**Community Reconciliation in Authoritarian Regimes: A case study of Rwanda**

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# Introduction

The horrific genocide in Rwanda in 1994 perpetuated by extremist Hutu against primarily ethnic Tutsi, Hutu moderates, and Twa sympathizers ended with the decisive military victory of Tutsi led forces. In the aftermath, an authoritarian regime dominantly made up of ethnic Tutsi was established. Few would expect any level of community reconciliation in such a setting and following such intense violence. Yet, much of the literature on post-conflict reconciliation has praised the levels of reconciliation that appear to have been achieved in Rwanda following the genocide. This paper seeks to explain why authoritarian regimes might choose to pursue policies of community reconciliation and the ways in which authoritarian regimes may be able to create space for those policies to produce meaningful results.

Much of the literature on reconciliation in post-civil conflict societies emphasizes the need for reconciliation in order for states to develop and maintain democratic institutions and the rule of law (Teitel 2000; Mani 2002; Robertson 2002; Crocker 2000). Why, then, might an authoritarian regime pursue reconciliation when it has no ostensible goal of democratization? Further, what reconciliation processes are most attractive to authoritarian regimes in the achievement of these goals? Finally, why do we see some successful reconciliation in authoritarian states where we might assume the goals of the regime do not necessarily include genuine reconciliation? The purpose of this paper is to answer these questions. I do so by examining the experience of Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. The new regime aggressively pursued processes of community reconciliation through both highly centralized and surprisingly decentralized, democratic methods. I argue that despite the initial assumptions of many to the contrary, the benefits of pursuing reconciliation were worth the potential costs to regime leaders. This is in part because the regime strategically chose to engage in and implement reconciliation processes that were most beneficial and least threatening to it. Finally, I suggest that the restrictive nature of the authoritarian context in which reconciliation was pursued in Rwanda led to some surprising results. That is, the restrictive nature of the regime itself may have made possible instances of genuine reconciliation at the local level.

To assess the questions above and determine what benefit, if any, an authoritarian regime might gain from pursuing reconciliation, this paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I briefly define reconciliation. In the second section, I discuss the difference between reconciliation processes and true reconciliation and examine some of the most common strategies employed for reconciliation in post-civil conflict states. In the third section, I take a more in depth look at the policies that the Rwandan regime pursued in the post 1994 genocide era and generate some possible answers to my three research questions. In the fourth section, I analyze the lessons learned from the Rwandan case and summarize my findings with regard to my research questions. In the final section, I attempt to synthesize the conclusions that can be drawn from the Rwandan experience and how these lessons might be used by other authoritarian regimes in post-violent conflict societies. I also suggest ideas for further research in this area.

Several findings emerge from this paper. One is that reconciliation processes need not present a threat to authoritarian regimes. Quite the contrary, reconciliation programs can be employed by authoritarian regimes to consolidate power and control and monitor the population. That is, something that looks like a reconciliation process may serve the interests of authoritarian leaders who have little genuine interest in meaningful reconciliation. The reconciliation processes in Rwanda provide an example of how this has been done successfully. Some of the “tools” that have been promoted by scholars as helpful for reconciliation in democratizing societies also look remarkably similar to the “tools” in the authoritarian toolkit. By couching these processes in the language of reconciliation, authoritarian regimes are able to legitimize certain behaviors that would otherwise be seen as overly repressive to the international community. Another finding is that, in line with the assertions of many scholars and practitioners of reconciliation, the Rwandan case shows that bottom-up processes are more able to produce genuine reconciliation. Finally, and maybe most surprisingly, this study reveals that the highly controlled context in which the bottom-up processes operated in Rwanda may be the reason for their relative success. Indeed, it may be the case that authoritarian regimes are better able to create the space for true reconciliation than democratic or democratizing regimes.

# Defining reconciliation

Reconciliation is a rather amorphous term that lacks a clear consensus in the scholarship. As I define it, reconciliation can be understood as:

*a process that involves formerly adversarial groups living in close proximity to one another, interacting peacefully and toward mutually beneficial goals, where some acknowledgement of past wrongs has occurred, though not necessarily including forgiveness.*

In the literature, definitions of reconciliation range from minimal calls for cessation of violence and threat to the lives of others, to more demanding ones that insist on forgiveness and a state of harmony among former combatants. At the less demanding end of the scale, reconciliation means that violence has ceased and there is a mutual agreement that all parties deserve to live without their basic human rights being threatened (Estrada-Hollenbeck 2001, 65. See also Crocker 1999, 60 and Afazli and Colleton 2003, 3). Since many authoritarian regimes have played on the ethnic, religious, and class divisions within their territories to secure their positions of power (Geddes 2003, 53; Arriola 2009, 1345), one might assume that minimalist versions of reconciliation would be the goal for authoritarian regimes that choose to pursue reconciliation in post-civil conflict areas. Curiously, though, some regimes have gone beyond these most basic steps in the name of reconciliation. I am interested in why some regimes choose to do more. Therefore, minimalist definitions are too narrow for the purposes of this paper.

