Trajectories of Authoritarianism
An Introduction

A famous Hollywood director once said that movies are the same as life with the boring parts cut out. I found that this was precisely right. The boring parts of the revolutions had simply finished up on the floors of the television studio cutting rooms all over the world. What the world had seen and heard were only the most dramatic and symbolic images. This was all right, but it was not all.

—Slavenka Drakulić,
How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed, xiv.[1]

In mid-1970, rumors began circulating about the health of the then Rwandan president Grégoire Kayibanda. As Rwanda's head of state and president of the de facto state party, the *Mouvement démocratique républicain-Parti du mouvement pour l'émancipation hutu* (MDR-Parmehutu), the ailing president was at the core of the country's authoritarian regime. The rumors about his health were reinforced by his frequent absences from public political life, as he spent much of his time at his home in Gitarama, a little less than hour away from the capital, Kigali. Furthermore, according to one observer, the president's purported ill health coincided with a "worrying slowing down of political activity": No official Ministers' council was held for months, and the *Assemblée nationale* (National Assembly) did not hold plenary sessions or engage in commission work.[2]

The rumors persisted for months, as did theories about the source of the president's illness. Some suggested that Kayibanda suffered from some kind of malaise or depression, others that alcohol and tobacco

[1] Thomas Pepinsky expressed similar sentiments in a blog post. "Everyday Authoritarianism is Boring and Tolerable," *Tom Pepinsky Blog*, https://tompepinsky.com/2017/01/06/everyday-authoritarianism-is-boring-and-tolerable/, January 6, 2017, consulted March 20, 2017.
[2] Personal translation. "Éphéméride situation politique intérieure et extérieure 1970," 1971, Belgian Diplomatic Archives, 18809/I.

were to blame or slowed his recovery, contrary to the rather ascetic public persona he had maintained. Another rumor suggested the president may have faked health problems to test his ministers' loyalty, looking to see if they would act against him if his hold on power appeared to be weakening.

The president's condition remained a topic of speculation well into 1971. Kayibanda's health had gotten so poor, the whispers suggested at some point, that the president had considered resigning, but he had been dissuaded by some of his closest advisers, and especially the ministers who attended a council in September 1971. To add to the intrigue, this same inner circle appeared to be the main source of the rumors about the president's health. The French Ambassador at the time, Jean-F. de La Boissière, indicated to the Quai d'Orsay that "the rumours that irritate the President, but which are to some extent true, have been spread by personalities from his entourage, belonging to the higher reaches of the Government and the Administration."[3]

The government confronted the rumors with periodic communiqués denying anything was wrong with the president. Kayibanda also used his infrequent public appearances to castigate those who spread the rumors. In one instance, he angrily targeted

> the enemies of public tranquility – Rwandans or Europeans – who spread falsities according to which, tired and sick, he will soon leave for Europe with his family to get treated. All these people are wrong. They are wasting their time, because what they claim cannot convince anyone. Everything that is said I am informed of, because the people are vigilant and have remained loyal, knowing that I devote all my strength to them and would give them my blood if needed.[4]

[3] Personal translation. Letter from the French ambassador in Rwanda to the minister of foreign affairs, "Fête de la Justice," no. 472/AL, November 1970, French Diplomatic Archives, Politique intérieure, présidence, gouvernement et institutions, célébrations nationales et officielles (janvier 1966-juillet 1972), 1966–1972, Afrique Levant 65QO, RW 5-1.

[4] Personal translation. Speech given on November 27 and reproduced by the French Embassy in Kigali. Letter from the French ambassador in Rwanda to the minister of foreign affairs, "Allocution du Président Kayibanda à la Fête de la Justice," no. 474/AL, 30 November 1970, French Diplomatic Archives, Politique intérieure, présidence, gouvernement et institutions, célébrations nationales et officielles (janvier 1966–juillet 1972), 1966–1972, Afrique Levant 65QO, RW 5-2.

Despite the salvos of counter-information and Kayibanda's protestations, the rumors and uncertainty affected his reputation, especially perceptions of his ability to lead. Belgian observers, among the better-informed external actors in Kigali at the time considering their former colonial rule of the territory and continuing influence, indicated they sensed a growing malaise around the president. They went as far as to suggest that further decline could eventually – admittedly, possibly years down the line – open the door to political change. "How long will this go on for," asked the Belgian ambassador, "I fear that an improvement of the President's general health is unlikely [. . .] It must necessarily mean that one day there will be political change."[5] Finally laying to rest all the conjecture, Kayibanda made an apparent recovery and eventually returned to a more active role. He continued to serve as president for two more years, even entrenching his power in his final year of rule through constitutional modifications, until he was ousted by a coup in 1973.

