

The animators: how diasporas mobilise to contest authoritarian states

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Our work aims to provide an in-depth and granular analysis of contemporary transnational politics. In order to do this, we examine how diasporas form to contest authoritarian states in Africa. How do they emerge and adapt? What determines the agendas they adopt and the institutional forms they assume? Under what conditions are they successful in having impact upon the politics of the homeland? It focuses on African examples, with two in-depth case studies: Zimbabwe and Rwanda, both of which are authoritarian states with two of the putatively most active contemporary African diasporas.

Based on extensive multi-sited fieldwork carried out over two years in South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, the UK, Belgium, and France, our project traces the recent historical evolution of these transnational communities. It shows how, far from being static or permanent, diasporas are inherently political entities that have dynamic ‘lifecycles’: they are born, they live, they die, and they even have afterlives. Their existence and the forms they take are historically and politically contingent. Crucially, these lifecycles, and the durability of the diaspora, are determined not by the inherent qualities of the diaspora but by the role of elite ‘animators’, who make resources available to the diaspora.

Overall, the project takes up the challenge made by other scholars of diasporas, recognising that they are dynamic rather than static, and that they are frequently mobilised by external actors for particular political ends. On an empirical level, we contribute two untold and important transnational political histories: of the Rwandan (2003–2013) and Zimbabwean (2001–2013) diasporas. On a theoretical level,

the project offers insights into how political science and international relations can better conceptualise transnational politics in the early twenty-first century.

Our work begins with an empirical puzzle, which existing theories struggle to address: namely, some diasporas exhibit ‘lifecycles’. They are born at particular moments, they may decline, dissipate, and die. And they may also exhibit afterlives, maintaining the external façade of existence even after their meaningful activities have long since ended. While this is by no means the case for all diasporas, some appear to have less durability and greater cyclicity than others. This observation leads us to a particular research question: *how can we explain diaspora formation?* In other words, what determines whether particular communities come to regard themselves and behave as diasporas in the first place? What determines the institutional form they take? What determines their agendas? What explains their relative durability over time or, alternatively, their decline and disappearance?

We examine this political process in a particular context: diaspora formation to contest competitive authoritarian states in Africa. Why? This is a context in which most of the relevant politics takes place outside of the state. By definition, opportunities for political contestation on the territory of the state are greatly restricted and so often take place transnationally. In Rwanda, 2003 represents Faustin Twagiramungu’s defeat in the Rwandan elections at the end of the transitional period, after which the main context of political contestation becomes transnational. In Zimbabwe, 2001 represents the formation of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, which is, similarly, a moment when the most viable avenues for political contestation become transnational. Both Rwanda and Zimbabwe are competitive authoritarian states in Africa in which during this period a significant amount of political contestation has been transnational. Both are among the most widely recognised contemporary African diasporas, and yet both also exhibit ‘lifecycles’ within which those diasporas are born, die, and have afterlives.

In both main case studies we engage in in-depth process-tracing to show the lifecycle of the two diasporas (our dependent variable) and we examine how the characteristics of the animators (our independent variable) have influenced those trajectories. We

structure both cases in a similar way in order to allow the case studies to be read both independently and comparatively. Both the Zimbabwe and Rwanda sections explore: i) the birth of the diaspora; ii) its death and political afterlife; and iii) its often neglected humanitarian role that endures even after avenues for meaningful political activity may have closed.

In the case of Zimbabwe, we argue that much of what we think of as the political organisations of the ‘Zimbabwean diaspora’ are a by-product of attempts by non-Zimbabweans to contest the Zimbabwean state up until the 2008 elections. In particular, we argue, a loose network of South Africa-based elites, keen to influence South Africa’s bilateral policy vis-à-vis Zimbabwe, mobilised donor resources to animate the diaspora. In other words, the diaspora was effectively an instrumentalised tool with which a small group contested ZANU-PF rule in Zimbabwe. However, once the structures of the Government of National Unity emerged in Zimbabwe from 2008, and the main site of Zimbabwean politics moved back to Harare, these external animators discarded the associations they had previously funded, and diaspora organisations were left to struggle onwards, denuded of the wider international structure of material resources that had made them initially meaningful. These residual structures have fallen into two categories: a group of sidelined political aspirants eager to attract further funding to retain status, and a small number of heroic humanitarians, continuing to do practically important but politically marginal work with exceptionally limited resources.

In the case of Rwanda, almost the opposite is true. The political organisations of the Rwandan ‘diaspora’, as opposed to the political organisations of other Rwandan extra-territorials, are confections of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) state apparatus. They are designed to fulfil certain important ends of states overseas, of which there are three big ones: contestation with Rwandan extra-territorial nationals unwilling to accommodate themselves to the present dispensation in Rwanda; the occlusion of that very contestation, and the discursive presentation of an anti-political diaspora. Although between 1994 and 2003 opposition – mainly Hutu mobilisation – took place, it was fragmented, incoherent, and institutionless, being violently smashed by the Kagame regime. Then, from around 2007, Rwanda began to play

the diasporic game itself, resuscitating a pro-regime diaspora. Against this backdrop, there has been a revival of transnational resistance since 2009. This has been based around two elements: elite political parties and a separate campaign of resistance related to refugee rights. Both have been largely unsuccessful, the former being constrained by its inability to attract external animators and the latter being co-opted by a different transnational network of external elites. □