For most scholars, reconciliation consists of this minimal level of peace in addition to some form of relationship between former combatants (Long and Brecke 2003, 1; Dwyer 1999, 96; Kriesberg 2001, 48; Fisher 2001, 26). The added requirement of a relationship that is at least minimally positive and cooperative gets to the idea in reconciliation that psychological and emotional healing is just as important as addressing other factors that led to conflict. The final group of scholars argues that in addition to maintaining peace and focusing on relationships, reconciliation also needs to include forgiveness, closure, and a sense of harmony among former antagonist groups (Galtung 2001, 3-4; Afzali and Colleton 2003, 3). The demanding nature of this definition so limits the sample of states (authoritarian, democratic, or hybrid) whose efforts in post conflict situations would qualify as reconciliation that it would almost exclude all cases.

For my purposes, it is useful to choose a definition of reconciliation between these two poles. Within this middle ground there is some disagreement over whether forgiveness is necessary for reconciliation, as the maximalist definitions imply. In this respect, it is most helpful to this study to side with those that argue forgiveness is not necessary for reconciliation (Dwyer 1999). This is because certain crimes committed during the course of violent conflict such as rape and murder are so psychologically traumatic that forgiveness may not be possible for some. However, it is possible for people to learn to live with those who have wronged them without the need to forgive. Therefore, it is more practical to allow for forgiveness as a part of reconciliation, but not require it. The mid-level definitions are more suited for questions of why authoritarian regimes would pursue reconciliation following violent civil conflict. As noted above, it would not be surprising to see authoritarian regimes enforcing peace (as the minimalist definitions imply), but anything beyond that raises questions of why authoritarian regimes would use resources on reconciliation processes that could otherwise be used as rent for supporters.

# Strategies for Pursuing Reconciliation

It is important to distinguish between achievement of reconciliation and the various strategies that are used to promote it. The achievement of reconciliation is not guaranteed by any of the tools that are recommended by scholars and practitioners of reconciliation. In fact, there remains a large debate in this community over which tools and processes might be best for promoting reconciliation in the long run. So while the employment of these strategies may be done in the name of reconciliation (genuinely or otherwise), the *achievement* of reconciliation is not certain. Hence, there is a large reconciliation “toolbox” from which advocates of community reconciliation can pull options. These tools may focus on society-wide healing where individual wrongs are not specifically dealt with, but offenses against groups or society as a whole are addressed. Some options for society-wide healing include collective amnesia, trials and punishments, and truth commissions. Individual level reconciliation projects, on the other hand, focus on specific instances of wrongs and attempt to build or heal relationships between individuals and small groups. Individual level reconciliation tools include activities of healing specific injuries and projects for creating cross-community ties. Here I will briefly describe each of these strategies before examining how they were or were not used in Rwanda.

## Focusing on Society

*Collective Amnesia*: It is argued by many that reconciliation cannot happen until mass human rights violations that were committed during ethnic conflict are addressed by society (Crocker 2010; Hayner 2011; Bass 2000). However, not all societies that have experienced ethnic violence have chosen to pursue truth-telling. They have instead chosen a path Andrew Rigby labels “collective amnesia” (Rigby 2001). Collective amnesia simply involves the collective choice to forget about the past. There are practical reasons that a democracy or autocracy might choose a policy of collective amnesia. Perpetrators of crimes committed during conflict may still have supporters within society and prosecuting those individuals might lead to renewed violence (Hayner 2011, 197). Additionally, collective amnesia can be seen as an acknowledgment of collective guilt. Depending on the history of a given conflict, individuals may be both perpetrators and victims of violence. By choosing amnesia, society may acknowledge that all sides of a conflict did wrong while refusing the place those wrongs in a hierarchy of blame (Rigby 2001, 57).

*Trials and Punishment*: When society (or some portion of it) decides it cannot move on without first addressing the crimes of conflict, they may choose to punish individuals who are suspected or known to be responsible for specific crimes or groups of crimes committed during the course of war. Trials are most likely to be used as a tool for reconciliation when the regime has the capacity to identify and punish those it wishes and when there is a large majority of the citizenry who want to see the perpetrators of the crimes punished (Rigby 2001, 4). In these cases trials can be used to codify that one side of the conflict (the losers) were at fault while the other side (the winners) were simply victims regardless of the specific acts committed by each side. Alternatively, and positively for the purposes of reconciliation, trials can serve the purpose of individualizing guilt. Rather than blaming an entire group for the problems of war, individuals are identified and punished allowing the rest of society to get along peacefully (Bass 2000, 286). Importantly for authoritarian regimes, trials can also serve to remove or eliminate political threats to the regime (Doung and Ear 2009).

