The War in the DRC: Unveiling the Hidden Power of Agency

Aymar N. Bisoka

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Introduction

The Rwandan-backed M23 rebels continue their relentless advance, capturing villages, towns, and cities in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The fall of the city of Bukavu, the last major stronghold, after a more than three-year offensive, symbolises a new turn for the worse in communities already devastated by three decades of war. As a native of Bukavu — a city where I lived for almost half my life and to which I return several times a year — I am deeply saddened. Moreover, as a researcher and ethnographer in the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC), I feel an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the face of the security and humanitarian uncertainty that weighs on the inhabitants of this cross-border region. These populations — predominantly peasants and the poorest strata of these countries[1] — are the first victims of warring parties' obsession with power and sovereignty.

Finally, as a lawyer and a political scientist, I am disturbed by the media coverage of this war. The conflict, which was triggered by the M23's capture of Chenu et Runyonyi in November 2021, is rooted in a complex history of regional wars. The First Congo War in 1996[2] saw the occupation of Bukavu by Rwandan-backed rebels, some of whom are now part of M23[3]. The wide

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1 K. Claessens, A. N. Bisoka, & A. Ansoms, "Rethinking Communal Land Governance in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa", *Progress in Development Studies*, 2021, 21(2), 144-160.
2 R. Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
3 For the multifaceted evolution of successive rebel groups over the past three decades, see: J. K. Stearns, *From CNDP to M23: The Evolution of an Armed Movement In Eastern Congo*, London, Rift Valley Institute, 2012.

range of conflicting interpretations and diversity of analyses make it difficult to understand this protracted conflict, as different actors approach the conflict through the prism of their own values and interests. The asymmetry of information is also exacerbated by the speed at which news is disseminated and the spread of fake news, which fuels incorrect or incomplete analyses.

Therefore, I feel it is crucial and urgent to speak out to clarify the keys of this conflict. I do not intend to repeat the arguments that dominate media discussions (e.g., the role of Rwanda, minerals, governance, and international actors). Instead, I analyse the current phase of this conflict using a key interpretive framework derived from the second wave of debates in African political science (1980-1990). This effort recognises the fundamentally political nature of African political actors' discourses and practices[4]. It also moves beyond reductionist approaches that frame African events as mechanical and inevitable, actors' actions as impulsive and random, and social phenomena as dogmatic and culturalist. We must be wary of these problematic interpretations of the conflict, which reduce armed violence to ethnic conflicts and problematic governance. Such reduction obscures the strategies and interests[5] of actors involved in a cycle of power struggles. The agency of these actors — their ability to act in the face of structural constraints[6] — is influenced by ever-changing economic structures that, while stable, are always shifting[7].

This interpretive framework highlights five problems that often arise in interpreting the causes and consequences of the current phase of the war in the DRC. All five issues neglect the role of actors' agency. First, I consider how an overemphasis on structural causes of the war results in *Shallow Depths* that do not take seriously the agency of the actors or the need to define

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[4] M. Gazibo et C. Thiriot (dir.), *Le politique en Afrique. État des débats et pistes de recherche*, Paris, Karthala, coll. « Hommes et sociétés », 2009, pp. 135-163.

[5] This should not necessarily be seen as a distinction between ideology and interest. See: Mehta, Jal. The varied roles of ideas in politics: From 'whether' to 'how'. *Ideas and politics in social science research*, 2011, p. 23-46.

[6] This refers to the ability of an individual or group to act, make decisions, and influence events or situations despite structural constraints.

[7] H. Vigh, "Motion squared: A second look at the concept of social navigation", *Anthropological Theory*, 2009, 9(4), 419-438.

war on the basis of its brutal reality. War is the deliberate administration of systematic violence intended and maintained by a number of powerful actors, targeting mainly innocent people for power and profit. Second, I propose *Untold Stories* — an analysis that prioritises the primary motivations of certain key actors who trigger war or determine its most violent phases. Recognising this agency introduces contingency into the present (vis-à-vis a deterministic past). These actors' key strategic move politically merges the state's interest with their personal interests. Third, this is not exceptional to Africa. Rather, a global *Familiar Enjoyment* expresses the same underlying logic of domination and killing based on a *raison d'état* that justifies both the survival of existing regimes and their violent actions across global conflicts (e.g., between Ukraine and Russia or between Israel and Palestine).

Fourth, the focus on agency allows us to understand the consequences of war beyond physical and material violence. The Congolese and sub-regional populations also suffer *Intimate Losses* from the destruction of their individual and communal efforts to rebuild. These stories move away from the sensationalisation of suffering, from the academic obsession with the rationalisation and theorisation of pain without a normative goal, to prioritise a discursive practice aimed at alleviating the misery of war victims. Finally, these losses reveal several paradoxes around *Defiled Dignity*. The war defends the right to kill as the ultimate expression of state sovereignty while continuing to defile the dream of dignity in *postcolony*[8] by enthroning fratricide through ritual collusion and conviviality between powerful regimes and the people.

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[8] N. A. Bisoka, *Afrocritique : essai sur l'infrapolitique des luttes noires*, Paris, Eterotopia France, coll. « Rhizome », 2025.

