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OPINION

## Hotel Rwanda hero is unlikely to get a fair trial

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The movie *Hotel Rwanda*, a story of heroism amid the breakdown of civilization, captivated audiences around the world when it was released in 2004. It depicted the real-life story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who turned Hôtel des Mille Collines into a sanctuary for Tutsis targeted by predatory Hutus during the genocide. The actor Don Cheadle played the character of Mr. Rusesabagina with anguish and grace, and was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe. When the film was screened in Rwanda in front of 10,000 people at a stadium in Kigali, the director Terry George said it was one of the most emotional experiences he had ever witnessed. He later recalled how after a screening in Rwanda's parliament, President Paul Kagame personally turned to him to say that the movie had done much good in exposing the horror of Rwanda's 100 days of slaughter.

Mr. George went to great lengths to get the story right: He interviewed survivors at the hotel where Mr. Rusesabagina, a Hutu, is said to have saved more than 1,200 people, mostly Tutsis, from extermination. In 2005, during the screenings in Rwanda, people who had been at the hotel tearfully acknowledged Mr. Rusesabagina's role in protecting them.

But in Rwanda, where power has long been vested in one man – the president – Mr. Rusesabagina's reputation as a hero was bound to end, and in spectacular fashion.

In November, 2005, after nearly a decade of living in exile, Mr. Rusesabagina was awarded a presidential medal of freedom by then U.S. president George W. Bush – an act that political insiders say invoked the wrath of Mr. Kagame, who is not accustomed to sharing the glory in the aftermath of genocide. According to Rwanda’s official version of history, Mr. Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) are credited with ending the ethnic violence, which pitted Hutu executioners against Tutsi victims. The accolades from global elites such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Bill Gates have largely been directed at Rwanda’s supreme leader.

In 2006, Mr. Rusesabagina wrote *An Ordinary Man*, a bestselling autobiography that accused the Rwandan President of being a dictator and profiting from a Tutsi-led “elite power.”

In 2007, as Mr. Rusesabagina was gaining agency as a humanitarian and international public speaker, he broke the code of silence around Rwanda’s official genocide narrative. He said Tutsis were not the only victims in 1994, and he urged the United Nations to prosecute Mr. Kagame’s troops for the extensive, systematic crimes they committed against Hutus. He alleged that Tutsi commandos were responsible for killing Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana – the act that triggered the genocide – and that Tutsi soldiers killed and burned countless Hutu civilians in Rwanda’s forests.

By then the Rwandan government had begun a concerted smear campaign against him, according to Tutsis who broke with Mr. Kagame and now live in exile. Former RPF military sources say the regime has resorted to a tried-and-true tactic called *gutekinika* against the *Hotel Rwanda* hero, which in Rwandan parlance means the art of lying for political gain. For three decades, the RPF has used Rwandans to engage in *gutekinika* – fabricating false stories about political opponents that are then fed to international institutions, academics and journalists. The RPF has invented criminal dossiers to successfully frame innocent people and it has staged violent attacks that are blamed on enemies. Authorities have manipulated poverty data to reflect a rosier economic picture than actually exists, according to Mr. Kagame’s former colleagues.

Now, the Rwandan regime claims Mr. Rusesabagina exaggerated his role in rescuing Tutsis and extorted money from people who sought refuge at his hotel. Authorities accuse him of genocide denial and revisionism, crimes that are punishable under Rwandan law. Mr. Rusesabagina also stands accused of supporting Hutu rebels in neighbouring Congo, and of launching deadly attacks on Rwandan territory in 2018 through the armed wing of his political party at the time, the Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change. He has been detained for nearly two weeks in Rwanda, and has only just been able to speak with his family

and a consular official. Mr. Rusesabagina has been charged with terrorism, financing terrorism, arson, kidnapping and murder – accusations that seem diametrically opposed to his acts of bravery in 1994.

His international team of lawyers has roundly denied the charges against him, arguing that Mr. Rusesabagina was abducted in Dubai and subjected to an extraordinary rendition. Jared Genser, Mr. Rusesabagina’s lead counsel who has helped free a number of political prisoners in global hot spots, says his client is at serious risk of being tortured.

Mr. Kagame has denied Mr. Rusesabagina was kidnapped in late August, but suggested that he had been tricked into coming home, calling the operation “flawless.” As The Globe and Mail has reported, critics of Mr. Kagame, in particular people willing to expose RPF crimes, have a habit of disappearing, being kidnapped or turning up dead.

Mr. Rusesabagina will surely not get a fair trial in Rwanda. At this point the best he can hope for is to be treated humanely in jail if international pressure is brought to bear.

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