*Truth Commissions*: Truth commissions “…focus on a defined period in the past, exist for a limited period, are official, and are tasked with, at a minimum, compiling a narrative of the past violations and recommending ways to repair the damage and prevent its repetition” (Roht-Arriaza 2006, 3). Truth commissions have become both incredibly common and varied in their formulation. It is the most highly encouraged step toward reconciliation recommended by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) (Sanchez and Rognvik 2012; Bloomfield et al 2003). In formalizing this process of collecting what is deemed relevant information about past violence, truth commissions allow the state to establish one official version of the truth. Like amnesia and trials, this allows for the state to decide whether to demonize or make victims of individuals or whole classes of people. Additionally, because these commissions often have a mandate to examine certain categories of crimes, truth commissions can create a hierarchy of crimes where only certain kinds of crimes are considered valid for identifying victims and perpetrators (Uvin and Mironko 2003).

## Focusing on the Individual

*Healing specific injury*: As addressed in the definition section above, reconciliation often involves an aspect of forgiveness. It is argued that forgiveness is necessary for both victims and perpetrators to heal and move on from injury (Lederach 2010; Burns et al. 2003, 95; Galtung 2001, 4; Fisher 2001, 26). This is especially emphasized in countries where the dominant religion(s) emphasize forgiveness. What this implies for reconciliation proceedings that include forgiveness is that there must be a forum through which both victims and perpetrators can come to ask for or offer forgiveness. These strategies, then, are incredibly varied in their formulation, but often are tied to traditional modes of seeking and bestowing forgiveness based on the dominate religion.

*Integrating individuals from different communities*: Community building projects are those that are intended to show members of formerly adversarial groups that they have common experiences, injuries, and interests that can be improved through partnership, understanding, and working together. Such projects may include community learning programs focused on local leaders or youth. In these programs, the aim is to bring either leaders or youth together from differing groups in order to learn more about one another and change minds with the hope that the participants will take their new knowledge and attitudes about former adversaries back to their communities and these new attitudes will trickle up and out to the rest of the community (Moaz 2000). Other community level projects focus on bringing people from former rivalry groups together to work on specific projects such as building a community or health center that provides services to all members of the community. It is thought that through working together to build, maintain, and use such facilities, individuals will see that there is more to be gained by cooperating than by remaining hostile (Chayes and Minow 2003, 7).

With this brief overview of the strategies commonly promoted and used in the pursuit of reconciliation, I now turn to the case of Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. The strategies employed by Rwanda should help to illuminate the various benefits reconciliation procedures can produce for authoritarian regimes and allow me to build initial answers to my three research questions.

# Reconciliation in Rwanda: A case study

In this section, I first lay out the expectations for reconciliation in authoritarian regimes. That is, few would expect to see any legitimate attempt by an authoritarian regime to seek reconciliation. I then give a brief overview of the context of the Rwandan conflict. I explore the various steps taken following the genocide that have been presented as intended for reconciliation by the regime. While many if not most of these strategies appear to serve the purpose of punishing and controlling regime opponents rather than creating the space for reconciliation, the *gacaca* courts present a puzzling paradox where both the structure and the mission of the courts seem to promote genuine reconciliation. I explore each of these steps with special attention to the *gacaca* courts and draw several conclusions which are described in detail in the following section.

Authoritarian leaders struggle with issues of uncertainty. Their hold on power is always insecure and the information leaders obtain to determine their security is often unreliable and distorted (Schedler 2011). This is what is known as the “dictator’s dilemma” (Wintrobe 2001). Due to the outward displays of loyalty that authoritarian regimes often demand from their subjects, they can never know if the loyalty shown is genuine or a mask for discontent and subversion. Some regimes deal with this uncertainty by attempting to control every aspect of society. This might include codifying what labels are and are not acceptable for different groups (ethnic, religious, class), what slogans may be used in public, and what acceptable versions of history may exist including who is to blame for the problems society has faced. In states that have experienced violent civil conflict, these kinds of controls may be particularly beneficial for establishing and maintaining order. As such, if authoritarian regimes such as the Rwandan regime pursue processes of reconciliation, one would expect that they would choose processes that help to control the population in order to reduce the uncertainty experienced by the regime. One would not expect to see strategies of reconciliation that did not allow the regime to have high levels of control over both the process and the outcomes of reconciliation procedures.

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 has been widely documented and analyzed by many scholars. As such, I will only give a brief overview of the conflict here. The Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa ethnicities make up the population of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi (Bornkamm 2012, 9). Tensions between the two largest communities, the Hutu and Tutsi, have been going on for at least decades (and possibly centuries). In early April 1994, the Hutu president of Rwanda was on a plane that was shot down and it is still debated who was actually responsible for this act. Regardless of who was factually at fault, local radio broadcast the death of the president and encouraged retribution against all Tutsi (Bornkamm 2012, 15-16). This sparked a wave of violence that lasted for several months ending in July of that same year. The result was the death of an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsi and their Hutu and Twa sympathizers (UN 1994). The conflict ended abruptly in a decisive military victory by Tutsi led forces with the implementation of an authoritarian government. The new government placed an immediate emphasis on the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation in Rwanda revolved around three main concepts: punishment of perpetrators, reparations for victims, and elimination of ethnic identities. The banning of ethnic identities necessarily was a society level process while punishment of perpetrators and repartitions for victims happened at both the societal and individual levels.