Shallow Depths

Recent political studies of Africa have considered how immediate factors and local dynamics (e.g., economic or security interests[9]) can trigger or exacerbate conflicts. This perspective complicates the dominant view that the war in the DRC is driven by some kind of deep-rooted vendetta that can be traced back through the region's long history. The more historical view suggests the conflict began with the colonial redrawing of borders, which exacerbates ethnic conflicts[10]. It was then intensified by the insecurity of the Rwandophone population in the DRC, the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the failure of successive Congolese governments to resolve the problem once and for all, the inability of the Congolese state and its international partners to resolve various structural problems, and so on.

Indeed, one should be familiar with the region's long history to understand the complex narratives that are often used to justify violence[11]. For example, while the effects of artificial colonial divisions continue to reverberate, they certainly did not cause the current massacres. Such information contextualises ethnic and national tensions that are manipulated by powerful actors[12], including how colonisers transformed political conflicts into ethnic ones or exacerbated the latter by playing on identities and favouring certain populations. Moreover, Rwandophone populations in the DRC do remain

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[9] P. Collier, P., *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007 ; J. K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*, New York, Public Affairs, 2011.

[10] The classic critique of African historiography denounces the bias of locating the beginning of African history with the presence of white people or colonisation on the continent.

[11] J.-P. Chrétien, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs. Deux mille ans d'histoire*, Paris, Aubier, 2000.

[12] E. M'Bokolo, *Afrique noire. Histoire et civilisations. Du XIXe siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Hatier/AUF, 2004.

marginalised and are frequently perceived as 'foreigners' or 'enemies'[13]. The Congolese government has also repeatedly failed to provide stable and inclusive governance[14], reinforcing people's sense of marginalisation and mistrust of the state. These examples show how the region's long history, unhealed wounds, and poor governance can contextualise discourse on the conflict.

However, focusing on the underlying causes of war neglects the motivations of individual key actors, which lead to the outbreak of war and decisive phases of violence. An over-emphasis on structural elements in the midst of conflict is fraught with ethical and political problems. It plunges the debate into a flurry of discussion obsessed with identifying the precise historical causalities of violence and its inevitability[15]. It also gives the impression that the outbreak of the war and the war itself are not the central issue. Furthermore, the supposed 'inevitability' of war as an act of absolution helps absolve those who actually started the war.

This problematic reasoning distracts from the immediate suffering of those victimised, including those the elites claim the war is trying to save. Debates about historical responsibility or the causes of the conflict risk making us forget the present — the urgent need to end the war here and now. Moreover, responsibility is often placed on the victims' nations, which are supposedly responsible

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[13] G. Mathys, *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands. Conflicts, Connections and Mobility in Central Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, coll. "African Studies", 2025 ; B. Muchukiwa, *Territoires ethniques et territoires étatiques : pouvoirs locaux et conflits interethniques au Sud-Kivu (RD Congo)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. « L'Afrique des Grands Lacs », 2006.

[14] There is much to be said about how the current regime in the DRC used the war to secure victory in the 2023 election campaign. The megalomania that emerged, exemplified by slogans like "mokengeli ya peuple congolais," undoubtedly fuelled the regime's ambitions to make a potential constitutional change. The war has also facilitated lucrative business ventures. These issues should be addressed separately and rigorously, as little analysis of the current regime in Kinshasa goes beyond simplistic terms, such as tribalism, clientelism, and corruption. As the anthropology of public spaces in Africa suggests, such concepts often perpetuate an oversimplified and uniform view of African regimes without capturing the underlying dynamics. Furthermore, in light of recent events involving figures such as Vladimir Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu, and likely Donald Trump, it is essential to distinguish between international aggression and internal governance issues, even though the latter are also undeniably serious. For a critique of the generalised concepts of politics in Africa, see: J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, ''A la recherche des normes pratiques de la gouvernance réelle en Afrique'', *Afrique: pouvoir et politique*, Discussion Paper, No. 5, December 2008.

[15] K. Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, London, Routledge, 2013.

for these root causes, not the state and political actors who unleashed the violence. Nations as wholes are blamed for the millions of deaths and displacements[16], as well as for the physical, sexual, and psychological violence.

Discussing the structures can obscure the political agency of the actors involved in causing the conflict. Agency introduces uncertainty into the present — it does not predictably and automatically unfold from past events[17]. Those who seek to complicate the situation fall prey to a teleological analysis that positions violence as a simple consequence of the past, not a tragedy being perpetuated by current political choices. This linear and uninterrupted view of history leaves out the ruptures and crises, the fleeting moments of calm or massive violence that punctuate history because of actor agency. Justifications that make the present inevitable or natural cannot account for discontinuities and moments of resistance. They also tend to obscure the role and potential of agency in urgently addressing and ending current suffering. Overlooking the real impact of contemporary political decisions may delay measures to end violence.

Debates on the agency of political actors in Africa erupted during the second wave (1980-1990) of African political science, a period of reflection and analysis on what room for manoeuvre African political actors had, particularly concerning governance, democratisation, and economic crises[18]. Political actors are subject to internal and external constraints, but this alone cannot explain their actions. Calculations, strategies, and identities are the key to understanding their decisions.