This episode of Rwandan history is never recounted when scholars discuss post-independence Rwanda and the events they believe shaped the country. And, indeed, the president's illness and the speculation it generated seems trivial in the context of the violence Rwanda experienced during Kayibanda's time in power and a quarter century later, when genocide swept the country.

The story of Kayibanda's illness also seems perhaps trivial in the broader context of the uglier face of authoritarianism scholars commonly focus on, especially the coercion and oppression we associate with it. In Rwanda's authoritarian story, which has now largely come to be associated with the genocide, this episode is one of the "boring parts" left on the editing room floor, by most scholarly assessments. But the banal uncertainties surrounding an ailing president are as much part of the country's trajectory, and of the high and lows of authoritarian governance generally, as the more striking events of Rwandan history.[6]

[5] Personal translation. Telegram from the Belgian Embassy in Kigali to the Ministry of External Affairs, no. 617, September 10, 1970, Belgian Diplomatic Archives, 18809 XIV; Telegram from the Belgian Embassy in Kigali to the Ministry of External Affairs, "Voyage royal – état de santé du président pronostics sur l'avenir," no. 447, July 10, 1970, 18809 XIV.

[6] Indeed, parallels could be made between the dense political environment of the two republics and some of the intrigues at court in ancient Rwanda. Chapter 8

Indeed, these trivial authoritarian moments are part of a country's larger trajectory of authoritarianism, and they even suggest – just as larger crises do – some of authoritarianism's inherent fragility. In the ongoing struggle to contain and control, the concentration of power can be thrown off by an illness. A close circle of advisers and associates can be a source of both strength and intrigue. To say nothing of a regime's popular groundings, often born of perceptions of strength, which can wax and wane with events as banal as ill health. These seemingly trivial moments, their ambiguity, the kind of dull grating on authority and power they constitute also make and, in their own way, break authoritarianism. A sudden death or an overthrow may take down an authoritarian regime quickly and dramatically, but the little speculation, the rumors of weakness, and the questioning and uncertainty, pull and tear at the bases of a regime on a regular basis, thus weakening its foundations.

They are just as part of the authoritarian trajectories as authoritarianism's more dramatic moments are, calling on us to rediscover some of the middle-range, more routine and more local forms of making and breaking in the authoritarian system.

Reappropriating Trajectories of Authoritarianism

We have tended to neglect these boring parts. Instead, we gravitate toward the ugliest, most extreme faces of authoritarianism when thinking of authoritarian governance. Authoritarianism is associated most naturally with notions of power, of the privileged few, and of coercion and control. It is understood as a rigid, top-down form of governance that violently, whether in a physical or structural sense, demands and generally obtains deference. Lay visions of authoritarianism, and of the surveillance and repression we associate with it, have an inescapable quality – that is until we imagine the regime breaking up, with the attendant blazes and barricades accompanying its demise. In both the literary world and the "real" world, we hear of examples of far-extending authority – regimes reaching deep into citizens' lives to erase private space. In this conceptualization, the authoritarian regime is a

delves further into this political environment. See, in addition, Filip Reyntjens, "Understanding Rwandan Politics through the *Longue Durée*: From Pre-colonial to the Post-genocide Era," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12(2), 2018, pp. 514–532.

gray realm of surveillance, denunciation and defeat, and life within its reach lived in the shadow of the government and its dutiful agents. It is often, in our minds, the world of the most punitive days of an Amin or a Hussein. To the point where some conflate and use interchangeably the concepts of "authoritarianism" and "totalitarianism."

Straus reminds us of the necessity to distinguish between the nature of a regime and its capacities,[7] but these common perceptions of authoritarianism tend to stress authoritarian regimes' strength, in the form of attained control, as opposed to their struggles to achieve and maintain power. Conceptions of authoritarianism based on strength rely on a static portrayal of achieved power, in the form of overwhelming control, endemic coercion, and complete achieved obedience on the part of the citizenry. In reality, authoritarianism is an ongoing dynamic process, as those in the inner circle work to keep power and influence, or attain it. Though we often reduce them to the "ruled," citizens' position in the system is just as dynamic, as ordinary people continue to navigate their circumstances even if under authoritarian control.

Recent academic literature on authoritarian regimes has tended to echo this common understanding of authoritarianism, promoting an understanding of authoritarianism as an achieved state, rather than a dynamic process. In response to the enthusiasm surrounding the "third wave" of democratization, which some saw as the final extinction of non-democracy and the glorious victory of democracy,[8] others countered that many authoritarian regimes have weathered the democratization wave quite well. In this newer literature, scholars of "authoritarian resilience" have examined the mechanisms that allow these regimes to endure. Mostly, this endeavor has taken the form of looking at national-level institutional or organizational means deployed to prevent or address political challenges, largely understood as stemming from national-level challengers. But these studies, framed as they are around endurance, commonly assume regimes fall into one of three categories: stable dictatorship, unstable dictatorship, or democracy. The changes captured by these models are first and foremost

[7] Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 11.