## Eliminating Ethnic identities

One of the main strategies pursued by the Rwandan government following the genocide in 1994 was to eliminate the ethnic divisions that had marked the different sides in the conflict. The government removed ethnicity from national identity cards (which had been used during the genocide to identify potential victims) (Burns et al 2003, 89-90), banned all political parties except those that promote unity and attempt to represent all Rwandans (Hitjens 2009, 89-90; Zorbas 2004, 33-34), and made it essentially illegal to use ethnic or racial terms in public conversation (Sommers and McClintock 2003, 41). By removing the vocabulary of ethnicity from social conversation, the Rwandan government exercises a great deal of control over the way in which the population is able to discuss the events of the genocide. The Rwandan regime has argued that eliminating ethnic identities is a process of reconciliation because it discourages identity labels that exclude or isolate individuals and forces new, more collective identities to emerge (Lemarchand 2009, 65-66). They argued, some say sincerely, that the ethnic divisions in society were the root cause of the genocide and by eliminating ethnic discourse, they were trying to prevent genocide from happening again (Hitjens 2009, 79). This is a society-wide process of reconciliation that was not directly addressed in the various strategies discussed above.

Controlling the public discourse by making the use of ethnic terms all but illegal makes it easier for the regime to monitor and deal with potentially subversive behavior in two ways. First, individuals who speak openly about ethnicity are shamed by their neighbors for using such “divisive” language. This leads those who might prefer to use ethnic terms to suppress such language for fear of social retribution (Havel 1985, 35). Second, and more direct, individuals who use ethnic terms can be reported back to the government either by their neighbors or by regime loyalists and such individuals may be directly punished for committing the crime of “divisionism.” The crime of “divisionism,” officially created to enforce the ban on ethnic terminology, also provides the regime with “a convenient weapon to ban almost any type of organized opposition” (Lemarchand 2009, 66). So while the banning of ethnic terminology in public has been supported by some under the guise of promoting unity and reconciliation, the motives of the regime may also easily be attributed to a want to control and monitor the population.

## Punishment and reparations

Those who participated in the genocide were divided into two main categories of criminals: *génocidaires* who physically murdered people during the genocide, and those who participated in other genocide activities such as stealing or destroying property but who did not themselves murder anyone or organize the massacres. *Génocidaires* were tried in state court and, if found guilty, sentenced to death (Uvin and Mironko 2003, 226). Lesser offenders faced more informal forms of punishment, mostly distributed through community based, extra-legal trials known as *gacaca* (Schabas 2009).

Victims of the genocide were also recognized at two levels. Whole groups of people such as villages, churches, or families were acknowledged as victims of specific massacres that occurred during the genocide. Reparations for these victims and the wider Rwandan society often took the form of public memorials, museums, or days of recognition. Individuals were also recognized as victims through the *gacaca* courts. Reparations for individuals may have come in the form of payment, labor, or other assistance (Uvin and Mironko 2003).

### Societal reconciliation through trials and memorials

In the immediate aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the new regime rounded up as many suspected *génocidaires* as they could to be jailed and put on trial for their crimes. However, even though suspects had been jailed, no trials began until 1996 (Uvin and Mironko 2003, 223). These trials were (and are, as there are many suspected *génocidaires* still awaiting trial) presented as a means to promote societal healing and combat the problem of impunity (Schabas 2009, 207; Uvin and Mironko 2003, 222), for without justice, some argue, there can be no reconciliation (Kayigamba 2009). However, it is also reasonable to assume that the Tutsi dominated regime saw this as an opportunity to punish and eliminate its strongest potential political opposition. Conveniently for the new regime, the most prominent *génocidaires* and the most dangerous political opposition were the same people. In this instance, by linking the need for punishment with the idea of ending impunity, reconciliation became a way to strengthen to the new regime both within Rwanda and in the international community.

The new regime also acknowledged some victims of the genocide in ways ostensibly aimed at promoting society wide reconciliation. Multiple memorials were created all over the country, many at the sites of the most notorious acts of the genocide. These memorials are meant to serve as a public reminder of the genocide and the costs of the ethnic divisions that were at the heart of the genocide, acknowledging the victims of the genocide as belonging primarily to one ethnic group while also warning against the use of such divisions in the future. The sites also serve as a space for commemoration events (Buckley-Zistel 2009, 134). These memorials, along with a national Genocide Memorial Day, have been promoted by the regime as a way to honor victims of the genocide and to promote healing and reconciliation. However, memorials also have other purposes including providing political legitimacy to the regime (Moore 2009, 47). These memorials control not just how, but where and when it is appropriate to discuss the genocide. Discussion of the genocide outside of these state-sponsored events and sites could be seen as “divisive” and therefore illegal.

## Individual reconciliation through *gacaca* courts

To this point in this paper, it is arguable whether one would consider the steps taken by the Rwandan regime to be part of reconciliation at all. Each of the above mentioned strategies could easily be seen as acts of repression intended to control the population couched in the language of reconciliation for the sake of international legitimacy. Whatever dressing the regime attached to these strategies, however, it seems unlikely that the international community would support such tactics had there not been some genuine reconciliation coming out of Rwanda. This is why the *gacaca* courts have received so much attention from both scholars and practitioners of reconciliation. Something about these courts was different from the other strategies pursued by the regime and it seems to have produced some instances of genuine reconciliation. How these courts functioned and the outcomes associated with them are explored in this section.