In the DRC, internal and external constraints (e.g., security threats and economic issues) may explain certain behaviours, but cannot fully explain why some actors have launched the current war. Rather, the war is the result of rational calculations by political actors who use these constraints as a pretext

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[16] This issue is also problematic in the Great Lakes region and particularly in the DRC. Admittedly, the number of deaths caused by the war since 1994 is unknown. But it is appalling that this debate should take precedence over the fact that powerful actors have ordered massacres and must answer for their actions.

[17] M. Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

[18] N. Van de Walle, « Démocratisation en Afrique : bilan critique », dans M. Gazito et C. Thiriot (dir.), *Op.cit*., pp. 135-163.

to serve their own interests. Structural threats (e.g., insecurity, the growing influence of competing regional actors, or restricted access to resources) become strategic tools to justify aggression and consolidate the power of the aggressor internally and regionally. Contrary to some perspectives in Peace and Conflict Studies, a more complex analysis is essential for understanding how these political actors align their interests with those of the state.

We must find ways to tell the *Untold Stories* that do not fit into the dominant narrative imposed by those in power, who deliberately seek to pass off individual interests as the common good. The same goes for the academic obsession with theorising suffering without any effort to alleviate the misery of war victims. Some analyses and discourses treat these issues as an end in themselves, revelling in them as a form of intellectual catharsis, some form of 'misery porn'. They forget that the depth of our understanding or the relevance of our explanations is of little importance when faced with people who are suffering. What matters most is alleviating their suffering here and now. Tragically, the theoretical understanding of crises often takes precedence over urgent action to alleviate that suffering. Academic discourse and explanatory reasoning assuage consciences but have no concrete impact on the lives of the victims, amounting to little more than a sensationalisation of suffering. This is common in African conflict studies[19], which struggles to link research and writing to its normative question. It reflects a rationalist interpretation that developed in the 1990s out of a desire to study politics in Africa while avoiding the excesses of systematic and depoliticised catastrophism[20] and misplaced and Afrophilic optimism[21], [22]. The actors waging wars of aggression are generally more powerful than the people they attack, so research on the subject *must* be normative, taking the side of the communities affected by the violence.

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[19] V. Clette-Gakuba, *Épreuves de la colonialité dans l'art et la culture. Faire exister un monde noir à Bruxelles*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Faculté de Philosophie et Sciences sociales, 2023.

[20] C. Coulon et M. Denis-Constant (dir.), « Les Afriques politiques [compte rendu] », *Politique étrangère*, 1992, 57(3), 704.

[21] V. Clette-Gakuba, *Épreuves de la colonialité dans l'art et la culture. Faire exister un monde noir à Bruxelles*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Faculté de Philosophie et Sciences sociales, 2023.

[22] A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001

Untold Stories

Long-term, causal perspectives on the war in the DRC tend to neglect the involved actors' strategies or simplistically assume that the interests of actors are distinct from the state (as in 1990s-era Peace and Conflict Studies). In many conflicts, the actors are said to be motivated by material and personal interests, such as greed for resources or power[23]. However, these theories fail to consider why the pursuit of these personal interests must always be linked to the interests of the state and how this is achieved.

From a Weberian perspective, the state in Africa embodies a performative discourse. The monopoly of violence and the separation of public and private spheres (and, more broadly, of state and society) are accepted through the internalisation of a discourse shaped by the state itself. This discourse does not merely describe reality, it creates it. In other words, it creates a 'state effect', reinforcing the idea that the state or its representatives seek to define and legitimise themselves through this separation. Consequently, eminent analysts of African politics have focused on the production of this distinction between state and society. As these political scientists argue, "we need to examine the political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced"[24].

This issue in African political science is crucial for understanding the war in the DRC and, more specifically, important, rarely discussed parts of its history. The artificial distinction between state and society has allowed certain political actors to deliberately and strategically present their own interests as

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[23] A. De Waal, "Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs* 1944-), 2009, 85(1), 99-113.

[24] T. Mitchell, "Society, Economy and the State Effect", dans G. Steinmetz (dir.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 76-97.

the interests of their respective states. Contrary to some social anthropology of the state in Africa[25], these actors cannot automatically pursue their own interests. Therefore, they shape the national vision in a way that primarily serves their personal ambitions by creating an illusion of coherence between their power and the general interest.

As long as powerful actors can maintain this convergence, they strengthen their authority by manipulating internal and external perceptions. They are prepared to sacrifice entire communities to achieve their goals and consolidate their power, all in the name of serving the nation. The question of the general interest, national sovereignty, public necessity, or even *raison d'état* is of paramount importance. It embodies the "black box" of violence that constitutes the state[26], in which actors claiming to represent the higher interest can, in theory, justify any act. These ideas are all the more dangerous in regimes where power is exercised in an undemocratic manner. The *raison d'état* may be transformed into a pretext to consolidate authority and influence, often to the detriment of principles like justice, fundamental rights, and international law. The manipulation of these concepts makes it possible to conceal purely partisan intentions under the guise of necessity, creating a fertile ground for repression and the abuse of power. Wars in Africa should be interpreted against the situation and interests of the key actors who instigated them and who seek to legitimise these instigations through *raison d'état*. In other words, conflict research must always consider the relationship between the involved state actors and the state itself. Personal interests are often linked to and confused with those of the state, creating a legitimacy dynamic that determines the course and duration of conflicts.

