

## GENOCIDE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY: POWER CONSOLIDATION AND HEGEMONIC CONTROL IN RWANDA'S 1994 CRISIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The Rwandan Genocide of 1994, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 800,000 individuals over 100 days, is frequently perceived as a rapid outbreak of long-standing ethnic conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis. This paper contends that although this perspective contains some truth, it overlooks the fact that the genocide was a deliberate political strategy employed by those in power to consolidate and maintain their control. Violence was not random. The government, media, and armed groups planned and carried it out. The government used radio to spread hate and make people think that killing others was a patriotic act. Simultaneously, people with moderate perspectives and political opponents, regardless of their ethnic background, were targeted and eliminated to suppress dissent and shift power dynamics in their favor. This paper also examines how the lack of robust international action was not just by chance. Instead, those perpetrating the violence used this situation to carry out their actions with little outside interference. This study employed a qualitative case study methodology utilizing survivor accounts, tribunal documents, official addresses, and scholarly works to investigate the institutionalization of mass violence as a means of political manipulation. Through a renewed examination of the Rwandan Genocide from the perspective of political strategy, this paper enhances our understanding of how authoritarian governments can use identity, fear, and international passivity to become dominant forces. This viewpoint highlights the critical need for the early identification of politically driven mass violence and the enhancement of global systems for prevention and accountability.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rwandan, Genocide, Political Strategy, Authoritarianism, Power, Consolidation, Propaganda, Mass Violence, Elite Control.

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### Introduction

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide, resulting in the systematic extermination of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus within approximately 100 days, remains one of the most horrifying examples of politically driven mass violence in the 20th century (Des Forges, 1999; Straus, 2006). While much of the literature frames the genocide as a consequence of deep-rooted ethnic animosities, this explanation often fails to account for the role of political elites and state institutions in deliberately orchestrating the violence to secure and consolidate power (Mamdani, 2001; Uvin, 1998). The central thesis of this paper is that the Rwandan Genocide was not a simple outburst of ethnic hatred. Instead, it was a specific political tactic used by the ruling forces to maintain their supremacy under the pressure of internal and external influence.

In the years preceding the genocide, Rwanda faced increasing political pressure due to economic decline, the rise of multi-party politics, and the growing influence of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which challenged the legitimacy of the incumbent regime (Prunier, 1995; Newbury, 1998). Confronted with the erosion of power, the ruling authority adopted a strategy that fused ethnic scapegoating with authoritarian control, deploying propaganda, bureaucratic mechanisms, and militia

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networks to mobilize ordinary citizens against perceived enemies of the state (Thompson, 2007; Chrétien, 2003). The use of hate radio, such as Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), played a critical role in inciting mass participation in the violence (Kellow & Steeves, 1998).

This paper examines the Rwandan Genocide through the lens of political strategy, focusing on how the authority used institutional tools to execute mass violence as a means of power consolidation. The analysis also examines the failure of the international community to take any action, even after obvious warning signals, which ended up letting the perpetrators off the hook. This Study contributes to the knowledge on the subject of genocide as strategic political engineering, which helps to explain state-sponsored violence and authoritarianism as an ever-present tendency in weak political structures.

### Data and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to analyze the 1994 Rwandan Genocide as a politically motivated strategy for power consolidation. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate for understanding the complex social, political, and institutional dynamics underlying mass violence (Yin, 2018). The Rwandan experience provides an opulent background to the discussion of how authoritarian regimes can utilize the instruments of the state apparatus and manipulate identities to meet political goals.