Those individuals who committed lesser crimes of genocide, such as being accomplice to murder without the intention to kill or theft or destruction of property, were dealt with in local *gacaca* courts where the focus was on repairing interpersonal relationships at the village level (Uvin and Mironko 2003, 224). *Gacaca*, prior to the 1994 genocide, was an ancient dispute resolution technique used at the local level in Rwanda that had fallen by the wayside with the introduction of westernized forms of justice. In their original form, these courts dealt mostly with inheritance and property disputes at the local level. They were revived following the genocide in their new criminal form as a way to try the lesser crimes of genocide and relieve the burden on the overtaxed judicial system (Schabas 2009, 221-222). The judges were respected and elected members of the community. They worked with the locals to collect evidence and investigate crimes of genocide that happened within their jurisdiction (Bornkamm 2012, 2; Thelle 2001, 83). The courts focused less on seeking retribution and turned their attention to more positive forms of punishment such as paying back the cost of stolen goods or working for the families of victims. This process was presented as an opportunity to provide victims and their families a way to be recognized publically and to allow perpetrators the opportunity to repent and ask forgiveness and begin the process of healing (Schabas 2009, 224). These localized ideas of justice were strongly supported by international organizations. Non-governmental organizations including Avocats Sans Frontières provided support for the *gacaca* courts by developing training manuals used by many of the *gacaca* judges (Huyse 2003a, 28).

The introduction of the *gacaca* courts presents a surprising shift in the dialogue surrounding reconciliation in Rwanda. While it appears at first glance that the reconciliation strategies pursued by the Rwandan regime were meant to exert high levels of control over the population with little regard for the actuation of reconciliation at the community level, many experts have argued that the *gacaca* system has produced real reconciliation. How it has done so is worth exploring.

Many proponents of the *gacaca* courts have praised their “capacity to facilitate *restorative justice* via meaningful *engagement* between parties previously in conflict, in the form of communal dialogue and cooperation, which are crucial to fostering reconciliation after the genocide” (Clark 2009, 300, emphasis in original). This focus on engagement between former rival groups specifically speaks to the issue of relationship building that is at the heart of reconciliation. This restorative justice does not mean that crimes go unpunished, but rather that punishments should be geared toward promoting reconciliation and not simply retribution. This is achieved through two avenues: the high levels of popular participation in the trials that result in genuine and difficult dialogue between all sides of the genocide, and through the plea bargaining and reparations often recommended in sentencing.

The ethos of the courts emphasizes the need for community engagement for success. That is, *gacaca* are places where the community can come together not just to hear and decide on individual cases, but to also engage in a dialogue where everyone has the chance to share their experiences and heal. Popular participation is an important aspect of the success of *gacaca* (Clark 2009, 312). The *gacaca* trials have encouraged open dialogue to discuss the root causes of the genocide and avenues for healing. This is different from legal trials and most truth commissions where individuals may be given the chance to tell their side of the story, but where a dialogue is not fostered to come up with creative solutions. A serious danger is apparent in this kind of open dialogue, however. It is easy to imagine how such discussions could lead to new hurt feelings and more deeply entrenched ethnic divisions. Because the vocabulary surrounding the genocide and ethnic divisions was so strongly controlled in Rwanda, however, it is possible that such retrenchment was more difficult. Without the ability to appeal to ethnic divisions in such discussions, individuals were forced to find new and maybe more salient ways of addressing grievances that were also easier to solve.

In addition to the intense dialogue that was a part of the *gacaca* process, the punishments that were meted out, especially for lesser offenses, were often focused around community service and reparations to victims. Some of these punishments included, for example, rebuilding the houses of genocide victims, making payments for property damage, or participating in the maintenance of a community garden (Clark 2009, 315). Such punishments force former adversaries to work together in close proximity to one another toward mutual goals. These punishments follow the same logic of the community building projects discussed as a strategy for reconciliation. So while the *gacaca*  themselves may not always be seen as relationship building projects, the punishments doled out may produce the same outcomes sought in such projects. While it is difficult to measure and quantify aspects of building relationships, the *gacaca* courts certainly seem to promote relationship building through both judicial processes and the implementation of punishments.

The *gacaca* courts have been widely seen and promoted as highly democratic means of justice in the authoritarian state of Rwanda. It seems counter-intuitive that the authoritarian regime would deliberately give up control of punishment for such a large group of individuals suspected of acts of genocide, especially an ethnically-based regime largely representing those identified as victims of the genocide and that is simultaneously prosecuting the leading *génocidaires* in other trials. The way the *gacaca* courts functioned, however, was beneficial to the regime in two ways. First, the democratic process of the *gacaca* courts is yet another piece of the reconciliation process that the regime can use to boost its international credibility. They can insist that allowing the local authorities to handle these lower-level infractions is in line with the democratic principles that the international community promotes. Second, these processes separate the regime from any specific verdict in a *gacaca* trial. If anyone is dissatisfied with the outcome of a trial, it is the fault of the locally elected *gacaca* judge, and not the regime. In this way, the regime may be able to maintain a positive reputation with some of the locals even when they are dissatisfied with a *gacaca* verdict.