[8] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. On this optimistic literature, see Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), 2002, pp. 6–9.

shifts across these three types.[9] And the answers on offer to explain why, despite our optimism, a relatively important number of authoritarian regimes have been able to maintain themselves have centered on national-level institutional arrangements. Or they have focused on the struggle to ensure "power-sharing" between elites that truly matters, for most scholars, for the making or breaking of an authoritarian regime[10].

These more static or achieved understandings of authoritarianism, in which flux is largely understood as taking place across types of regimes following radical breaks, and predominantly from an institutional standpoint, come at a cost: the neglect of what Pepinsky called "deep politics."[11] I take these "deep politics" to refer to the substrate of events, dynamics, and trends underlying the more apparent moments, features, and actors of authoritarianism that authors have focused on. The emphasis on endurance, strength, or lack thereof and on national-level factors and actors has drawn attention away from the less dramatic – but equally important – ebb and flow of authoritarian management, that is the changes within trajectories, and the national-subnational and subnational dynamics that also shape authoritarian regimes. This rather monolithic approach obscures the regular engaging, vying, and navigating that forms the day-to-day life of authoritarianism and plays its part in the creation, reproduction, or undermining of an authoritarian system, from the top of the system to the bottom.

This book seeks to provide a more granular take on authoritarianism,[12] the more alive and lived understanding of the phenomenon,

[9] See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010 and David Art, "What Do We Know about Authoritarianism after Ten Years?" *Comparative Politics*, 44(3), 2012, pp. 351–373.

[10] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 5. See also Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 and Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[11] Thomas Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism," *British Journal of Political Science*, 44(3), 2013, p. 650.

[12] Here, I follow Fujii's lead in using the term "granularity," which she uses to characterize her analysis of the finer, more local, and quotidian rationales behind participation in the Rwandan genocide. Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing*

from the regime's core to local implementers and its public(s), that a small number of proponents of an ethnographic or anthropological understanding of authoritarianism have called for.[13] It is meant as the rediscovery of the routine or more ordinary relations, practices, and events of authoritarianism, too often assumed to be its "boring parts," but that also matter to its destiny.[14] I propose to do so through a reappropriation of the concept of "trajectory."

An authoritarian regime can be conceived of as a trajectory, a path, a course, not just in terms of the transition from one type of political regime to another, but in and of itself. To start, authoritarian regimes, like democratic ones for that matter, are never monolithic, but rather evolve over time, as alliances shift, new players come in, and challenges emerge. Authoritarianism is a constant, nondeterministic navigation of these elements, although, as the authoritarian resilience literature points out, regime solidity or strength, available capacities, and institutional/organizational arrangements play a very important role in determining how smooth or bumpy the ride is. Several authors have pointed to the importance of studying authoritarian regimes over time, as key shifts may occur from emergence to settled and unsettled times[15]. But this must also be done while taking into account the more "ordinary" navigation, as it unfolds over the *longue durée*.

As importantly, authoritarianism should also be understood as a composite trajectory, made up of the trajectories of the different actors in the system, which includes national elites, as well as local elites and citizens. A predominantly institutional or structural focus has left a rather flat understanding of agents' engagement with the system. Agency is secondary in these conceptualizations, taken to matter little

Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 187.

[13] See, for example, Edward Schatz on the former and Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Oliver de Sardan on the latter. Edward Schatz, *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 and Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

[14] I thank an anonymous reviewer for the notion of "destiny."

[15] Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 2009, p. 407. On Rwanda specifically, see Filip Reyntjens, "Understanding Rwandan Politics through the *Longue Durée*: From Pre-Colonial to the Post-Genocide Era," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12(2), 2018, pp. 514–532.

outside of institutions or unsettled times. But authoritarianism is a human system, deployed, lived with, and engaged by agents, in the sense of agency, at all levels of society. Some have called for the rediscovery of the agent elements in authoritarianism, such as the quality of leadership demonstrated by national elites.[16] Yet many aspects of agency in authoritarian regimes remain neglected, especially beyond the national level. Little attention is paid to how authority is deployed across levels, all the way down to intermediaries, local administrators, and the citizen and her relationship with the authoritarian state; the notion of "reach" employed in many discussions of authoritarian systems implies this level of engagement, but reach itself is commonly assumed rather than assessed.

When agency is sometimes addressed, it is predominantly through the lens of "gain," as the primary motive behind relations across elites, whether inside or outside of the authoritarian system. This notion of gain is inherent to assumptions about the functioning of authoritarian systems: Key authoritarian supporters are gained through threats or bought off. They are therefore motivated by gaining or maintaining security or the advantages and rents afforded to the inner circle and supporters. While the point is not to deny that actors act with purpose, this notion of gain is rather limited. It cannot capture the full diversity of motives, stemming from different personalities, possibilities, challenges, and other factors. Depictions of motives or behavior for other actors are similarly narrow. Actors other than national elites are implicitly understood either to obey or to resist authoritarian power. Yet, local administrators and the regime's various publics navigate the system in their own ways, for their own reasons. As a result, in all but the most controlling regimes, authoritarianism on the ground takes on different shapes, even across the same state.

