

BOOKS | CURRENT AFFAIRS

Do Not Disturb by Michela Wrong review — the making of a monster

Paul Kagame is still a pin-up in the West, but this book reveals the sinister reality of his Rwandan regime, says Ian Birrell

Ian Birrell

Saturday March 20 2021, 12.01am,
The Times

Books



Paul Kagame has been de facto ruler of Rwanda since 1994
JEMAL COUNTESS/GETTY IMAGES

Once upon a time there were two boys growing up in Uganda. Their mothers were friends and they attended the same secondary school. The older was a bright, confident and gregarious lad who went on to study law at the nation's most famous university. The younger was an awkward character, hard-working but filled with suppressed rage, who sneaked on classmates and was suspended for fighting before ending up among street boys scratching a living in Kampala.

This superb book tells their entwined story, an epic tale of blood, bitterness and betrayal. On the human level, it is an absorbing Shakespearean saga in which this duo shape the history of their continent before their falling out, which led to a squalid death in a South African hotel room in the final hours of 2013. Michela Wrong, among the sharpest western writers on Africa, uses the murder of Rwanda's affable spy chief Patrick Karegeya as a device to dissect the ugly reign of Paul Kagame, the geeky gangster president accused of being behind his former schoolmate's death. (Kagame denies responsibility.)

Do

Not

Disturb

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

MICHELA WRONG

'A withering assault on the murderous Rwandan regime of Paul Kagame – very driven, very impassioned'

JOHN LE CARRÉ

'An extremely important and profoundly disturbing book'

**ARCHBISHOP
DESMOND TUTU**

It is a gripping tale, centred on two contrasting characters, that starts in Uganda among Rwanda's exiles. Many moved there in the early years of the 20th century to escape harsh Belgian colonial rule and rigid feudalism, while others — including the two-year-old Kagame, a scion of the royal family — were driven out later because of hostility from the Hutu majority towards the Tutsi aristocrats. This diaspora community played a key role in Yoweri Museveni's successful assault on power in 1986; he remains president of Uganda. These exiles observed his rebel tactics and how victors write history, before they built up their own forces and launched an invasion to seize Rwanda in October 1990.

The 63-year-old Kagame is a constantly sinister figure — he was a loathed intelligence operative nicknamed “Pilato” after Pontius Pilate for the enthusiasm with which he sought execution of indisciplined comrades. He took control of the Rwandan rebels after the death of a third player, a popular figure called Fred Rwigyema who died in mysterious circumstances on the invasion's second day. Was this assassination the first case of the Tutsi force “ruthlessly executing one of its own”, wonders Wrong. Certainly the history of this troubled region might have been different had the charismatic and consensual Rwigyema survived to govern.

Instead Kagame ended up in charge after a couple more suspicious killings — an insecure man reliant on fear and force to dominate officers who did not trust his leadership, in the words of one former colleague. Wrong covered the genocide of 1994, inflicted on the Tutsi minority by the Hutus during the civil war. Between 500,000 and 800,000 were killed and Wrong is still chilled by its horror. Yet she reminds us such events do not happen in a vacuum and atrocities were carried out by both sides, even if those inflicted by Kagame's side were far smaller in scale. She notes he kept out foreign and United Nations forces to ensure full control of the country, although their intervention might have saved many Tutsis from slaughter.

Kagame, president since 2000 but de facto leader as vice-president since 1994, rebuilt Rwanda, pretending to share power with Hutus. His regime was funded by raping the Democratic Republic of Congo for its huge natural wealth in two terrible wars that led to almost six times more deaths than the genocide. Karegeya comes across as a charming rogue, always ready for a beer and a gossip while giving little away. Kagame remains such a control freak he told one senior colleague to divorce a wife not deemed “pro-Rwandan” enough and personally beat up top military brass in a meeting. Any politician, judge or journalist showing the slightest sign of dissent either flees or ends up in jail or a grave with their name inevitably smeared.

The spy chief claimed his turning point was a battle against Ugandan forces in the Congolese town of Kisangani, when many corpses of former comrades were found blindfolded and shot in the back of the head. In one extraordinary vignette after Karegeya’s ousting as security chief in 2004, Wrong introduced John le Carré to this character who could have starred in one of his novels. “Your friend smiled and joked but did you notice that it never reached his eyes,” the thriller writer said afterwards. “I fear he will be rubbed out.”

Wrong admits she only realised how she misread the regime when she met a Hutu moderate after his sacking as interior minister. He dismissed suggestions that the Tutsi-dominated military were making a power grab, but his nervous body language did not match his reassuring words. This decent man soon fled into exile, set up an opposition party, survived one shooting, revealed the names of massacred Hutus and then was shot dead.

Yet this interwoven story of two fascinating men is much more than a smart device to tell the tale of another African rebel leader who festered in power, even if it is a riveting account of raw power turned rancid. Wrong, the author of fine books on Eritrea, Kenya and the Congo, challenges the tatty conventional narrative on the 1994 genocide, with its simplistic notion of triumphant Tutsi good guys led by the

heroic national saviour returning from exile. She exposes a more complex and tawdry story, showing the savagery that lies below the smooth surface of a regime hailed by many Western admirers.

The pages are laced with irony since Karegeya was a key player in creating the deceptive façade of a democratic Rwanda, before he fled and rebranded himself as an opposition leader. “When they say these dictators and monsters are created by those around them, I think it’s true,” confesses another key figure in exile. “We had a hand in the making of a monster.”

The book offers searing indictment of naive western politicians and gullible aid groups that appease this gruesome regime in desperation to find a poster child for their policies of spraying cash around the planet, ignoring how it lies blatantly on everything from human rights to poverty data. Wrong also points to the racism that lurks behind the idea Africans need a strongman to keep them in order.

The title *Do Not Disturb* comes from the sign Karegeya’s killers hung on the door handle of his hotel room. “The injunction was one Western outsiders were all too ready to embrace,” remarks the author acidly.

***Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* by Michela Wrong, 4th Estate, 512pp; £20**