However, while presenting the veneer of total separation from the processes of the *gacaca* courts, the government maintained strict control over what kinds of cases could be settled by these courts, restricted not only by the type of crime committed, but also by the time frame in which the crimes took place and where they occurred (Bornkamm 2012, 48-61; Clark 2009, 303). By so strictly defining what could be addressed in the *gacaca* courts, the regime maintained control over the discourse and definition of what crimes constituted part of the genocide and who was to blame. Quite advantageously, the *gacaca* courts allowed the Rwandan government to maintain fairly high levels of control, while also keeping themselves at arm’s length from the specific outcomes of the trials and boosting its international credibility as promoting democratic policies within its regime.

## Other reconciliation processes

It is worth noting that the procedures outlined above do not constitute the full list of processes employed in the pursuit of reconciliation in Rwanda. The international community, whether for reasons of guilt for not having acted to stop the genocide or for reasons of pursuing punishment for crimes against humanity as classified by the UN Charter, established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). The ICTR was created by the UN Security Council by resolution 955 on 8 November 1994 with the stated objectives to prosecute “persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1994” (UNICTR). The UN’s establishment of the ICTR may be another explanation for why the Rwandan government pursued reconciliation so aggressively. That is, the new regime sought to establish its legitimacy in both the eyes of the Rwandan people and the international community by demonstrating that the ICTR was unnecessary and that Rwanda could handle prosecuting crimes of the genocide on its own (Schabas 2009).

# Authoritarianism and Reconciliation

The case of Rwanda provides some important insights into why and how an authoritarian regime might choose to pursue reconciliation. Further, it also shows us some ways in which reconciliation might legitimately be achieved in an authoritarian context. In this section, I will take my research questions in turn and present the arguments that the Rwandan case has illuminated for each.

## Why would an authoritarian regime pursue reconciliation?

The above analysis of the Rwandan pursuit of reconciliation demonstrates that authoritarian regimes may have several motivations in pursuing strategies of reconciliation. These motivations include earning credibility with the international community, diffusing blame for failed or unresolved problems, and finding new ways to control the population. When reconciliation is pursued in such a way that these other goals may also be achieved, it is no longer surprising that an authoritarian regime would expend resources for these purposes. This does, however, present the question of which strategies for reconciliation are best suited to helping an authoritarian regime achieve these goals.

## Which strategies of reconciliation are most attractive to authoritarian regimes?

The Rwandan regime was clearly deliberate in choosing its strategies for reconciliation, but as was noted above, they were not the only strategies available. Authoritarian regimes will be more likely to pursue processes of reconciliation when there is an opportunity to use such processes as a mechanism to control the population. They choose those strategies which are most likely to allow the regime to control the narrative that is established as the “truth” about what happened during conflict as well as those processes that legitimize retribution against political rivals through trials and punishment. By couching these strategies in the language of reconciliation, authoritarian regimes are able to gain the support of the international community for programs that would have otherwise been denounced as dictatorial and oppressive. Based on these goals, it is worth briefly exploring the various strategies for reconciliation listed in the second section of this paper.

*Collective Amnesia*: Rwanda instituted what might be seen as a selective collective amnesia in the policy of erasing ethnic identity. In this process, the regime was able to control the narrative of the genocide while also establishing a “clean slate” for society going forward. In addition, the public memorials and national holidays associated with genocide remembrance restrict the acceptable ways and times in which the country is allowed to remember the genocide. This selective amnesia provided the regime with a high degree of control over society.

Many other authoritarian regimes have implemented more holistic policies of collective amnesia. For example, Zimbabwe, a single-party authoritarian regime since independence (Geddes 2003, 232), employed a strategy of deliberate collective amnesia. The war of liberation fought in Zimbabwe from the late 1960s through the late 1970s (Norman 2003, 65) came to an official end after the British helped to negotiate a settlement called The Lancaster House Agreement in 1979 (Rogers 1998, 65). The Agreement included a constitutionally enshrined policy of amnesia because, it was argued, the new country needed to forget the past as searching for the truth would only reinjure victims and hurt the reconciliation process (Huyse 2003b, 34-35). This policy of amnesia allowed for the new government to ignore war crimes it had committed in addition to controlling the public discourse about the war. Collective amnesia, it seems, can be an attractive reconciliation strategy for authoritarian regimes.

*Trials and Punishments*: As shown above, the Rwandan regime successfully used trials to identify, round up, and eliminate a large portion of their political opposition. They were able to label the leaders of the genocide, and the most likely political opposition, as *génocidaires*. This also served the purpose of legitimizing the regime to some in the international community. By actively punishing the *génocidaires*, the Rwandan regime was able to present itself as fighting impunity and promoting democratic principles. Other authoritarian regimes have also been successful using this strategy.