In the case of the DRC, United Nations reports and other evidence[27] demonstrate that the war was started from and is directed by Kigali[28]. Therefore,

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[25] J.-F. Bayart, *L'État en Afrique : la politique du ventre*, Paris, Fayard, 2006.

[26] A. N. Bisoka, « Lire Walter Benjamin dans une perspective afro-critique : droit, violence et nécropolitique en postcolonie », dans Ph. Coppens et M. de Nanteuil, *La violence du droit. Regards croisés sur Walter Benjamin*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2021.

[27] In addition to United Nations reports and statements by the Congolese government and other experts, the Rwandan president's speeches are becoming increasingly clear about the presence of his army in the DRC, which he says is for security purposes.

[28] See various reports by United Nations experts since the beginning of the war.

analyses should examine how the war's justifications are linked to the self-ish political interests of Rwanda's main political actors. Rwanda has been a highly centralised authoritarian regime for more than thirty years, so we can limit our analysis to the relationship between the interests of the Rwandan president and the Rwandan state[29]. The question is: how does the current war in the DRC, as justified by the Rwandan *raison d'état*, allow the latter to circumvent certain moral and legal rules? Then, how does this circumvention strengthen the authority and power of the Rwandan president?

Understanding what is at stake in the current war in the DRC requires understanding the political process that produces this blurred but powerful distinction between the interests of the Rwandan state and those of the Rwandan president. Political actors skilfully maintain this ambiguity, which is fed by a deliberate discourse that transforms selfish interests into vital national objectives. This focus on the agency of those in power (as opposed to purely structural causes) is necessary to help subaltern actors. It paves the way for obscured narratives, *Untold Stories*, that are more relevant to those suffering and dying today. We need to understand the political process through which the distinction between state and society in Rwanda has facilitated violence in the DRC. This is more than a simple epistemological question. It also has political and ethical dimensions. War fundamentally raises the question of the relationship between the state and the instrumental methods by which it exercises its violence.

The war in the DRC is primarily justified on security grounds. According to the Rwandan president, it is an internal conflict between the Congolese people, and Rwanda's intervention is merely a preventive measure to secure its borders. The Rwandan president refuses to publicly acknowledge the presence of his army in the DRC, and has repeatedly stated that his security strategy entails seeking out external threats and preventing them from entering Rwanda. However, there is no doubt that elements of the Rwandan army are in the DRC. Rwanda also claims that the main threat is the radical Hutu FDLR's presence in the DRC. Yet, this argument remains unconvincing,

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[29] M.-E. Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control before the Genocide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

even among Rwanda's closest allies, such as the UK, France, and the US. Numerous studies have shown that the FDLR is not a serious enough threat to justify violating Congo's territorial sovereignty[30]. Furthermore, Rwanda has undertaken formal and informal military operations in the DRC for almost thirty years. Kinshasa even worked with Rwanda to eliminate the remaining rebels, particularly in 2021. Finally, Kigali has repatriated a large number of FDLR rebels since the end of the war in Rwanda. Many of them have been integrated into the Rwandan army. With each integration, Kigali's narrative that every FDLR member is a genocidaire loses credibility.

The narrative has now shifted towards the idea that Congo's Tutsis are facing genocide, possibly perpetrated by the FDLR and other Congolese. There are still members of the FDLR and other Hutus who took part in the genocide and must be brought to justice. Many of them still subscribe to genocidal ideology and must answer for their actions. However, without minimising the serious problems faced by Rwandophone communities in the DRC, it is simply untrue that FDLR and other armed groups in the DRC only pose a threat to Rwanda and Rwandophones[31].

Over the past three decades, the Kigali regime has often dismissed its opponents by accusing them, rightly or wrongly, of collusion with the FDLR. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask whether the presence of the FDLR in the DRC — weakened both militarily and politically, and no longer a real threat to Rwandan power — could be a crucial factor in the survival of the existing regime. The hunt for the FDLR has justified Rwanda's intervention in eastern DRC for three decades and consolidated Kigali's political and economic influence in the region. Kigali also prevents any dialogue with its opponents by relentlessly persecuting the FDLR and systematically associating all forms of armed and unarmed opposition with the group. By "FDLRising"[32] all opposition (e.g., the P5, which is no longer spoken of), the regime maintains

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[30] J. K. Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name. The Unending Conflict in the Congo*, Princeton University Press, 2021.
[31] See our research into the massacres committed by armed groups in eastern DRC since 1996.
[32] Ignace Gata Mavita wa Lufuta, the DRC's ambassador to the United Nations, told the Security Council that a Rwandan rebel group called 'P5' operating between Fizi and Uvira 'could drag the Democratic Republic of the Congo into a new armed conflict.'

its image as genocide survivor without having to answer for its refusal to engage in dialogue with any opposition, armed or not. This strategy seems to be directly linked to Rwanda's proclaimed security doctrine based on the elimination of external threats. The project of eliminating the FDLR (and any 'associated' threat) strengthens the regime's control over the regional political situation, consolidates its power, and helps explain its longevity.

