

Wrong on Rwanda

Do Not Disturb:

The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad

Michela Wrong

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John Newsinger

In its 18 September 2021 issue, *The Spectator* published a powerful article, 'When will Britain wake up to the horror of Rwanda's President?', written by Michela Wrong.¹ 'No time soon' is obviously the answer. It seems clear that Prime Minister Johnson no longer reads the magazine he used to edit. If she read the article, Home Secretary Patel, probably considered it a positive recommendation of Rwanda's dictator, President Paul Kagame. What the article was at least in part concerned with was the Rwandan regime's attempts to smear and discredit Wrong since the publication of her book, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad*.

What Wrong has to say is tremendously important, not least because of the Conservative government's plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda despite – or perhaps because of – the Kagame regime's wholly justified reputation for repression and murder. The grim reality is that both the Conservative government and the Labour opposition are very much in bed with the Kagame regime, and have been for many years now. Indeed the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in June 2022 is actually scheduled to take place in the Rwandan capital, Kigali. Let us consider Wrong's powerful indictment of the Kagame regime.

Her book is organised around the assassination of one of Kagame's opponents, Patrick Karegeya, in a hotel room in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 31 December 2013. Wrong compares this to the Saudi assassination of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 – although it attracted nothing like the attention. Karegeya was probably poisoned and then strangled by a Rwandan hit squad. They left the room, placing a Do Not

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/4mdxmf5j>> or <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/when-will-britain-wake-up-to-the-horror-of-rwandas-president>>.

Disturb sign on the door. According to the South African police, '[a]fter carrying out the murder, the team was driven away in a car with Burundian diplomatic plates; the professionals flew out that evening'. One South African security expert, whom Wrong interviewed, told her that the killing clearly demonstrated the influence of Mossad on Rwandan intelligence. The assassination 'was standard Israeli MO'. The regime, of course, denied any involvement in Karegeya's murder, but at the same time celebrated it and used it as a warning to others. At a National Prayer Breakfast, of all places, Kagame took the opportunity

'to drum home an implacable "you can run but you can't hide" message. Available on YouTube, the speech is quietly bloodcurdling [. . .] His voice descends to a near whisper . . . "Whoever is against our country will not escape our wrath. The person will face consequences [. . .] Whoever he or she is, it is a matter of time".'

(pp. 28-30)

The audience, many of them clergy, applauded enthusiastically.

The biggest problem Wrong faced when researching and writing her book was, she tells us, 'Fear'. She notes that she had been warned that the Rwandan regime kept its enemies and critics under surveillance. Nevertheless she surprised when it was an email from Rwanda's high commissioner in London in 2015 that opened up her computer to 'a steady stream of viruses over the following months'. (p. 9) No Rwandan exile would have made such a mistake. She tells of how on one occasion, she urged a Western economist, who was publishing anonymous articles in the *Review of African Political Economy* that challenged Rwanda's supposed 'impressive development record', to go public. He refused, telling her: 'You have to understand, I have a wife, I have children'. And she recounts meetings with Rwandan exiles where they have been clearly afraid that they are under surveillance and their meeting was being watched, photographed. And this was not just in Africa. She met a Rwandan student in Great Portland Street in London, but he would only talk to her 'in the darkness of an archway' where he could not be photographed. (pp. 9-11)

How serious all this was is demonstrated by her account of how the Metropolitan Police contacted three Rwandan refugees in May 2011, warning them their lives were in danger. So seriously was the threat taken, soon after, one of them had armed plain clothes police arrive at his home in Thamesmead. At that same time, the British government was giving Rwanda 'an annual £55 million in the form of annual direct

budgetary support'. (p. 83) And in Belgium, a Canadian journalist researching the regime was, in 2014, 'assigned . . . a team of armed escorts and an armored car for the duration of her stay'. (p. 434) One last point here: the Rwandan regime inevitably made use of Israeli NSO Group's 'Pegasus' spyware – the software 'so powerful that the Israeli government – which NSO asks to approve its customers –classifies it as a weapon'. (p. 475)

One interesting way in which the murderous activities of the regime were publicly exposed in 2011 was when exiled Rwandan journalists, given asylum in Scandinavia, put a number of tape recordings of Rwandan security officials planning assassination online. As Wrong writes:

'it is possible for any ordinary member of the public to enjoy the surreal experience of eavesdropping on an African intelligence officer ordering a political hit. Google "YouTube", "Assassination", "General" and "Kayumba" and you can listen to Kagame's henchmen at their sinister work, with subtitles in English and French helpfully provided'. (p. 74)

An effort was made to interest Western governments in this. Patrick Karegeya actually visited London (it was on this occasion that Wrong first met him) and handed 'the recordings over to MI6, which circulated them around the Foreign Office and Department for International Development'. In the USA, the recordings were handed over to the FBI. As she points out: 'Whatever these Western government ministers might say publicly, they could not claim to be unaware of Kagame's tactics'. Where they were unsuccessful was in getting the BBC, CNN or Al Jazeera to give the tape recordings an airing. (pp. 77-78)