Both Argentina and East Timor have engaged trials as part of the reconciliation process following civil conflict (Doung and Ear 2009). Interestingly, many years following the period of the “killing fields” under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian government (still considered authoritarian, though under different rule) (Geddes 2003, 228) has begun to pursue trials for those Khmer Rouge still alive and living in Cambodia (Chea 2003, 50). This presents another possibility for authoritarian regimes pursuing reconciliation. That is, a regime may choose to employ a policy of amnesia with regard to previous crimes until there is enough pressure on the regime to prosecute former war crimes that might threaten the stability of the regime. In other words, authoritarian leaders might keep the option of trials “in their pockets” as an option for dealing with or distracting from political unrest at a future date. Trials and punishments, then, are also likely reconciliation tools for authoritarian regimes.

*Truth Commissions*: As is clear from the discussion above, a truth commission was not part of the Rwandan reconciliation strategy despite the general support for truth commissions in the international community. To date, no authoritarian regime has managed to successfully set up a truth and reconciliation commission. Burundi, which has been experiencing ethnic civil war for decades, has pledged to set up a truth and reconciliation commission, but has yet to follow through on this promise (Sanchez and Rognvik 2012). This may be an indication that authoritarian regimes find this kind of truth-seeking commission to be too dangerous. It is hard to know which aspects of truth commissions might be most frightening to authoritarian regimes. It could be that truth commissions tend to focus on victim experience and rarely allow for the accused to respond to their accusers in an official way (Hayner 2011, 21). This may lead to fears that members of the regime or the inner-circle could be named in truth commission reports. Further, the regime may grant amnesty to certain individuals or groups in exchange for their loyalty and such individuals may be implicated in truth commission proceedings. This could put the power of the regime to enforce and follow through on its own deals in question, jeopardizing the regime’s strength. Additionally, a truth commission might decide on a version of the truth in contrast to the regime’s preferred truth. An authoritarian regime may try to control or dictate which version of the truth a commission settles on, but this could delegitimize the regime. Based on this analysis, one would not expect that truth commission would be a commonly used reconciliation strategy among authoritarian regimes.

*Healing Specific Injury*: Rwanda did not engage in private forms of individual healing. That is, healing on the individual level was dealt with in the more public *gacaca* courts. That said, these programs of forgiveness do not appear to be much of a threat to authoritarian regimes. Because these projects are limited to individuals and deal with specific instances of injustice, it does not follow that any truth revealed during these sessions, even if they are in public, would have much of an effect on the regime. Further, in the heavily Christian population of Rwanda, the religious aspects of forgiveness required that the injured party fully let go of the past injury, which would imply that any retaliatory act against the perpetrator or the state would be contrary to the idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness programs, then, teach tolerance of the state while encouraging letting go of personal animosities.

Much like trials, programs of forgiveness may also serve to placate the international community. Where a regime does not want, or is unable to try and punish certain individuals, they can point to programs of forgiveness as superior alternatives that address the crimes of the past without wasting community resources on jailing certain individuals. This also implies a level of control for the regime. As in Rwanda, an authoritarian regime can choose to punish one group of perpetrators while encouraging forgiveness programs for others. These programs provide seemingly legitimate cover in the international community for an authoritarian regime to allow its supporters to escape harsh punishment. Therefore, it seems that programs of forgiveness might also be expected in authoritarian reconciliation procedures.

*Integrating individuals from different communities*: A goal of cross-community integration programs is to show communities that have been fighting that they have more in common than they do differences. The threat to an authoritarian regime in this situation is that groups may find that what they have in common is a mutual problem with the state. Under such a situation, groups that had been fighting one another may work together to destabilize the regime. In this case it would be preferable to the regime to keep the groups fighting each other as opposed to the state. Additionally, these programs identify leaders in the community and teach them how to organize. Even if these programs are unsuccessful in achieving reconciliation between groups, the skills taught in these programs could be used to organize communities against the state instead.

Therefore, it is surprising that *gacaca* included many aspects of cross-community relationship building. Through the dialogues that occurred in the actual trials as well as some of the punishments handed down, people from different communities were encouraged to move beyond the differences of the past and work together. This seems like it could have produced a dangerous outcome for the regime, and yet it is argued that this process not only was not dangerous, but it also produced true reconciliation. This returns us to my final question.

## Why did we see some real reconciliation in Rwanda?

The projects and processes labeled as strategies for reconciliation and pursued by the Rwandan regime do not seem, at first glance, that have been intended to create true community reconciliation. Instead, it seems reasonable that the regime was more focused on establishing high levels of control over the population. Yet, many reconciliation scholars and practitioners have praised the levels of reconciliation to that have been achieved in Rwanda. Based on the case study above, I argue that the highly democratic process of the *gacaca* courts combined with the severely restricted language which was allowed to be used when referring to ethnic differences may have been particularly helpful in achieving some level of new or renewed relationships and reconciliation.

