors”.

Paul Kagame has overseen Rwanda’s transition to peace and security, but he has also been accused of silencing dissent and prioritising development over democracy [Getty Images]
Despite Rwanda’s remarkable progress under Kagame, serious concerns remain. As time has passed, guilt from the failures of 1994 has begun to wane and the international community has grown increasingly willing to question the policies and actions of Kagame’s government.

“It appears that every dissenting political leader who rejects this consensus approach gets into legal trouble” with charges including “negation of the genocide, divisionism, sectarianism, and even spreading rumours” a UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, Maina Kiai said after a recent visit to Rwanda. “This sends a chilling and unacceptable message that peaceful public disagreement with the [Rwandan] government is equivalent to criminality.”

Kagame almost seems to enjoy rebuffing suggestions that he loosen restrictions on Rwanda’s political space. He argues that his primary job is to ensure development security.

“I am not a journalist or a leader of NGOs and my job is not to entertain those who compromise Rwanda’s security,” he recently told a group of graduating police cadets. “I am not a musician, supposed to please anybody.”

Kagame has been especially defensive about a recent series of unexplained attacks on his political opponents abroad, and has little patience for reprimands by the international community and rights groups that he says refused to help Rwanda during its darkest hour.

“Who are these so-called human rights groups?” he asked during a recent press conference. “They are not accountable to anyone.”
Kigali regularly defends the lack of freedom in the country by saying that peace and development are more important than democracy and human rights, as if these principles were mutually exclusive.

“This argument is put forth by the government to rationalise its policy choices,” says Susan Thomson, an assistant professor of peace and conflict studies at Colgate University.

“The Rwandan government feels justified in killing, disappearing and intimidating its opponents because it fears losing its grip on political power.”

‘Accessories of power’

Rwanda earns high marks for women’s rights and gender equality. Women hold 64 percent of the seats in Rwanda’s lower house of parliament, the highest such margin in the world.

However Thomson says that “although women are very visible in Rwandan politics, their ability to shape the future of Rwandan women, ironically, is circumscribed.”

She points out that Rwanda’s parliament has limited influence and little room to develop policy or even to debate openly. “Women parliamentarians in Rwanda are mere accessories of power; they do not actually wield any of it.”

But some prominent Rwanda scholars remain bullish about the country’s prospects despite its less-than-democratic sensibilities.
“Rwanda has laid important foundations since the genocide,” says Phil Clark, a political scientist who has spent years researching the country’s justice system, which has processed nearly two million genocide related cases.

He believes Rwanda has “delivered better healthcare, education and economic opportunities than anyone could’ve imagined in 1994”.

Clark often gets flak from fellow scholars for his glowing estimation of the current regime. He says “Rwanda’s critics have legitimate gripes but often overstate them” and that while “there are some justifiable concerns at the national political level, especially in terms of a lack of genuine political opposition and stifling of dissent” Kigali’s critics “often ignore the many positives”.

The debate about progress versus freedom and human rights will be meaningless if Rwanda is unable to sustain its current peaceful and prosperous trajectory.
Cycles of violence

Rwanda has a history of bloody, territorial skirmishes and a rich warrior tradition that permeates its cultural symbols and practices. But the type of political massacre that came to a disastrous peak in 1994 had never been seen in Rwanda before 1959, when European colonisers began to lose their grip on the population.

The Hutu people had long been disadvantaged relative to their Tutsi countrymen, but the Belgian-enforced system of tribal classification exacerbated the problem by mandating favouritism towards the Tutsi and discrimination against the Hutu. To better facilitate this blatant prejudice, the Belgians required Rwandans to carry identity cards indicating their tribe. This hard division set the stage for disaster.

Ethnic violence repeatedly rocked Rwanda in the decades before 1994 as groups sought to get an upper hand and correct perceived injustices. Anti-Tutsi pogroms came to be expected at least every few years.

In 2014, Rwanda is widely considered to be among the safest and most stable countries in Africa. Much of that security depends on Kagame’s iron-fisted grip on power.
The Rwandan capital, Kigali, is kept free of rubbish, dust and street vendors [EPA]
But whatever the quality of his leadership, no one can remain president forever. How long he will remain in power and what will happen when he isn’t, we cannot know. But there have been some disturbing signs.

In January, a rumour spread that Kagame had died. In neighbouring countries, some erupted in celebration and hundreds marched down the main street in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Goma towards the Rwandan border to express their joy.

The presidency swiftly squelched the rumour by tweeting a picture of Kagame shaking hands with visiting students from The Wharton School. But not before it became perfectly clear that, while many Rwandans would be crushed to lose their leader, many of their regional neighbours would not share that sentiment.

**Remembering the genocide**

Today an entire generation of Rwandans has come of age knowing only peace. According to the country’s most recent demographic survey, more than 60 percent of the population is under 25 years of age. This means that most Rwandans alive today have never been issued an identity card that carried an ethnic label. When asked what tribe they belong to Rwandans invariably reply: “I am Rwandan.”
Twenty years after the genocide, Rwanda has been described by some as an African utopia [EPA]

This singular identity is part of Rwanda’s bid to instill national unity and reconciliation. The annual Kwibuka (remembrance) ceremonies are the centrepiece of those efforts. Because this year marks the 20th anniversary of the tragedy, organisers have put forth an expanded, global version of the commemoration. On the surface, this appears to be a grassroots social media movement, but it is, in fact, a sophisticated marketing and public relations effort.

The Kwibuka20 campaign, as it is known in Rwanda, is run - albeit discreetly - from inside Paul Kagame’s communications office. Commemoration events have been scheduled across the globe with the help of the Shoah Foundation’s Stephen D. Smith who produces the Kwibuka programme from Los Angeles. Smith says the campaign is meant to “encourage people and organisations to join with the rest of the world community and share this moment”.


An interactive “Million Voices” campaign encourages users around the globe to submit text, photo and video messages. Smith says this demonstrates Rwanda’s commitment to being accessible and allowing “every community to participate in remembering the lives lost in the genocide” and to “share Rwanda’s vision for a brighter future”.

It is against this backdrop that the post-genocide generation struggles with the machinations of their government. The legacy of Rwanda’s history of strict vertical hierarchy and obedience to authority persists today. Without fundamental changes, the contradictions of the last 20 years will undermine progress in the next 20.

Rwanda’s unparalleled rate of development is both remarkable and real. But it will be even more impressive if Rwanda can somehow manage to continue its advancement without the need to instill fear and intimidation.

Steve Terrill is an American-born independent journalist. He has worked as a correspondent for AFP, VOA and Global Post. His writing and photographs have appeared in The New York Times and The Boston Globe. He has also contributed to The Los Angeles Times, The Globe and Mail, ESPN.com and CNN International. Steve is the editor and curator of Rwandawire.com. In addition to specialising on Rwanda, Steve uses metadata from social media and web-based news to tell stories that are otherwise overlooked. He is currently finishing his first book, which will be published next year.

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