Familiar Enjoyment

In the 1990s, Africanist political scientists sought to move beyond the simplistic presentation of Africa as an exception primarily viewed through the prism of fatalism or systematic catastrophism[33]. These scholars advocated for a more nuanced analysis that incorporated local context and acknowledged global dynamics. They emphasised how challenges like ethnic conflict[34], corruption, and authoritarian governance were not unique to Africa — they were faced elsewhere, including in Europe[35]. Therefore, comparisons between the war in eastern DRC and other similar wars currently waged around the world, particularly those that fall within the context of contemporary imperialist dynamics, are fruitful.

The war in the DRC resonates with other major conflicts — such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine or between Israel and Palestine — where the actions of the key players are crucial for understanding the violence. A similar pattern emerges in all three contexts: they are territorial, even expansionist. The root causes of a conflict are often manipulated by the most powerful actors to justify the violence inherent in their system of governance. They can even become a pretext for justifying indefinite war. In reality, the *raison d'état* is indistinguishable from the political survival of dictators, autocrats, and fascists in power.

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[33] M. Gazibo et C. Thiriot (dir.). *Le politique en Afrique : état des débats et pistes de recherche*, Paris, Karthala, coll. « Hommes et sociétés », 2009.

[34] C. Coulon et M. Denis-Constant (dir.). « Les Afriques politiques [compte rendu] », *Politique étrangère*, 1992, 57(3), 704.

[35] J.-F. Bayart, A. Mbembe et C. Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, Paris, Karthala, 1992.

Rwanda continues to claim territory in eastern DRC that it supposedly lost to the bordering of the Berlin Conference. This myth that Rwanda was once greater[36] is perpetuated by Kigali, and many Rwandans believe that their current president is the only one who can fulfil this destiny. The narratives surrounding the Rwandan president, especially those that evoke his family ties[37], present him not only as the saviour of Rwanda during the genocide against the Tutsi and the builder of post-genocide Rwanda, but also as a conqueror. Listening to discussions with his collaborators[38], one sometimes gets the impression that he himself believes these stories. His power and longevity are not solely due to the repressive nature of his regime. They are also the result of his legitimacy as saviour, builder, and conqueror, which is bestowed by his collaborators and his people. However, current Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi's rise to power in 2019 significantly reduced the Rwandan regime's influence in the DRC. Their political room for manoeuvre[39] and territorial ambition was further limited by the emergence of new regional players with a stake in the DRC, such as Burundi, Angola, and South Africa.

The annexation of eastern DRC would have benefited the Rwandan state economically, but would also have legitimised the power and longevity of the Rwandan president, making him an emblematic historical figure of Rwanda. Thus, the sovereign action of the Congolese president became an obstacle not only to the interests of the Rwandan state, but also to those of its liberating[40], protecting, building, and conquering president. This obstacle became a reason for war and a justification legitimising the suffering of the Congolese people[41]. The war has dragged on for more than thirty years, partly because it merges the interests of the state with those of the main political actors.

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[36] On this subject, see: Mathys, G. Fractured *Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands. Conflicts, Connections and Mobility in Central Africa*, Cambridge Universty Press, 2025 (avril).

[37] See the links with the story of Rosalie Gicanda, wife of Mwami Mutara III of Rwanda.

[38] As when he says, 'I do not know how I was born among you'

[39] I. Batumike, N. A. Bisoka, « République Démocratique du Congo », dans F. Reyntjens (dir.), *Chronique politique de l'Afrique des Grands Lacs 2019*, Anvers, University Press Antwerp, 2020, pp. 35-62.

[40] See various speeches on 4 July Liberation Day in Rwanda.

[41] For example, the Rwandan president was absent at the signing of an agreement in Luanda on 15 December 2024.

In order for such a strategy to work, Kigali counts on various accomplices, including Congolese actors, who are motivated by their own personal interests. Congolese armed groups have participated not because Kigali made a direct request but because the DRC has failed to strengthen its control and territorial sovereignty, particularly in the east of the country[42]. It is also important to highlight the international support Rwanda has received over the last thirty years. The international community has chosen to ignore the violent realities in the east of the DRC. Instead, the Rwandan regime has received military and entered into agreements that facilitate the export of Congolese minerals, indirectly contributing to the perpetuation of the conflict. While international support does not explain Kigali's decision to start the war, it has helped consolidate the power needed to sustain it, often under the guise of economic and geopolitical interests.

Kigali also attaches importance to addressing the underlying causes of the conflict in its discourse. Indeed, it regularly emphasises the complex under-lying causes of the conflict, claiming that violence does not stem primarily from its proactive military doctrine but from a historical, uncontrollable, irremediable, and permanent complexity. In Kigali's view, this complexity justifies Rwanda's constant protection and permanent interventionist posi-tion in the DRC. This rhetoric legitimises military actions by framing them in terms of national security. At the same time, it conceals strategic personal and regional interests. If Kigali has no need for peace in the east of the DRC, then a greater focus on the root causes, not the political objectives, will only delay the end of the war.

This situation mirrors the war in Ukraine and Russia, where powerful actors are trying to maintain power through an old colonial logic of empire and *raison d'état* to preserve their authority. Certainly, in all political regimes, the leader's survival depends on their ability to align their own interests with those of the state. However, in countries such as Russia, Israel[43], and Rwanda, this alignment is based on the absolute control of powerful actors in the

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[42] K. Vlassenroot. Négocier et contester l'ordre public dans l'Est de la République démocratique du Congo. Politique africaine, N° 111(3), 44-68, 2008.