In the *gacaca* courts, individuals were encouraged to speak openly in an ongoing dialogue with former combatants. This dialogue was presented as a way for former combatants to establish new relationships and to get at the underlying cause of the genocide so that it would not be repeated in the future. However, these dialogues were also restricted by the laws against divisiveness and ethnic labels were disallowed. This may have forced individuals to find other, less identity focused ways of addressing the problems that led to the genocide in the first place. The extreme level of control that the regime exerted over the language used in these conversations would not have been possible in a democratic regime. That is, it may have been a benefit to the cause of reconciliation for these conversations to have taken place in a tightly controlled, authoritarian context. In this way, an authoritarian regime may be uniquely placed to create the space and conditions necessary for reconciliation in a way that a democratic regime cannot.

# Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explain why authoritarian regimes would pursue reconciliation procedures that have the potential to undermine their rule and which set of procedures they favor. I demonstrated through an analysis of commonly recommended reconciliation procedures that many of the goals of authoritarian regimes, specifically that of controlling and monitoring the population, can be achieved through the processes of reconciliation. In this way, reconciliation procedures can become a new set of “tools” in the authoritarian toolkit. Further, this paper explored the puzzling case of reconciliation in Rwanda where the authoritarian approach to reconciliation procedures also managed to produce some legitimate reconciliation. By taking a closer look at the *gacaca* courts in concert with the other reconciliation procedures pursued by the Rwandan government, I demonstrated how reconciliation might be easier to achieve in the highly controlled context of an authoritarian regime.

The case of Rwanda produces very reasonable answers for my original research questions. First, the Rwandan pursuit of reconciliation demonstrates that authoritarian regimes can have several motivations for pursuing strategies of reconciliation. These motivations include earning credibility with the international community, diffusing blame for failed or unresolved problems, and finding new ways to control the population. When reconciliation is pursued in such a way that these other goals may also be achieved, it is no longer surprising that an authoritarian regime would choose to expend resources for these purposes.

Second, as my theoretical explanation suggests and the Rwandan experience demonstrates, certain reconciliation strategies can be extremely useful tools for those in power to control the population. In Rwanda, this was done through banning any discussion of ethnicity or race in public, establishing memorials and holidays honoring victims and promoting the official version of the history of the genocide, and prosecuting perpetrators of certain acts of the genocide through state judicial and *gacaca* courts. These processes allowed the regime to monitor the population and all but outlaw political opposition as being “divisive.” Other authoritarian regimes may look to Rwanda as an example of what reconciliation tools establish high levels of control over the population following violent civil conflict while also establishing political legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and facilitating domestic stability. Despite the fact that Rwanda has been classified as an authoritarian regime since the end of the genocide in 1994 (Geddes 2003, 231), it is also regularly held up as an example of a state actively in pursuit of democratic principles and the rule of law because of its aggressive approach toward reconciliation (Chayes and Minow 2003; Bloomfield 2003; Clark and Kaufman 2009).

Finally, authoritarian regimes may be in a unique position to create the space needed for reconciliation to occur. That is, through the tight control of the political environment, authoritarian regimes may be able to direct conversations about the past in ways that will not allow for the retrenchment of old grievances by allowing only state-sanctioned language. This can force individuals to find new, and maybe more productive ways of dealing with the past.

This paper has provided an initial set of answers to these three questions, but much more research needs to be done to confirm these. It is worth noting that there are some other possible independent variables that may affect the choice of reconciliation strategies and the success of such strategies in authoritarian regimes that I have not to this point addressed. First, as noted at the beginning of the case study, the primary victims of the Rwandan genocide were the ultimate victors in the conflict and therefore controlled the government and the reconciliation processes chosen by the regime. Whether the regime is run by the victims or the perpetrators of violence may have an effect on the choices made in the aftermath. Second, it is plausible that both external pressure from the international community and internal pressure from mobilized community groups may have an effect on the timing and selection of strategies. A regime that prefers a policy of amnesia, especially when it is associated with the perpetrators of crimes, may be forced to institute at least show trials if there is enough internal pressure. Or, as in the Rwandan case, there may be pressure from the international community to take certain steps that combat impunity.

Finally, it may be argued that the *gacaca* courts worked in Rwanda because there was institutional memory associated with these settings. That is, the institutional inheritance associated with the *gacaca* courts in Rwanda made these bottom-up procedures more likely to work than we would expect in other authoritarian contexts. I would dispute this claim. Evidence shows that there was very little institutional memory associated with *gacaca* among the Rwandan population. Many people had never heard of the courts or what they were about (PRI 2002, 9 fn 16; Thelle 2001, 83-84). This would indicate that similar systems should be able to be instituted in other authoritarian societies that have no history of such institutions.

The effects of these and other independent variables not explored in this paper may have significant effects on the reconciliation strategies chosen by authoritarian regimes. Additionally, comparative analysis across other cases of reconciliation in authoritarian regimes would provide more answers. While there is not room for these in this paper, it is certainly worth exploring in future research.

Reconciliation need not be a threat to authoritarian regimes in the aftermath of violent civil conflict. Instead, reconciliation should be considered yet another tool in the authoritarian toolkit for maintaining power and repressing opposition if employed properly.

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