

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Citizenship, Political Violence,
and Democratization in Africa



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The denial of full citizenship rights to selected individuals and groups in Africa has triggered political violence. In many instances, these conflicts have slowed down the democratization process, which is essential for pulling Africa out of poverty and placing it more firmly on the path of stability and sustainable development. This failure to democratize has implications for national, regional, and global governance.

During the current wave of democratization, incumbents bent on prolonging their stay in power have used exclusionary notions of citizenship to bar their most challenging rivals from the electoral process. The best-known examples of this practice are the disqualification of former president Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and former prime minister Alassane Dramane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire from presidential elections in 1996 and 2000, respectively. Because one was a founding father and the other had served as head of government under the venerable Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the incumbent regimes felt compelled to resort to constitutional gymnastics to justify their political exclusion on the basis of citizenship.

In the Zambian case, that Kaunda's parents had migrated from Malawi when both countries were British colonies was held against him. Because his parents were not indigenous to Zambia, he was prohibited from running for a presidential seat that he had occupied for twenty-seven years (1964–1991).¹ The Ivorians were more sophisticated in their legal arguments. Conscious of the legal complexities of indigeneity in a territorial entity whose political boundaries had shifted and that was home to millions of immigrants, they excluded Ouattara from the presidential race not because he was not a citizen or had dual nationality, but on the grounds that he had in the past "availed himself of another nationality" by carrying a diplomatic passport from Burkina Faso.

The violent repercussions of these politically motivated acts of exclusion are well known. State repression of Kaunda's supporters and the general climate of violence resulted in numerous deaths, including that of the son of a former president. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ouattara's exclusion led to the boycott of presidential elections by his political party and to acts of ethnic cleansing on both sides of the political/religious divide between southerners and northerners and between Christians and Muslims. The crisis has escalated to full-scale civil war, whose solution is being sought through the involvement of peacekeeping forces from France, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the United Nations.

More detrimental to democratization than the reluctance of incumbents to leave office is the political manipulation of exclusionary notions of citizenship, reinforced by competition over scarce resources and socioeconomic opportunities in crisis situations. Two of the most compelling cases in this regard, which also present a regional and global challenge, are the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and ethnic cleansing in Mobutu's Zaïre in 1992–1994.

In the case of Rwanda, the Hutu Power regime originally established on the basis of the anti-Tutsi pogrom of 1959 had consistently discriminated against the minority Tutsi since independence in 1962. The Tutsi in Rwanda were denied their full citizenship rights, and those in exile in Uganda, Congo, Tanzania, and elsewhere were denied their right of return to Rwanda. Under the leadership of Tutsi exiles in Uganda, some of whom were prominent members of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) and the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) launched a military campaign against Kigali in October 1990. Regional and pan-African efforts to end the resulting civil war culminated in the Arusha Accords of 1993, which provided for power sharing between the incumbent Hutu regime, the Tutsi-dominated RPF, and moderate Hutu.

Radically opposed to this accord, Hutu Power extremists in the government did their best to undermine it. Their hate propaganda in favor of keeping Rwanda as a Hutu republic in which the Tutsi had no full citizenship rights, combined with a situation of worsening economic conditions, triggered genocide. David Newbury has identified two major and interrelated variables that contributed to violence. The first was the drastic fall in the world market price of coffee—the country's main export—which deepened the economic crisis and increased the number of jobless. The second was the increasingly large number of unemployed young men in both the modern and traditional economic sectors. In the modern sector, educational opportunities and jobs were limited.