[43] With a certain peculiarity for Israel that hardly needs to be discussed here.

political regime. The monopolisation of this power is characterised by the absence of political competition, limited public scrutiny, and the restriction of transparent institutional mechanisms. All of this is supported by state coercion and manipulation. Within the framework of the nation-state, internal stability and the right to intervene with military force abroad is essentially a question of power and force. The question of cause is essentially a question of legitimation or delegitimation.

Similarly, the Rwandan president's perfectly legitimate criticism of the West sometimes reads as hypocritical and preachy. This indignation, which should not be confused with his communication strategy, is not cunning (*Ubwenge*), contrary to what some have suggested. In practice, Western powers have gradually (since the mid-1990s) abandoned the principles of liberal democracy in favour of a logic dominated by violence and war. From this perspective of *enmity*[44]*, the use of force, justified by rhetoric about the enemy of the state, is now seen as a legitimate means of subjugation and control. All means are used to assert this domination. Russia, Israel, and Rwanda share this epistemic community with Western countries that have acted in the same way or supported similar dynamics in the past.*

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[44] A. Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016.

Intimate Losses

The most vulnerable populations suffer the most serious consequences. However, the most devastating *intimate losses* remain largely invisible in official discourse, highlighting the fundamental inequalities that underlie these wars. These *Intimate Losses* are the losses associated with the individual and community recovery efforts promoted by the populations of eastern DRC, who have been continuously exposed to armed violence over the past three decades. An *agency-based* approach highlights the profound and often invisible consequences of the conflict. It focuses not only on the visible destruction but also on the intangible losses affecting the population's ability to resist, rebuild, and maintain solidarity in the context of protracted war. The current war in the east of the DRC not only affects the population through direct violence, but also destroys political and socio-economic processes that, although imperfect, have developed despite the obstacles. This resilience and collective solidarity remains invisible to those who see only the devastation; it also crumbles with each new episode of destruction.

Many areas plagued by armed violence are among the most dynamic in terms of positive change. Bukavu has become one of the most important university centres in the DRC and the region, while Goma has become a major economic centre. Ongoing attacks destroy what the local population has managed to build against all odds and erode the agency of local actors who have long worked for a better future. One example is found in the political accountability process implemented by the current governor of South Kivu. Despite pressure and complex relations with his sponsors in Kinshasa, he has sought to reconcile the needs of his people with the demands of the

central government. Another example of agency is North Kivu's cooperation between the state and the private sector, notably for road maintenance after a conflict between the National Road Maintenance Fund (FONER) and oil companies. A desire for pragmatic and constructive local management is clearly visible.

Additionally, cross-border trade, especially over the last fifteen years, has enabled many small Congolese traders to work with Rwandan cooperatives to import consumer goods and strengthen cross-border economic and social ties that are crucial to local livelihoods and social cohesion. Until recently, many Congolese families could live in Gisenyi or Cyangugu in Rwanda while working in Goma or Bukavu due to the 24-hour open border established by the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL). This cross-border mobility facilitated exchanges and strengthened economic and human ties between the two countries. However, increased insecurity and the M23's activity have restricted this freedom of movement, disrupting not only trade but also day-to-day relations between locals on both sides of the border. The wartime restrictions on movement have affected the local population's livelihoods and access to resources needed to survive. The war has generated a rhetoric of closure based on sovereignty and sown mistrust between two historically linked peoples. This has affected the social and human fabric, tearing apart cross-border communities that, despite sporadic tensions, have tried to live together and forge links whenever possible. This foregrounds the war's political and social effects, which have made the future of cooperation and peaceful relations between the people of the DRC and Rwanda uncertain.

The war also has profound impacts on the national political process. Congo has enjoyed fragile, but notable, democratic advances, such as the organisation of elections, political turnover, relative freedom of expression, and a growing demand for good governance. The main belligerents in the Congolese camp (Tshisekedi, Kabila, and Nangaa) once worked together to find negotiated solutions to the challenges of national cohesion. For example, Kabila and Nangaa allegedly transferred power to Tshisekedi after the 2018 elections, even though he did not actually win the election. Furthermore, many M23 leaders have been released from prison in Kinshasa through out-of-court

agreements with Tshisekedi in the name of peace. However, the intensifying conflict is threatening these fragile gains by destabilising political institutions and diverting attention from necessary reform. The war is exacerbating internal tensions and weakening existing democratic processes — this risks stalling any momentum for change and democracy brought about by public pressure in the DRC.

Governance problems under the Tshisekedi regime have significantly slowed economic progress and raised concerns about the DRC's inability to strengthen its fragile democracy. The war is only making things worse[45]. It is reversing the little progress made by the government and through the initiatives of the Congolese people and their various international partners. This threatens to plunge the country into a crisis that will jeopardise its political and institutional future and its territorial integrity.

For instance, community conflict resolution initiatives remain inadequate, mainly because the Congolese government and its various partners seek to suppress the conflict at any cost instead of trying to institutionalise conflict management methods. When the various actors' demands are so contradictory, only legitimate violence can resolve them by catalysing an institutionally binding form of expression, management, or transformation. Unfortunately, the war has swept away even these inadequate formal and informal initiatives. No community — not even Rwandophone Congolese people — benefits from exacerbated ethnic conflicts. The war has merely become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy on which Rwanda can continue to build its narrative and justify the repeated attacks on the DRC. In response, extremist Congolese groups stigmatise all Rwandans and Rwandophones.

