

Introduction

Genocide destabilizes societies and creates power vacuums that illiberal actors exploit.

Despite transitional initiatives intended to promote democracy, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina instead produced hybrid regimes with authoritarian characteristics. These regimes are shaped by international actors through transitional administrations and mediation processes.

Genocide is widely perceived as a failure of the international community that reflects poorly on international actors. Accordingly, these actors are more concerned with appearance of responsibility than with the political realities of post-genocide states. International actors granted legitimacy to hybrid regimes through transitional institutions, economic aid, and symbolic justice mechanisms, seeking to rebuild their own legitimacy in the process.

Post-genocide illiberal regression is consistent across historical case studies, reflecting a concern for the international community through its potential to contribute to the global trend of autocratization.

Author: Rachel Stratthdee

Research Advisor: Dr. Arne Kislenko

The Legitimacy Machine: Genocide, Authoritarian Regime Production, and International Complacency

Primary Research Objective

- To examine the role of genocide and civil conflict in producing hybrid-authoritarian regimes in the historical cases of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina

Secondary Research Objectives

- To track the influence of the common factors of a) power vacuums, b) American interest, and c) international interventions on genocide processes and regime outcomes
- To examine how both transitional states and international actors pursue and acquire legitimacy, and how they legitimize each other, following genocide

Historical Case Studies

Cambodia

Historical Background

Civil war and American bombing radicalized the Khmer Rouge (KR), who seized power in 1975 and proclaimed Democratic Kampuchea. Under Pol Pot, the KR killed 1.7–2 million people through class-based, ethnic, and religious persecution.

International Failures

Superpower competition shaped the genocide. China backed Pol Pot as part of the Sino-Soviet split, while the U.S. ignored atrocities after its Vietnam defeat; no major power intervened.

End of Genocide & Transitional Efforts

Vietnam intervened and deposed Pol Pot in 1979. The United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia tried to democratize the nation between 1991 and 1993, but failed; drawing on patronage networks, Hun Sen staged a coup in 1997. International actors condemned the coup but quickly resumed aid, prioritizing stability over democracy, and Sen entrenched his regime.

Authoritarian/Illiberal Consolidation

Hun Sen deepened his control over Cambodian power through land concessions, clientelism, and selective development. He manipulated transitional justice (ECCC trials) to bolster legitimacy. Cambodia remains a hybrid regime under his son, Hun Manet.

Rwanda

Historical Background

Colonialism entrenched Hutu–Tutsi divisions. Civil war began in 1990, led by the RPF under Paul Kagame. After President Habyarimana's plane was shot down in 1994, Hutu extremists killed ~800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

International Failures

The UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda withdrew most troops as genocide escalated, despite warnings of the nature and severity of the violence. The U.S. discouraged substantive intervention following their failures in Somalia, which was norm-setting due to their post-Cold War unipolar status.

End of Genocide & Transitional Efforts

Kagame's RPF ended the genocide militarily. A coalition government was nominally installed, but Kagame held de facto control as Vice President until staging a coup and formally assuming the presidency in 2000.

Authoritarian/Illiberal Consolidation

Kagame entrenched his rule through term limit abolition and repression of opposition. Gacaca courts and genocide memorialization laws were used to silence dissent. As he pursued development, International donors legitimized his regime despite human rights abuses.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Historical Background

Legacies of Titoism and the collapse of Yugoslavia led to the ethnically driven Bosnian War (1992–1995). Serbian forces committed ethnic cleansing, culminating in the mass killing of 8,000 Bosniak men at Srebrenica in 1995.

International Failures

The UN Protection Force's weak mandate and Western narratives of ancient "Balkan hatred" justified inaction. Despite evidence of genocide and ethnic cleansing throughout the war, the U.S. avoided decisive action until after Srebrenica, when NATO airstrikes forced Serb concessions.

End of Genocide & Transitional Efforts

The Dayton Agreement ended the war in 1995, creating a consociational system that allocated power along ethnic lines. The Peace Implementation Council and Office of the High Representative remain involved and provide ongoing international oversight.

Authoritarian/Illiberal Consolidation

Dayton entrenched ethnonationalist elites, incentivizing corruption and clientelism. Despite elections, political space is functionally non-competitive. EU accession processes reinforced existing elites, legitimizing a fragmented competitive authoritarian system.

Conclusion

In the cases of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, genocide was enabled by international neglect. Subsequently, ostensibly democratic transitional regimes were implemented. However, these processes were carried out with little regard for the political realities in the post-genocide states, with International actors prioritizing the appearance of stability over genuine democracy.

Post-genocide regimes simultaneously consolidated power and acquired legitimacy through

- Performing democracy (elections, constitutions, transitional justice initiatives)
- Controlling memory of genocide (trials, memorials, laws)
- Leveraging international aid and pursuing development

The international complacency that has allowed illiberal regimes to repeatedly proliferate following civil conflict and genocide must be remedied; ongoing conflicts like those in Darfur and Myanmar have the potential to follow the same trajectory as the examined case studies.

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