

The Africa Platform and its awareness-raising activities. Panel discussion on the future of Rwanda (13 May 2015)

In essence, the Africa Platform of Ghent University Association (GAP), which publishes *Afrika Focus*, is an academic platform with academic activities at its core, such as the organization of a symposium and the publication of a peer-reviewed journal. In addition, however, GAP also functions as an advisory body and it organizes awareness-raising and informative sessions related to particular issues or current events taking place on the African continent. In organizing these events GAP often collaborates with African diaspora associations, governmental bodies or the socio-cultural sector. We see it as part of GAP's social responsibility to put the Africa expertise of its members and its networks in Africa at the disposal of the non-academic community. As such co-organizing these kinds of non-academic activities form an inherent part of the mandate of GAP.

Within this framework, a panel discussion on the future of Rwanda was organized on the 13th of May, taking place in Vooruit Ghent, one of the prime arts centres of Flanders. This debate was co-organized with Vooruit and the Rwandan community in Belgium. The panel discussion was followed by a theatre show called *Samedi Détente* (https://vooruit.be/nl/show/detail/8365/Dorothee_Munyaneza), focusing on the Rwandan genocide. Very deliberately, however, the participants of the panel discussion decided not to focus on the genocide of 20 years ago, but rather on the future and how Rwandan youth (whether living in Europe or elsewhere) attempts to deal with the past in order to work towards a reconciled Rwanda in the future.

The discussion was moderated by Stijn Vercruyse, a journalist who works for national TV and specializes in sub-saharan Africa. The participants included a political scientist, a freelance Central Africa expert, an ngo-worker and two young ladies of Rwandan origin who live in Flanders/the Netherlands.

The discussion took place on the eve of the attempted coup d'état in Burundi and at first participants were invited to reflect on the outcome of the tense situation in Burundi and parallels were drawn between Rwanda and Burundi. Thereafter, the discussion was conducted in a restrained manner, and covered a wide variety of topics. It did not slip into the kind of tense debate in which opponents and supporters of the current regime in Rwanda disagree on the way in which the Kagame-government has tried to deal with the aftermath of the genocide. On that front, all participants seemed to agree that a fair degree of economic development has been achieved in Rwanda, but mostly to the detri-

ment of human rights and freedom of expression. The 1994-genocide still seems to be an undigested tragedy in Rwanda and as a result it is very hard for the various population groups to actually come together to deal with the past. Interestingly, the younger generation of Rwandans is positive about the future. Once people are allowed to talk about the past, it will be possible to work together to build a new future for Rwanda. In addition, the experts in the panel argued that conflicts on African soil now tend to be regulated from within Africa, by inter-African institutions, such as SADC, the EAC and also the African Union – for instance, when taking a stance against military coups and urging governments to respect their constitutions. In these terms it seems as if Africa has finally succeeded in liberating itself from interference by former colonial powers. Nevertheless, a country like Rwanda is still largely dependent on donor money coming from the West. The participants of the panel discussion all seemed to agree that it is the moral duty of the West to reprimand those African governments who fail to respect the democratic process, and, if needed, withdraw financial support. For long-term stability in Rwanda basic human rights and freedom of speech are a *conditio sine qua non*. If not, and even taking into account the country's slight economic development, it might be very hard to eventually achieve reconciliation.

The reactions to this event were generally very positive; a great many interesting issues were touched upon and the atmosphere of the discussion allowed sufficient room for various points of view and an optimistic view on the future of Rwanda to be expressed. This was an excellent example of an event in which academic Africa expertise is made available to inform a broad public, in conjunction with an artistic performance. Also the input provided by the Rwandan diaspora was greatly valued. In the future, this is definitely the way in which the African Platform of Ghent University Association wishes to present itself to the academic community and beyond.

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