In Rwanda, this war has profoundly reshaped the symbolism of the nation and its leadership. Rwanda has positioned itself as a model of good technocratic governance and development in Africa — a polished, prosperous, and stable country that embodies dignified leadership for the continent.

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[45] For a major example on security: J. Verweijen, "Soldiers Without an Army? Patronage Networks and Cohesion in the Armed Forces of the DR Congo", *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 626-646, 2018.

The Rwandan president is perceived as a pan-African leader, a defender of Africa's interests. Notably, he stewarded the Agenda 2063 reforms for a prosperous and self-reliant Africa in 2016 and chaired the African Union in 2018. However, this image is built on a complex and contradictory foundation. After all, Rwanda has sponsored military interventions in the DRC since 1996 and promotes authoritarianism at home. Moreover, Rwanda's development discourse and the political and economic orientations put forward by the Rwandan government have faced criticism.

Still, many Africans, including some Congolese, find inspiration in the Rwandan president and imagine the possibility of finding similar leaders their countries deserve. However, this symbolism has taken on a much darker meaning in the context of war. Rwanda's nationalist imperialism in disguise punctures the image of a Pan-African leader. The collapse of this idealised narrative reveals the limits of Rwanda's security policy, which is now seen as an instrument of regional expansion and domination, not an act of defence[46]. The failure is not just of one president; it is a failure for Africa and all those who had pinned their hopes on this symbol. Here, we must return to old notions of Pan-Africanism, which depoliticized conflicts, massacres, and wars that have scarred the region by reducing them to ethnic hatred (not struggles for power). This inherently strategic discourse portrays the ruling elites as the guarantors of stability to obscure an undeniable truth. As long as Pan-Africanism avoids addressing key issues of democracy and governance, it will remain a hollow concept, disconnected from the fundamental concerns of the continent's populations.

Another often overlooked impact has affected regional integration — both formal institutions like the CEPGL, East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) or ICGLR, and informal ones (e.g., local initiatives led by NGOs, religious figures, artists, journalists, and other civil society actors) promoting peaceful subregional exchanges. The war has seriously undermined these processes, which had great potential to bring people together. Distrust between citizens of neighbouring countries and ethnic tensions have intensified, fuelled by increasingly visible

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[46] This policy also has internal consequences that require further analysis.

political rivalry. These tensions are particularly evident within the EAC, where relations between the DRC-Burundi-Tanzania coalition and the Rwanda-Uganda-Kenya coalition are deteriorating. Ethnic sub-regional divisions weaken regional integration and undermine collective efforts for peaceful cooperation. What remains is division and mistrust that threatens the future stability of Central and East Africa.

The AU, EAC, and SADC have proved incapable of solving African problems, so the Great Lakes region now awaits the verdict of the Security Council or the European Union. This failure makes Africans complicit in their own problems and blunts analysis of the West's neo-colonialism. Firstly, minerals extracted from the Congo and sent to Rwanda benefit not only Rwanda but also, perhaps primarily, the West[47]. Second, the weapons used are not made in Africa; many come from the West. We also cannot forget the historical and contemporary responsibility of the former colonial powers, which continue to protect authoritarian regimes in Africa. However, Rwandan anti-imperialist discourse falters, especially when promoted by self-proclaimed Pan-Africanists, as it is the West's accomplice in this war.

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[47] Ch. Vogel, *Conflict Minerals, Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviourism in Eastern Congo*, Londres, Hurst, 2022

Defiled Dignity

The war in the DRC is associated with a paradoxical loss that goes beyond the regional framework to raise essential questions on the exercise of power in the *postcolony*[48]. *Given the dominance of state-centric and sovereigntist discourse on the continent, a vision of Pan-Africanism or Afropolitanism[49] is no longer one option among others but a vital necessity. Dominant state-centric discourse is based on the idea that territorial sovereignty is paramount and must be preserved at all costs. It does not account for the cross-border realities that ensure a dignified life for the local population in the east of the DRC. The sovereigntist discourse ignores the age-old movement of goods, people, and information, reducing these realities to artificial geographical spaces frozen by the sovereignty of nation-states. It traps entire populations within rigid, disconnected borders. For the last thirty years, such ideology has imposed war as the ultimate expression of necropolitics. It not only decides who lives and who dies[50], but also manages human lives when brutality, militarisation, and the saturation of war discourses, memories, and projects become ordinary expressions.*

The reductionist and necropolitical vision of territorial sovereignty imposed by certain powerful actors has tragic consequences in the region. It shows no

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[48] A. Mbembe, *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2000.

[49] These are two very different schools of thought on Africa. However, in the face of its many challenges, Africa cannot afford to reproduce the nationalist model centered on the primacy of the nation state.

