

THE GOVERNING PHILOSOPHY, INSTITUTIONAL BUILDING AND POLICY CHOICE OF THE RWANDA PATRIOTIC FRONT

Wang Xuejun

Professor, School of Government, East China University of Political Science and Law

The sound economic and governance performance in Rwanda has attracted wide attention in the international community. A lot of research into its specific policies has been done to look at the reasons behind the success of Rwanda. From the perspective of party politics, its success can be equated with that of the governance model of a party-centered country. Rwanda's ruling party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), has led the country in achieving strong economic development by enhancing its power, strong will for development and pragmatic and flexible policy choices. The RPF's success can shed light for latecomer countries in terms of economic development and governance.

PRESSURE, MISSION, AND RPF'S STRONG WILL FOR DEVELOPMENT

The first impetus for the RPF to lead Rwanda in developing its economy comes from its strong will, which is not only caused by its survival pressure, but also influenced by the sense of mission at its birth.

Firstly, the RPF faced severe challenges when it came to power. The Rwanda genocide in 1994, which lasted nearly 100 days, not only took a large number of lives, but also caused a serious economic disaster. Rwanda's GDP plunged by more than 50% that year, with per capita GDP falling from \$249 the previous year to \$112. The country was in desperate need of an infusion of funds for recon-

ciliation and reconstruction, but it had neither mineral resources nor strategic importance and was not on the radar of Western-led international aid. From 1994 to 1996, only \$800 million of the \$2.2 billion promised by the West was delivered. Even with the subsequent increase in foreign aid, as a result of various efforts, it was often halted or reduced by the West on so-called "human rights" grounds, which prompted Rwanda to resolve to become self-reliant. Another pressure comes from within. The RPF is a political organization composed mainly of Tutsi refugees who have been living in neighboring countries such as Uganda and Burundi since independence. Before ending the genocide and taking over power in 1994, the RPF had little contact with the country's majority Hutu population. "The majority of the people accepted the new regime not because they truly recognized its justice and legitimacy, but because they hated the previous rule. In the long term, unless there's rapid economic development and people can live a better life, peace will be most fragile". The third pressure comes from the threat posed by long-standing Hutu rebel militias in eastern DR Congo. To deal with it, the RPF must invest significantly in improving its defence capabilities. In the uncertain prospect of Western aid, it is difficult for the RPF to achieve political autonomy and secure its regime unless it achieves sustainable economic development in Rwanda. Under these three pressures, the RPF has developed a strong will to commit itself to the sustainable development of the national economy.



Photo: Xinhua

Rwandan President Paul Kagame (center) inspects the disaster situation on May 12, 2023 in the western Rubavu region.

Secondly, the development will of the RPF came also from its strong sense of mission, which can find its source from three aspects. The first is the sense of national pride and honor existed in the history of the Kingdom of Rwanda. According to its own narrative of history, the kingdom was in expansion in the pre-colonial period when the country was rich and strong, the society was prosperous and peaceful, and the people beamed with a strong sense of pride for their nation. It was all interrupted by the invasion of European colonists and poor domestic governance after independence. The RPF is thus committed to restoring its past glory. The second is nationalism in modern Rwanda. It was born during the colonial rule by Belgium and the decolonization struggle, with the goal of independence and prosperity for Rwanda, breaking the shackle of Western countries and eliminating the influence of neocolonialism. This is the most direct source of the RPF's sense of mission to revitalize and develop the national economy. The third is the personal ambition of RPF leader Paul Kagame. Kagame experienced a raft of disasters such as ethnic antagonism, refugee crisis, civil war and genocide in Rwanda after its independence, and developed a resolute character and the ambition to pursue national independence and peaceful development. Kagame's personal ambition is undoubtedly crucial to the RPF sense of mission as a political party.

With the process of Rwanda's national reconciliation

completed and the new regime established, Kagame launched a national consultation campaign in the late 1990s. And in 2000, after consulting experts from China, Singapore and other countries, the Rwanda Vision 2020 was announced, which was committed to building Rwanda into a middle-income country based on a knowledge-based economy. In December 2020, Kagame unveiled once again Rwanda's Vision 2050, emphasizing that "Vision 2020 was about what we had to do in order to survive and regain our dignity. But Vision 2050 has to be about the future we choose, because we can, and because we deserve it". The new vision aims to transform Rwanda into an upper-middle-income country by 2035 and a high-income country by 2050. The two documents have provided guidance for the country to develop at different stages.

