Understanding Rwanda in the Context of Haiti
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Stop for a minute and reflect on Haiti. It’s a mess, isn’t it? Poverty, disease, corruption, crime, environmental destruction and now an earthquake. But turn your mind to Africa, because Haiti is richer than Rwanda. That’s right. Haiti’s per capita GDP is around $1,300 per year. Rwanda’s is little over $1,000. That means that the Haitian economy is thirty per cent bigger than Rwanda’s.

Suffering plays really well on TV, so when you watch the misery broadcast from Haiti you might think, ‘How could anywhere be worse off?’ You wouldn’t know it by looking, and it’s true that the devastation caused by the earthquake will trim Haiti’s fortunes considerably. Now, rewind a few weeks, to before the catastrophe.

Rwanda is the same size as Haiti, over twenty-seven thousand square kilometers, which is about the same size as Massachusetts. Rwanda’s population is roughly ten million people, same as Haiti’s, same as Michigan’s. Haiti grows and exports sugar, coffee and mangoes to keep its economy going. Rwanda grows and exports coffee and tea and a few mangoes.

Haiti’s history is one of slavery, colonialism, corporate predation, foreign aid, authoritarianism and corruption. Rwanda’s past is colonialism, corporate predation, foreign aid, genocide, civil war and authoritarianism. The point is that on paper the two places are very similar. Paper, though, never tells the whole story.

Haiti’s proximity to avenues of exploration, colonial sources of commodity wealth and later the United States meant that after 1492 it was never left alone. There was always an outside interest bigger, richer and stronger than any Haiti government looking to make a fast buck, and there was always a person or group inside Haiti greedy enough or scared enough to sell whatever they could grab to those outside interests in order to line their own pockets.

Rwanda, by contrast, was hard to reach before it had an airport. The first Europeans to see the central African kingdoms around Lake Kivu, and who lived to tell the tale, were the explorers of the 1850’s. Colonialism arrived there only around 1900. Still, plantation agriculture and repressive government quickly made beggars and hustlers out of a few Rwandans, who used their money and power to keep the rest under a boot.

We think Rwanda is special because twice in fifty years corruption, ethnic hatred and the prodding of Belgium and France caused the dominant ‘tribe’ to attempt genocide on its rivals. The scale and brutality of the violence in Rwanda in 1994 and 1959 might be exceptional, but the phenomenon wasn’t. Societies everywhere, but especially poor ones are vulnerable to competition for money – survival. Remember that $1,300 per year GDP per capita? That’s $3.56 per day to live on, for people lucky enough to have jobs. Wouldn’t you try to augment your
share by any means possible?

Haiti’s government was never really interested in Haiti’s people until about 2006. Between 1957 and 1986 the country had only two President-dictators, Francois ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ‘Baby Doc.’ Between them they stole almost a billion dollars of public money and supported domestic terror groups like the Tonton Macoutes to shore up their rule. The Duvaliers were followed by the corrupt US puppet Jean Bertrande Aristide, whose administration was so bad that he had to flee the country and could only be re-installed backed by US troops and a UN stabilization force.

The current President, Rene Preval was making headway in recreating an actual government and resuscitating the economy before the January earthquake. Now, though, Haiti’s government is a bit player alongside relief efforts bankrolled by the US, EU and UN and secured by US troops. Though they need the help, Haiti won’t stand on it’s own feet, and thus won’t really improve the lot of its people, until everyone else leaves and it gets the investment, free trade, respect for human rights and justice that make development possible.

In the past fifty years Rwanda’s government seemed to care a little bit too much about its people. It was so sensitive to who belonged to which ethnic group and which political faction Hutus or Tutsis supported that it twice tried to wipe out whole populations with machetes, necklaces of burning tires and whatever guns it could muster. The genocide of 1994 followed the death of the President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, in a plane crash widely thought to be an assassination.

Evidence unearthed this year points to Hutu extremists who brought down the plane as an excuse for implementing their plans to exterminate Tutsis. A civil war that began in the late 1980’s when Paul Kagame and the Rwanda Patriotic Front attempted to overthrow the Hutu regime intensified after the genocide, and Kagame finally succeeded in driving out the interim Hutu-led government at the end of 1994 and set himself up as President of Rwanda.

He has ruled since then with a combination of repression and skillful economic policy, which prevents overt challenges to his authority while making instability in general less likely through broad economic development. Today, Rwanda is a clean, well-run and growing enclave with an overbearing government which is very interested in hi-tech – a lot like Singapore.

The thing that separates Haiti from Rwanda is that nobody really cares about Rwanda. Think about how many news stories you read after the genocide there was forgotten – and it was forgotten, quickly. Television coverage from Rwanda decreased sharply only two weeks after the genocide ended. Newspaper coverage in North America and Europe declined four weeks after the killing stopped. Rwanda isn’t on our doorstep. Port au Prince, Haiti’s capital, is a two hour flight from Miami. Haiti needs and deserves all the help we can send it right now, but then what?

All that attention from the outside world over the last five hundred years didn’t do Haiti many favors, disaster relief aside. Rwanda by contrast is humming along nicely if somewhat oppressed in a forgotten corner of a forgotten continent. You might characterize Haiti’s history
as purchasing freedom at the expense of security, and you might say that Rwanda bought security at the expense of freedom. Where would you rather live?