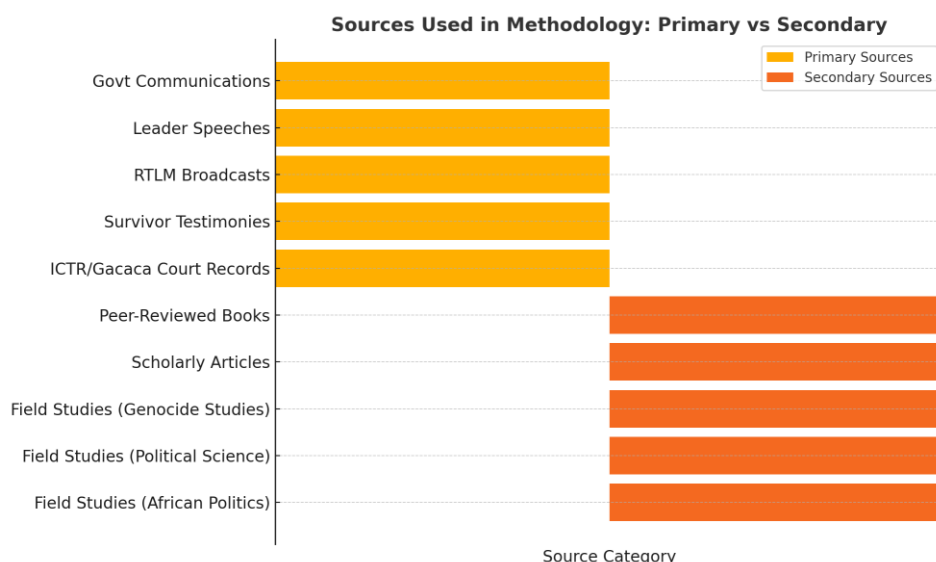
### Data Sources

The analysis is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, as seen in Figure 1:

Primary sources include official government communications, speeches by political leaders, transcripts of broadcasts from Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), and testimonies from survivors and perpetrators recorded by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and Gacaca courts (ICTR, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic books, articles, and field studies conducted by scholars in genocide studies, political science, and African politics (Mamdani, 2001; Straus, 2006; Prunier, 1995).

These sources were selected for their credibility, relevance, and depth of insight into political behavior, institutional design, and authoritarian rule.



**Figure 1: Sources used in Methodology**

### Methodological Framework

A theory-guided content analysis was employed to interpret the political intent behind narratives, policies, and actions during the genocide. The study utilizes elite and authoritarian resilience theories to analyze how political elites manipulated institutional tools and public discourse to mobilize violence (Higley & Burton, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Relevant themes, including state-sponsored propaganda, ethnic tagging, and elite alignment, were determined and evaluated to determine trends in strategic decision-making. The credibility of the results was triangulated, and the interpretation bias was limited (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such a methodological setting allows us to comprehend better how genocide, not state collapse, could be used as a kind of political engineering to re-construct the state according to authoritarian interests, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Methodological Framework and Literature Review Summary**

Component	Details
Methodological Approach	Qualitative Case Study with Theory-Guided Content Analysis (Yin, 2018)
Core Theories Applied	Elite Theory (Higley & Burton, 2006); Authoritarian Resilience (Levitsky & Way, 2010)
Evaluation Method	Triangulation to minimize interpretation bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018)
Key Themes Analyzed	State-sponsored propaganda, Ethnic tagging, Elite alignment
Outcome Interpretation	Genocide as a strategic political engineering, not a state collapse

### Literature Review

In the past three decades, the scholarly perception of the Rwandan Genocide that occurred in 1994 has been altered significantly as the transition to the avoidance of reductive ethnic logic and the adoption of a more intricate interpretation, such as the political, historical, and institutional one, has been implemented. The first analysts generally theorized genocide as the culmination of historic ethnic competition between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples (Gourevitch, 1998; Prunier, 1995). These contributions were significant in bringing violence to a sensible historical perspective. However, they had a way of downplaying the role of political leaders and the state forces in inciting violence.

A growing body of research challenges the notion of spontaneous ethnic violence, arguing instead that the genocide was politically planned and executed by elites within the ruling regime. Mamdani (2001) asserts that colonial classifications of ethnicity were institutionalized and later manipulated by post-colonial authorities to justify exclusion and eventual extermination. Similarly, Uvin (1998) emphasizes the role of the developmental state in fostering structural violence and enabling genocidal outcomes through institutional discrimination and centralization of power.

