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A Conversation with King Kigeli V

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King Kigeli V Ndahindurwa is the current king of Rwanda and has been living in exile since a coup d'état in 1961. He was originally born Jean-Baptiste Ndahindurwa, but took the name King Kigeli V when he ascended to the throne in 1959 after the death of his brother, King Mutara Rudahigwa. In 1961, after ruling Rwanda for two years, King Kigeli traveled to Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) to meet with the Secretary-General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld. However, during his absence, a group led by the Hutu politician Dominique Mbonyumutwa, aided by the Belgian military, seized power and abolished the monarchy. This overthrow led to what has now been 49 years of exile for King Kigeli. He has spent that time in a variety of countries and now has political asylum in the United States. During this time, he has spoken out about the Rwandan genocide, as well as the need to use peaceful processes to solve ethnic, political, and religious disputes between groups. In the fall of 2009, King Kigeli visited Stanford with an invitation from the Stanford African Students Association, and the Journal was able to secure an interview with him. With his experiences in mind, the Journal talked with him about his view of the genocide, his experiences with colonialism, and his thoughts about Rwanda today.

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Can you give us an idea of how you felt during the events [the genocide] in Rwanda in 1994?

King Kigeli V: It was a critical time, a sad time, because you see that your children have killed like that, like a goat. It is not something that is easy. It was like the feeling of losing one’s children. That happens, and it is sad. One must have courage, to see one’s son or one’s mother killed like that and that makes a strong impact. I can’t imagine that it is something that everyone can understand.

SJIR: Personally, I cannot imagine that. To continue with that line of questioning, were you angry?

King Kigeli: No, not angry. Anger is minor, but sadness is something that comes form the bottom of the heart. You see, if you are unable to save anyone, then you stay truly isolated.

SJIR: You mentioned [earlier in your talk] about CNN…

King Kigeli: I went to CNN. I said that we need to help Rwanda. I told them that the conditions in Rwanda were bad and that if things continued the way they were going, many people would be killed. Everyone was silent. No one wanted to go there, no one reacted, and then they killed them like that.

SJIR: Prior to 1960, what was the relationship between the Belgian government and the monarchy?


SJIR: Why in your opinion, did the Belgians favor the Hutus over the Tutsi?

King Kigeli: Yes, because the Tutsi were asking the immediate independence of Rwanda and the Hutu
wanted to give 40 years more to the colonial rule.

SJIR: How do see the African Union? What is your opinion of such a regional organization?

King Kigeli: It is a good idea, I wish this organization to make a big effort to bring peace and security in Africa.

[Translator Starts]

SJIR: Colonialism has had a large impact on the world. How has colonialism affected Rwanda and you, personally?

Translator: The genocide was one of the main effects. He is very distressed to see that some people cannot work with one another and end up killing one another like that with no reason. That, I mean, that is very sad.

SJIR: And what were some of the other effects of colonialism besides it being the main cause of the genocide that happened?

T: There is another thing to know. To take him out of this country, you know, this is his country and he had to go in exile. That’s another problem.

SJIR: What do you see as the prospects for democracy in light of what happened when there were not enough controls on people’s behavior and the transition to mob rule that caused all of this violence? What does this mean for how the society would have to be organized in the future?

T: There are a lot of people with heart and he would love to see these people in the country. I wish for peace in the country. Besides this, the people are hiding, and the only way is to try and bring the kids and to try to bring the people together. It will be Rwanda the way it was before.

SJIR: We read in 2007, that you talked with Paul Kagame about returning to Rwanda as a constitutional monarch. What has happened since then, and how would you envision a constitutional monarchy in Rwanda?

T: Since the time of the interview, the Rwandan government said that they were going to send a delegation to come to speak with him but they have not sent anybody yet.

SJIR: Have you been back to Rwanda since then?

T: The last time he went was in 1961.

SJIR: What are your thoughts on the conflict in Sudan? How does it compare to what happened in Rwanda?

T: In Rwanda I know what caused the genocide and I know the medicine for it. However, in Sudan, I do not know the answer. So personally, I found the medicine to be able to cure the disease in Rwanda. Then, it is easier to go help others and cure these people.

SJIR: Since you have not been able to go to Rwanda, how are you able to stay in contact with the people there, and what your relationship is with the country?

T: You know they do speak; they communicate a lot with the [French]; they are always informing him. Everyday, he cannot sleep without getting any information.

SJIR: From your perspective, what is the most important thing that the United States can do to help Rwanda?

T: First of all, the United States can bring democracy to try and help the orphans, the poor, and the widows and bring the proper medication and education to the people of Rwanda. They can also teach love.

SJIR: Is there anything you would like to communicate to our readership, or any particular message you want to send to them?

T: The message from him is to bring justice, human rights, and freedom of speech. It’s really, really, really important to help out the people of Rwanda.

SJIR: Thank you. It was really a pleasure to speak with you. Ñ