[50] A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019. Pour l'une des modalités pratiques de cette longévité, voir : K. Vlassenroot, K., E. Mudinga, E., & J. Musamba. Navigating Social Spaces: Armed Mobilization and Circular Return in Eastern DR Congo. Journal of Refugee Studies, 33(4),832-852, 2020.

interest in promoting prosperity for the population or dignified cross-border cooperation. On the contrary, it enforces borders as an instrument of separation, control, and restriction; their protection is the ultimate goal, even justifying immediate death. This kind of violence confines human relations to rigid categories dictated by the nation-state. The barbed wire fences and trenches created by the threat of death prevent populations from adapting to the changing realities of the region. Yet, the region's 'transnational flows' clearly indicate the artificiality of these borders and the fluidity of the social realities that exist within them. Social identities and dynamics cannot be reduced to categories imposed by territorial sovereignty. In reality, they are characterised by complex, hybrid, and interrelated identities that defy any attempt at categorisation.

The rigidity of borders is a form of structural violence that serves the interests of dominant actors who wage war in the name of suffering populations. This war exposes the cracks in the logic of imperialism, which is specific to the state and a legacy of colonisation, and reveals the inherent contradiction of sovereignty. State sovereignty hinges on the demarcation of fixed borders and the desire to extend them indefinitely through colonial territorial conquest or the expansion of murderous capitalism. This necropolitics is not imposed by force alone. It is linked to the rigidity of borders and fuelled by the principle of sovereignty. Both sides promote an ideology of dignity — or, rather, of defiled dignity, which argues that people need to die in the name of these mythical constructs. This war also reveals the manoeuvres of powerful regimes that feed on the proud and determined masses who, in a fratricidal frenzy, are ready to die for the supreme interest of the nation or its leader, as the case may be[51].

Authorities enlist the support of victims for their projects by imposing the idea of dying in a fratricidal war. In both the DRC and Rwanda, sovereignty as the ultimate justification for the right to kill on behalf of the state or the

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[51] See the mechanisms that determine the distinction between lives worth protecting and those that can be sacrificed: J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London-New York, Verso, 2006 ; *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable*?, London-New York, Verso, 2016.
2016. Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? London; New York: Verso.

regime derives its fundamental claim and legitimacy from its own narrative — a narrative the population is expected to share. With no legal limits, sovereignty takes on a mythical or divine nature, conveyed through various rituals, such as the proclamation of dignity (*Agaciro*) in Rwanda or the swearing on the flag (*Bendele*) in the DRC. These legitimising and heterogeneous symbols — *Intore, Wazalendo, Bendele, Agaciro*, security, *Mwami*, sovereignty, father of the nation, never again, national unity — blur the line between freedom and coercion. Leaders weave a symbolic and dominant "matrix" that is perfectly aligned with the protection of their interests, which are conflated with the *raison d'état*.

The fundamentally media-driven nature of this war reveals another ritual dimension beyond simple coercion. Mudslinging, insults, and hatred represent the public's endorsement of violence through a dramatisation that produces complicity between the state, the elites, and the people to create an epistemic community around necropolitics[52]. Reciprocity between the elites' decision to go to war and these moments (silence, mockery, pride, jokes, disappointment, justifications, understanding, and everyday practices of intimacy and ease in the face of the death of the other) legitimises power. This legitimacy has become entrenched in the subregion (DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi), the diaspora, and elsewhere, fostering a conviviality that further empowers the regime.

Yet, this overflow has given rise to an extravagance that highlights the vulnerability of power: these rituals of reciprocity and conviviality between the regimes in power and the people have no impact on the underlying logics, which remain rooted in necropolitics and send all who legitimise this power to war and death. This exposes fragility, delegitimisation, and, above all, the flaws that underlie the very *raison d'être*.

Paradoxically, this critique of the nation-state is not without consequences. An opposition to territorial sovereignty may feed the imperialist and expansionist ambitions of some of the DRC's neighbours, whose geopolitical interests often conflict with those of the local populations in the region.

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[52] Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.

Therefore, the sovereigntist discourse is often the only legitimate framework for addressing this conflict. Yet, it also reduces debates to whether the M23 or Rwanda are violating the sovereignty of the DRC, whether this violation is legitimate, and whether the ruling elites can wage war to end it. This discourse is hardly surprising, as it stems from the logic of the nation-state and the protection of state sovereignty.

However, there are pernicious consequences associated with the very concept of the nation-state. For instance, nation-state discourse is deeply suspicious of otherness and movement. It often perceives hybrid and plural flows and realities as threatening while justifying internal inequalities and the exclusion of certain groups. It also implies that Africans — struggling to exist and carve out a place for themselves in a world that so violently ignores, if not mistreats or kills them — should focus their efforts on armament, the only truly effective means of deterrence. They must arm themselves and wage fratricidal wars in the name of dignity instead of engaging in projects that could rethink conditions for a more dignified humanity after slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial violence.

How can we think and act differently when the discourse of those who kill us is based on the same nation-state logic as the discourse of those who have the power to stop them? Perhaps only the resolution to this paradox and the struggles it implies will reveal the real *Agaciro*[53] — a politics of living with real dignity in the African Great Lakes region.

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[53] D. Mwambari, "Agaciro, vernacular memory, and the politics of memory in post-genocide Rwanda", *African Affairs*, Volume 120, Issue 481, October 2021, pp. 611–628. A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001. necropo

Collectivités-chefferies Bahunde et Bashali: A political economy of compounded crises

Patching old garment with new cloth? The Wazalendo coalition and armed groups dynamics

Sam Kishnie and Koen Vlassenroot