Studies on media and propaganda have highlighted how the state instrumentalized communication channels to incite violence. Kellow and Steeves (1998) demonstrate how RTLM radio broadcasts played a pivotal role in framing the genocide as a national duty, thereby facilitating mass participation. Thompson (2007) further explores how journalists and state-run media became tools of political messaging that dehumanized Tutsis and discredited moderate Hutus.

From a political science perspective, scholars such as Straus (2006) and Hintjens (2001) argue that the genocide served as a rational strategy for elites to eliminate political opponents and forestall regime change. Straus (2006) particularly identifies the high level of coordination and bureaucratic efficiency in the killings as indicative of state-led planning rather than chaotic violence. This can also be observed in the broader literature on dictatorial/authoritarian governments, which in most cases would use repression, fear, and fabrication of crises to maintain power (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Despite the above contributions, it is agreed that more needs to be done to integrate political theory into studies of genocide. Few analyses go as far as to frame genocide as a political move to stay in power.

This paper builds on existing work by applying elite and authoritarian resilience theories to demonstrate how the Rwandan authority utilized institutional tools and social narratives to engineer violence for hegemonic consolidation.

### Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The results of the present research highlight the importance of a new change in the perception of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide as not an outbreak of ethnic violence but as a calculated move of political engineering initiated by the governing power. Through elite coordination, institutional manipulation, propaganda, and the calculated use of international silence, the genocide was weaponized to achieve specific political outcomes. When analyzed through political science lenses such as elite theory and authoritarian resilience theory, each thematic area reveals how mass violence can be systematically deployed to reinforce authoritarian control.

- **Elite Coordination as Political Intent**

The coordination among Rwanda's political and military elites points to a clear, intentional plan rather than a decentralized or reactive outbreak of violence. Elite theory suggests that ruling coalitions act in their collective interest to maintain political supremacy, especially when facing threats to their status (Higley & Burton, 2006). In Rwanda, the assassination of President Habyarimana acted as a trigger, but not the cause, of the genocide. Evidence from the ICTR (2003) and Des Forges (1999) shows that elite actors had already developed kill lists, weapon stockpiles, and mobilization plans well in advance. The authority did not lose control of the state—it used the full weight of the state to carry out targeted elimination of both ethnic and political opponents.

- **Institutional Manipulation and Bureaucratized Violence**

This intervention of civil institutions, including local government offices, police, and administrative networks, implies a great extent of state intervention and organizational discipline. This is consistent with the position of Straus (2006), who argues that genocide is characterized by bureaucratic rationality. Rather than failing, the state persisted in being efficient and even hyper-efficient in controlling violence. The command passed down administrative lines, creating a deadly combination of legitimacy and coercion. By taking part in genocide as a civic and patriotic responsibility, the authority was able to remove the moral distinction between governance and annihilation.

- **Propaganda as a Tool of Mass Mobilization**

The strategic use of propaganda, particularly via RTLM and Kangura newspaper, shows how psychological manipulation was central to elite strategy. By framing Tutsis as existential enemies and invoking fear of ethnic reversal, the regime created a moral panic that justified violence (Kellow & Steeves, 1998; Thompson, 2007). Propaganda was not only aimed at demonizing the "other" but also at unifying the Hutu population under a singular political vision—one that conflated loyalty with participation in violence. This exemplifies the application of what Gramsci (1971) called manufactured consent, whereby the authority employed media hegemony to justify its action.

- **Exploitation of International Paralysis**

The knowledge of international inaction by the authority was, perhaps, one of the most telling things about the genocide. This demonstrates a logical read on global geopolitics in that the Foreign powers saw the cost of intervening politically and economically as too high (Power, 2002). The withdrawal of UNAMIR troops and the failure of the international community to label the events as "genocide" early on gave the perpetrators space and confidence to operate without consequences. From a political strategy perspective, this inaction was not accidental—it was anticipated and exploited.

- **Synthesis: Genocide as Political Engineering**

Combining these themes, one can conclude that genocide was political engineering of some sort, a violent form of rearrangement of the political terrain through authoritarian instruments. The ruling elite employed mass violence to lengthen its political existence by killing people who disagreed with its policies, ethnically homogeneous backing, and the restoration of the institutional power balance.

