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English as a tool of Rwanda's anti-colonial policy

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In modern international relations, a crucial element for developing countries seeking to maintain their political credibility is the use of anti-colonial rhetoric. An important tool in the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism is language policy. Typically, post-colonial nations abandon the language of their former colonial ruler in favor of an indigenous language. However, Rwanda presents a unique case in this regard, as the government actively promotes English over local languages (Kinyarwanda and Swahili) in education, science, the public sector, and business, despite the fact that Rwanda was never a British colony. This study identifies the key reasons behind the implementation of English across all sectors of Rwandan life and seeks to answer the question: "Why is English a tool for combating colonialism in the 'land of a thousand hills'?"

Rwanda is a former colony of Belgium. During the period of Belgian colonial rule, specific reforms were introduced that led to the segregation of the Tutsi and Hutu populations [1]. Following independence, the radical Hutu government was supported by both Belgium and France. France extracted resources from Rwanda, contributing to a permanent socio-economic crisis. Today, the Rwandan authorities frequently accuse France of instigating the civil war and supporting the 1994 genocide [2]. Consequently, the French language, which had been used in the country since the early 20th century, is associated by Rwandans with Belgian colonialism and French neocolonialism – forces that led to the deaths of approximately one million people.

In 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) halted the genocide and emerged victorious from the civil war. The organization's leader, Paul Kagame, was backed by the United States, and American intelligence agencies participated in training RPF combat units. The RPF itself was largely composed of Tutsis who had been persecuted under the radical PARMEHUTU government (during the 1960s-1990s) [3]. During the repressive Hutu policies, they had emigrated to neighboring English-speaking Tanzania and Uganda, where the organization was founded. Largely due to the support the Rwandan Patriotic Front received from English-speaking nations, its leadership adopted a course toward Anglicization.

After the overthrow of the pro-French PARMEHUTU government in Rwanda, France accused the Rwandan Patriotic Front of instigating the war and the genocide. In 2006, French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière petitioned the International Court of Justice to have Paul Kagame brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) [4]. In response, the French ambassador was expelled from Kigali [5]. Meanwhile, Belgium was actively supporting the Rwandan opposition, leading Rwanda to similarly sever diplomatic ties with that country. The rejection of the French language became a political gesture aimed at breaking away from the former colonial powers that were opposed to the new Rwandan government.

In 2007, Rwanda joined the East African Community (EAC), where English is the official language. The desire to accelerate integration with the bloc accelerated the country's Anglicization. In 2008, English became one of Rwanda's three official languages, despite the fact that only 5% of the population was proficient in it [6]. English was made compulsory for civil servants. In

2009, the country joined the Commonwealth of Nations, seeking to attract investment from the United Kingdom. Thus, the implementation of English is primarily driven by economic reasons and the pursuit of preferential advantages.

The process of Anglicization has been progressing very slowly since 2008: by the end of 2025, only about 7% of the population is fluent in English. The main reason for this trend is the low level of teacher training. In some regions of Rwanda, over 80% of teachers continue to deliver lessons primarily in the national language, Kinyarwanda, which contradicts the official policy. In February 2026, during the national "Umushyikirano" dialogue, President Paul Kagame instructed the government to take measures to improve the situation with the English language. However, there is also positive data: approximately 50% of university students are fluent in English.

As for French, in 1994, around 13% of the Rwandan population spoke it, but by 2025, this figure had dropped to 5% [7]. After France officially acknowledged its role in the genocide and diplomatic relations were restored, French was partially reintroduced into schools as a foreign language. Nevertheless, the associations of French with the colonial past in the minds of Rwandans have not been overcome.

In conclusion, the French language came to symbolize colonialism and the 1994 genocide. The catalyst for abandoning this remnant of the colonial past was France's accusation that Rwandan Patriotic Front had started the war. Conversely, English became the language of anti-colonial struggle because the Tutsi liberators were supported and trained by English-speaking nations. The driving force behind the implementation of English was the RPF's desire to gain economic advantages from the United States, the EAC, and the Commonwealth of Nations. The process of Anglicization in Rwanda is progressing slowly, but the government is taking measures to accelerate the implementation of English in all spheres of life in the country.

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