

The Strategy of Ethnic Division

President Juvenal Habyarimana, nearing the end of two decades in power, was losing popularity among Rwandans when the RPF attacked from Uganda on October 1, 1990. At first Habyarimana did not see the rebels as a serious threat, although they stated their intention to remove him as well as to make possible the return of the hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees who had lived in exile for a generation. The president and his close colleagues decided, however, to exaggerate the RPF threat as a way to pull dissident Hutu back to his side and they began portraying Tutsi inside Rwanda as RPF collaborators. For three and a half years, this elite worked to redefine the population of Rwanda into "Rwandans," meaning those who backed the president, and the "ibyitso" or "accomplices of the enemy," meaning the Tutsi minority and Hutu opposed to him.

In the campaign to create hatred and fear of the Tutsi, the Habyarimana circle played upon memories of past domination by the minority and on the legacy of the revolution that overthrew their rule and drove many into exile in 1959. Singling out most Tutsi was easy: the law required that all Rwandans be registered according to ethnic group. Residents of the countryside, where most Rwandans lived, generally knew who was Tutsi even without such documentation. In addition, many Tutsi were recognizable from their physical appearance.

But shattering bonds between Hutu and Tutsi was not easy. For centuries they had shared a single language, a common history, the same ideas and cultural practices. They lived next to one another, attended the same schools and churches, worked in the same offices, and drank in the same bars. A considerable number of Rwandans were of mixed parentage, the offspring of Hutu-Tutsi marriages. In addition, to make ethnic identity the predominant issue, Habyarimana and his supporters had to erase—or at least reduce—distinctions within the ranks of the Hutu themselves, especially those between people of the northwest and of other regions, those between adherents of different political factions, and those between the rich and the poor.

From the start, those in power were prepared use physical attacks as well as verbal abuse to achieve their ends. They directed massacres of hundreds of Tutsi in mid-October 1990 and in five other episodes before the 1994 genocide. In some incidents, Habyarimana's supporters killed Hutu opponents—their principal political challengers—as well as Tutsi, their declared ideological target.

Habyarimana was obliged to end his party's monopoly of power in 1991 and rival parties sprouted quickly to contend for popular support. Several of them created youth wings ready to fight to defend partisan interests. By early 1992, Habyarimana had begun providing military training to the youth of his party, who were thus transformed into the militia known as the *Interahamwe* (Those Who Stand Together or Those Who Attack Together). Massacres of Tutsi and other crimes by the *Interahamwe* went unpunished, as did some attacks by other groups, thus fostering a sense that violence for political ends was "normal."