FPR/APR : Rwandan Popular Front and Rwandan Patriotic Army

The Rwandan Popular Front, a guerrilla movement and then a political party, made its official appearance in December 1987. Several of its founding members, including Fred Rwigyema and Paul Kagame, took part in Yoweri Museveni’s struggle for power in Uganda and in the NRA (National Resistance Army) between 1981 and 1986. They then held positions as senior officers in the Ugandan Army, before being pushed aside precisely on account of their Rwandan origins.

The great majority of the FPR’s members came from the Tutsi diaspora that fled Rwanda after the massacres of 1959, 1963 and 1973. The core of its leadership derived from the Rwandan diaspora in Uganda. Nevertheless, since its creation the FPR has sought to present a multi-ethnic make-up, welcoming into its ranks in the late 1980s and early 1990s Hutu figures who had previously been close to Juvénal Habyarimana, like Pasteur Bizimungu, Alexis Kanyarengwe and Seth Sedashonga.

The APR (Rwandan Patriotic Army) was the armed and, initially, clandestine faction of the Front. On October 1, 1990, the FPR attacked Rwanda, but was destabilized by the death of Fred Rwigyema and defeated by the military support given by France to the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana during Operation Noroit. After a difficult retreat into the volcanic region, the FPR changed strategy, moved towards guerrilla struggle, and organized raids and limited attacks.

At the beginning of 1994, the FPR numbered 20,000 men. But the war of conquest running in parallel with the genocide was to profoundly alter the composition of the movement that found itself in charge of Rwanda in July 1994 and doubled its numbers. While, officially, the Arusha Accords were implemented after the end of the genocide, it was the armed wing of the Front around Paul Kagame, who became Defense Minister, that held real power.

The opposition parties were emptied of their substance and their leaders were imprisoned or had to leave the country between 1999 and 2000. In reality, the FPR became a single party that nevertheless faces serious internal disagreements, particularly between members hailing from the Ugandan and Burundian diasporas. In 2003, following the adoption of a new Constitution, Paul Kagame was elected President of the Republic with more than 95 percent of the vote.