Why then was the Rwandan regime so liked in the West? Tony Blair praised Kagame as 'a visionary', while Bill Clinton actually described him as 'one of the greatest leaders of our time'. (p. 389) A blind eye was turned towards the regime's excesses because of the way that it projected itself as a successful modernising regime – authoritarian maybe, but successful. Rwanda was enthusiastically celebrated as Africa's Singapore! Visitors to the capital city, Kigali, whether they were Western journalists, politicians or officials, were always impressed by the absence of beggars and the homeless on the streets, 'even after a Human Rights Watch report explained the reason: the indigent were routinely rounded up and taken to "rehabilitation centers", where regular beatings were the main

form of education, according to those who emerged'.² Many visitors were impressed by the lack of corruption, but as Wrong observes, while 'you were certainly unlikely to be shaken down by a customs 'officer with whisky on his breath', the regime was engaged in the 'systematic looting' of the mineral wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which presumably did 'not count as corruption'. In July 2013, Gustave Makonene, a Transparency International investigator, was strangled by Rwandan police officers and his body dumped 'after showing an unhealthy interest in mineral smuggling'. (pp. 388-389) Wrong is particularly scathing about Kagame's intervention in the DRC which exposed 'a casualness to human life, cavalier ruthlessness, and shocking levels of greed'. (p. 334) Once again the West turned a blind eye.

But surely Rwanda is a democracy? Well, before the Presidential election in 2003, there was a discussion about what percentage of the votes Kagame should give himself. The general feeling among his people was that he should receive 70% of the vote, because this would give the election credibility in the West. Kagame dismissed such concerns and gave himself 95.1% of the vote. Such a result demonstrated his absolute dominance to his domestic enemies. He was also confident that his Western allies would not be the slightest bit concerned about such blatant electoral fraud – fraud that was accompanied by widespread repression and intimidation. Indeed, in 2010, he gave himself 93.8% of the Presidential election vote and in 2017 no less than 98.79%. It is worth mentioning here that in 2009, even though it had never been a British colony or dependency, Rwanda was invited by the New Labour government of Gordon Brown to join the British Commonwealth. Its membership was opposed by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative because of the regime's human rights record, but Rwanda was allowed to join. The Commonwealth conference in June 2022 is actually scheduled to meet in the Rwandan capital Kigali!

One point worth making about Kagame personally is that when his admirers have met him in Davos, Washington DC, Brussels, London and elsewhere, they have always been impressed by 'the hermit-like austerity of Kagame's appearance, the monkish simplicity of his dark shirts and high-collar tunics'. He was apparently a man who ruled by intellect rather than by force. The reality is very different. Kagame had a great capacity for 'personalized intimidation': that is to say, he regularly beat his subordinates, punching and kicking them, having them flogged, indeed

² That report is at
<<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/rwanda>>.

sometimes flogging them himself. (p. 335) Wrong recounts a number of episodes, among them Kagame's anger when the curtains in his office were changed. His finance director and the army captain in charge of security were ordered to lie on the floor while he caned them in front of his senior staff. After five minutes, he ordered others to take over and the beating continued, according to one of those present, 'for half an hour'. (p. 428) And as if this were not bad enough, Kagame is also a fervent Arsenal supporter. The government of this poverty stricken country actually sponsors the club to the tune of £10 million a year; in return for which players' shirts and the stadium carry 'Visit Rwanda' messages.

Which brings us to the Johnson government's planned deportation scheme. The first point to make here is that, as far as Johnson himself is concerned, the scheme is primarily a distraction – an attempt to exploit anti-immigrant feeling in order to shift attention from his lying, incompetence and serial law-breaking. (Apparently the building in Britain with the highest number of Covid fines by far is already 10 Downing Street, with many more fines still to come.) This is not to say, of course, that he is in any way concerned about the fate of refugees and asylum seekers. He obviously is not. For Patel and other right-wing Conservatives, however, the deportation of potentially thousands of asylum seekers to Rwanda or other similar countries is very much the favoured solution. The conditions they encounter there are really of no concern whatsoever to these people. They have no problem with handing over vulnerable people to the tender mercies of a murderous dictatorship. In fact the very character of the current Rwandan regime will actually make it easier to hide and cover-up the inevitable horrors that are going to result from this policy.

What is interesting though is that, while the Labour opposition has made clear its opposition to the Rwandan scheme, it has been remarkably quiet regarding the character of the Kagame regime. The reason for this is quite simple: not only was the New Labour government a strong supporter of Kagame, but even after he had lost office, Blair continued as an adviser to and apologist for the regime. In 2015, when one of Kagame's lieutenants was detained at Heathrow on a European Arrest Warrant, with a view to extraditing him to Spain to face war crimes charges, the legal team that prevented his extradition was headed up by a certain Cheri Blair. And as recently as April 2021, Kagame spoke alongside Blair at a meeting hosted by the modestly named Tony Blair Institute for Global Improvement. With the Blairites once again in the ascendency inside the Labour Party – indeed, arguably stronger than ever

before – we cannot expect any real criticism of the Kagame regime and its murderous brutality from any party spokesmen or women. This shameful reality makes Michela Wrong’s book all the more important. It is a brave and powerful indictment that deserves urgent reading.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God: Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism*, published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>