INSTITUTIONAL PARTY BUILDING AND THE RPF'S GROWING STRENGTH

The second impetus stems from the RPF's ever-growing strength as a political party, which not only ensures social stability, but also guarantees the policy making and delivery capacity of the Rwandan government. Its strength mainly comes from the institutionalization efforts in the following three aspects.

I. Establish and Cement the RPF-Led Political Party

System and Political Party Consultation System

First, the RPF took “consensus democracy” as the ideological basis of the new Rwanda after the end of the genocide, and quickly established a unity government led by itself and with the participation of the main opposition parties of the former regime including the Republican Democratic Movement, the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. During the ensuing nine years of transition and subsequent governance, it kept on strengthening its supremacy in the party system and the state power structure. Through the allocation of cabinet posts and parliamentary seats, it gained political dominance in the country. According to the Basic Law framework adopted by the Transitional National Assembly in May 1995, when the government is unable to make a decision, the decision-making power shall be exercised by the President as a sovereign representative, and the minority of one-third plus one has the right to veto. Of the 21 cabinet ministers in the transitional government, the RPF held eight, an effective minority with veto power, thus ensuring that the President “makes decisions in a sovereign manner” on behalf of the RPF. At the same time, it also controlled a majority of the seats in the Transitional National Assembly together with its army and allied parties. The 2003 Constitution, amended after the transition period, inherits the spirit of the Basic Law framework and bulwarked the political position of the RPF. In several post-transition-period elections, the RPF won both the presidential and parliamentary elections by a large margin.

Second, the Rwandan government enacted during the transitional period from 1994 to 2003 a series of party bans, prohibiting extremist and ethnicity, religion and region-based parties, in order to strengthen the leadership of the RPF and national unity. When Rwanda established the transitional unity government, it banned the former ruling party, the National Revolutionary Movement for Democracy and Development, and the Hutu extremist party of the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic, which were directly responsible for the genocide. At the end of the transition period, it banned in 2001 the National Council for Renewal and Democracy which was then in its founding stage and in 2003 the Republican Democratic Movement which was the largest opposition party at that time, both on the grounds that they violated the provisions of the Political Party Law prohibiting the formation of new political parties during the transition period, or endangered national security by inciting political parties

or ethnic division.

Third, the RPF established the Forum of Political Parties to engage political parties in political consultation. During the transitional period, the RPF established the Forum as an initial framework for political consultation in accordance with the Arusha Peace Accords. Rwanda’s 2003 Constitution provided for a multi-party system and made the Forum a permanent and institutionalized establishment. At present, it has 11 members and holds assemblies twice a year for open dialogue and discussion on major issues of national development and governance. At the same time, the Rwandan Constitution also stipulates that the purpose of the Forum is to promote consensus-building, political tolerance and national unity. This in fact further confirms and consolidates the leadership of the RPF.

II. Strengthen Party Building in its Organizational System, Ideology and Party Discipline

Rwanda has a RPF of organization and power system at each of its five administrative levels from province, district, county to village. The party structure of the RPF is parallel to the state administrative structure, with the executive secretary of the party being the core of leadership at all levels and holding decision-making power. The RPF grass root organizations are built all through to, and below, the village level. Party building often takes place in family-style language, encouraging every Rwandan to join the RPF family, which in many areas is the majority of the population. The governance model of the integration of the party, the government and the army is a major feature of the RPF party building, with party and government institutions at all levels, from the province to the village, appointed military and political commissars to supervise the entire political proceedings.

Since taking power in 1994, the RPF, drawing on experience from history and based on actual national conditions, has built a set of ideological system under which the whole party are rallied together, thus strengthening its cohesion as a ruling party. This ideological system mainly includes four aspects. The first is the historical view of the Rwandan national community, which holds that the Rwandans were ethnically united before colonization, with the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, not ethnic labels, but differentiated in wealth and social status. The colonists then came and caused ethnic politicization which continued after independence. And it was not until the RPF came to power that historical glory and national unity were re-