Theoretical frameworks on authoritarian resilience (Levitsky & Way, 2010) help explain how violence was used not only as a short-term defense mechanism but also as a long-term strategy for post-conflict dominance. The current centralized political order in post-genocide Rwanda reflects this calculated restructuring, as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Synthesis – Genocide as Political Engineering**

Analytical Element	Explanation
Initial Trigger	Internal and external political threats to regime legitimacy
Theoretical Framework	Authoritarian Resilience Theory (Levitsky & Way, 2010)
Elite Objective	Power consolidation through the elimination of opposition and ethnic homogenization
Instruments Used	Propaganda, institutional control, ethnic targeting, and bureaucratic coordination
Strategic Execution	Mass violence used as a deliberate mechanism for political engineering
Post-Conflict Outcome	Centralized political order and prolonged elite dominance in post-genocide Rwanda

The current discussion confirms the key thesis statement that the Rwanda genocide was not a governance failure, but an authoritarian exercise. The ruling elite made ethnic divisions work as a tool of political consolidation by employing state institutions, the media, and international diplomacy strategically. These figures make one rethink the genocide study in political science, not only on the axis of ethnicity but also on the axis of strategic political decision as a cause of mass atrocities.

### Conclusion

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 should not be viewed only as an eruption of ethnic violence but also as a well-thought-out political plan implemented by people in power to strengthen their grip on power, derail rivals, and rearrange the national status quo.

Through careful analysis of institutional behavior, elite coordination, and media propaganda, this study demonstrates how the genocide was methodically planned and carried out using the whole machinery of the state.

The genocide was neither irrational nor spontaneous. Instead, it was a calculated exercise of political violence, shaped by the logic of authoritarian survival. Political elites, facing growing internal and external threats to their dominance, mobilized the population through fear, hate speech, and the manipulation of historical narratives. State institutions were transformed into instruments of extermination, and the authority exploited international hesitation to carry out violence without fear of intervention.

Through the use of theories of political science, this paper will establish a more realistic and critical view of how mass atrocities can reach specific political results using elite theory, authoritarian resilience, and state-sponsored violence. Rwanda is a chilling lesson that genocide may not be planned despite the failure of governance, but because of its utmost employment.

### Policy Recommendations (Table 3)

**Table 3: Policy Recommendations to Prevent Politically-Engineered Genocide**

<b>Policy Recommendation</b>	<b>Strategic Focus</b>
Reframe Early Warning Systems	Include elite behavior, institutional abuse, and propaganda as early warning signals.
Enhance International Political Will Power	Establish red lines and enforceable thresholds to trigger global intervention.
Institutional Accountability	Focus on prosecuting elite architects of genocide, not just field operatives.
Literacy and the Regulation of Media	Build resilient, autonomous media and promote public literacy on hate speech.
Civil Society Support	Empower civil society to monitor state actions and promote intergroup dialogue.

- **Reframe Early Warning Systems**

Since genocide prevention systems should no longer be built exclusively around intergroup tensions, they should also consider indicators of authoritarian abuse of state authority and elite political motives. Early warning indicators should center on monitoring elite rhetoric, institutional behavior, and propaganda networks.

- **Enhance International Political Will Power**

Future interventions must not be symbolic condemnation. The international community, mainly the UN and regional bodies, ought to come up with action levels that are not negotiable and red lines on hate speech and systematic civilian targeting.

- **Institutional Accountability**

Post-conflict justice systems must go beyond prosecuting direct perpetrators and pursuing those who orchestrate genocidal policies in their seats of power. The responsibility of the elite and policy-level accountability should be the priority of international tribunals.

- **Literacy and the Regulation of Media**

Media literacy initiatives and control of hate speech are needed in vulnerable states. International collaborations should help constitute autonomous media structures that are not susceptible to appropriation by the state or manipulation by propaganda.

- **Civil Society Support**

An internal safeguard against further manipulation of the elites and state-initiated violence can be achieved by enhancing the local civil society organization that oversees state conduct, supports openness, and facilitates intergroup discussion.

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