To be sure, the neglect of these different elements of authoritarianism (the trivial or non-juncture points of an authoritarian trajectory, what lies below the national level, more diverse forms of engagement with the system) does not necessarily imply that scholars have been blind to these realities. Rather, the focus on a regime's most formative moments and elite, national-level players with their aggregate depictions of motives is often a strategy to capture the most obvious,

[16] Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics*, 41(2), 2009, p. 218.

and most generalizable, elements of the authoritarian experience – that is, the parts that matter most in the making and breaking of systems. But breaking points rarely appear out of thin air. They often are formed by an accumulation of other trivial trends that create a context conducive to breakage. Authoritarianism, therefore, needs to be studied beyond the confines of its most dramatic moments and elite circles, as many recent episodes of protest born of growing frustration at the local level remind us.[17]

Reappropriating the notion of authoritarian trajectories in such a way leads to a different set of questions from those generated by the focus on endurance. More than identifying major factors in a regime's resilience or lack thereof, this reappropriation is aimed at a fuller exploration of the makeup of an authoritarian course. How does an authoritarian system evolve over time? What does a trajectory perspective suggest about national elites, official and unofficial, and their relation to the overall system, including other echelons of the regime? How should we understand the engagement by and role of local authorities and publics in the system?

Do these neglected dynamics have something to contribute to our understanding of authoritarian resilience or decline? I believe they do, as they constitute the brittle base on which authoritarianism rests. If, over time, authoritarian management of this entire set of relations and realities continues to accumulate contradictions, as we can assume is often the case when the basis of ruling is exclusion, this base may increasingly crack and open the space for the more dramatic moments we associate with authoritarianism. In a sense, seen from the lens of a trajectory, authoritarianism is inherently caught in a Humpty Dumpty paradox, where the choices and moves it makes to balance itself nonetheless take place in a situation that contains its own seeds of precarity. Moves, even moves toward stability, can bring the system closer to the brink.

Pre-genocide Rwanda

To begin answering these questions, the book turns to a single case: post-independence Rwanda. Single-case studies have not been the

[17] In her study of ethnic mobilization in Hungary and Romania, for example, Sherrill Stroschein found that masses mobilized before elites. "Microdynamics of Bilateral Ethnic Mobilization," *Ethnopolitics*, 10(1), 2011, pp. 1–34. Many of the recent episodes of political protest had mass-led or, parallel to elite, mass sources, such as mobilization in Sudan in spring 2019.

method of choice in recent literature on authoritarianism, which has tended instead to prefer medium-N analyses or multiple case studies. But the tide may be turning in this regard in comparative politics.[18] And when it comes to studying the fine grain of a trajectory, which requires both depth and a *longue durée* look, a single exploratory case has much to offer, especially in terms of granularity.[19]

The book thus focuses on a case that has been especially susceptible to the achieved focus and monolithic outlook often adopted in studies of authoritarianism: post-independence Rwanda. Both pre- and post-genocide regimes in Rwanda have been categorized in scholarship as strongly, especially for the Second Republic, effectively authoritarian. Academics and non-academics alike have also ascribed to the three regimes that have succeeded each other in Kigali since independence an inescapable quality, especially for "ordinary citizens" caught in them.[20] While there is no denying the recourse to authoritarian strategies and practices in Rwanda with the violence and oppression they entail, the tendency to adopt an achieved understanding of authoritarianism has led to the neglect of the shapes authoritarianism took in the country, including outside of major episodes of violence that shook Rwanda, and for the people experiencing political trends. More broadly, it has led to the neglect of Rwanda's authoritarian trajectory over time, collapsing instead our understanding of authoritarian realities around very finite moments of Rwandan history, and especially the transitions across regimes.

In large part, the issue has been the long shadow the 1994 genocide casts over interpretations of the post-independence period and the country's political system and environment at the time. The genocide

[18] Thomas B. Pepinsky, "The Return of the Single-Country Study," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 2019, pp. 187–203.

[19] As a single-case study, this book harks back to important work on the authoritarian experience, such as Lisa Wedeen's seminal *Ambiguities of Domination*, which draws attention to symbolic components of authoritarian rule. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.

[20] The notion of "ordinary citizen," which some might take to be dismissive is on the contrary meant to stress the importance of non-elites in the authoritarian regime. "Ordinary citizens" are outside of specific formal and informal hierarchies of authority, but I do not take them to be "powerless" or without influence. Similarly, Linz spoke of "average citizens." *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 2nd ed., Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. p. 49.