

**BOOK REVIEW – *Bad News: Last Journalists in a Dictatorship***

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In *Bad News: Last Journalists in a Dictatorship*, Anjan Sundaram stresses not only his passion for investigative reporting, but also its importance for and connection to human rights. The book follows his personal struggle to run an educational and supportive program for young and inexperienced journalists in Rwanda, East Africa. His endeavors occur amid the current political situation in Rwanda, which is heavily influenced by the trauma of the devastating 1994 genocide. Rwanda's postcolonial history is dotted with conflicts between its two major ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi, after colonizers upset the practices that had maintained peace in the region previously. The brutal acts of organized violence in 1994 left the country raw and represents a heinous mass atrocity where government officials worked with civilian militias to orchestrate mass murder. The current president, Paul Kagame, is revered for ending the genocide and steering the country toward prosperity, yet critics argue that the political situation is on a different course. Sundaram reports that while the powerful Western world supports Rwanda's perceived progress with massive investments, the reality of the situation is that Rwanda is led by a dictator who violates the human rights of his people and is primed for future atrocities.

Sundaram masterfully brings the reader into this situation to better understand the complexities of Rwanda today. His writing focuses on the feelings of fear and hopelessness that are a reality for many people living in Rwanda. This is gripping enough in and of itself. Perhaps this focus on emotion in lieu of descriptive writing is intentional. (Indeed, the reader does not mind the absence of imagery that could

perhaps provide a better mental picture of this foreign landscape and its customs.) The story focuses not on superficial differences between Rwanda and the West, but rather on that which every human can relate to: Human emotions. Highlighting differences would only drive a wedge between the message and its intended audience in the West.

This story parallels George Orwell's *1984* in certain ways because the hellish fictional social system shares many similarities with the real life report of Rwanda's government. The opening chapter of *Bad News* is called "Grenades" after mysterious explosions that plague the city. Sundaram shares his frustrations as he investigates these events from a journalist's point of view, only to come to a dead end. The government quickly covers up any evidence of the explosions, cleaning up the damage in the streets but also removing any suggestion of grenade bursts within the media. Through the tight grip that officials have over the Rwandan people, the state seems to erase the event from history. The people, fearful and repressed, swallow whatever version of the truth their government feeds them. The disappearing grenades serve as a chilling symbol of the Rwandan government's ability to manipulate what would be inescapable truth outside of a dictatorship. Just like Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's famous dystopian novel, Sundaram seems to be nearly alone in his ability to see past the state-sanctioned rhetoric to the innumerable human rights violations taking place in the country.

A frustrated Sundaram – seeing that the oppression of free thought, speech, and press are at the core of the government's power – creates a journalism program for the few aspiring reporters in the country who dare to go against their government to expose real issues the country. *Bad News* reads like a gripping novel following the story of the author and protagonist as he fights against the odds for justice. Along his journey toward a free press, he exposes the reality of life in Rwanda – which comes in stark contrast to the myth of prosperity, freedom, and cohesion that the government perpetuates at home and abroad. Sundaram brings to light countless human rights violations carried out by the Rwandan state, at the same time attempting to keep himself and the other journalists in the program

safe. The very need for a semi-undercover journalism program demonstrates how the government limits the press. Journalists in Rwanda who criticize the government make themselves susceptible to extreme violence. The government systematically monitors media outlets with “government media regulators” who can block publications (p. 37). Through the acts exposed in this book, it is clear that the people of Rwanda do not have the basic human rights of freedom of speech and freedom of thought.

The Rwandan government does not stop at monitoring the press, though, keeping close tabs on the thoughts and moods of its people in cities and villages alike. The government hovers literally (in helicopters) and metaphorically, through the seemingly brainwashed guards who patrol more remote villages to monitor civilians, “mak[ing] sure they uttered only officially sanctioned words” (p. 128). Any person who threatens the interests of the government, and specifically the president, can be arrested and incarcerated without legal trial, let alone one that is based on equality before the law. Torture and persecution is understood as a reality faced by citizens who dare to deviate from pro-Kagame rhetoric. Ironically, the government uses the natural human desire for freedom to deny it, as well as to maintain an environment of paralyzing paranoia and conformity: “In a dictatorship one gained one’s freedom not by defending the liberty of others but by working to diminish it: for each person you turned in you earned more space,” writes Sundaram. “Even if such freedom could not last, even if you could lose by betrayal what you had gained through betrayal” (p. 42). In this way, the atmosphere creates a self-sustaining system of thought control. This relates back to the necessity of a free press to circulate alternative views that holds the government accountable.

To expose other, seemingly endless, human rights violations, *Bad News* relies on smaller stories that stem from the main thread. One follows the plight of Gibson, for instance, who was initially introduced as a star student of the journalism program. Early in the book, he is hungry to use his talents and skills to do good for his country despite its rocky political situation. He takes the risk of starting an independent publication whose content falls somewhere between government propaganda and directly

criticizing the regime. It featured a story on malnutrition, for example, which does not criticize the regime directly but exposes an issue that does not exist in the state-sanctioned version of the truth. Not even this is tolerated; Gibson was betrayed by a friend to the government and he soon feared for his life and had to flee the country. “The problem with Gibson’s case was that it was not official, if the government had pursued him through the courts, through some public mechanism, there might have been a chance. But they had gone after him in secret, extra-judicially” (p. 51). Though Gibson survived, other journalists are not so fortunate. The appendix of the book contains a hallowing non-extensive list of journalists who have been persecuted, tortured, or killed by the government from 1996 until the present day.

Rwanda today may seem to have advanced beyond the state embroiled in the 1994 genocide, but Sundaram warns that it is not far from that genocidal atmosphere. He writes that “when the killing began, there were almost no voices to oppose it” (p. 45). In a perverted twist, the government that promises to honor the genocide and protect its people from any similar future event uses residual fear and trauma to oppress its people. While freedoms of speech, thought, and press alone are not enough to halt more tangible human rights violations, work towards a rights-protective state depends first on free expression and the transfer of information and ideas.

One criticism of the book is that it works from the assumption that the reader has an existing knowledge of the Rwandan genocide. By keeping the contents powerful but with a narrow vision, Sundaram risks the reader coming to conclusions based on personal interpretation rather than the real experiences of Rwandan people. This political situation is complex and without a deep insight into its history, a clear understanding of the present is impossible. Along these same lines, Sundaram alludes to Western financial supporters’ apparent blatant refusal to recognize the corruption of the government that they support. While this is shocking and adds to the desperate and helpless mood of the book, it feels that a political story is being left untold here.

Despite these omissions, Sundaram's gift is conveying emotions along with his investigative reporting. Today's news consumer is overwhelmed with global reports of hardships and injustices. By telling his story in a compelling way, Sundaram cuts through the noise of the world issues and helps the reader engage with the situation. Ultimately, *Bad News* gives the reader an understanding of what it is like to live in a dictatorship, which has relevance beyond Rwanda and even beyond Africa. This story could be the first or closest experience the reader has with this type of regime. Because of Sundaram's masterful storytelling, it will not soon leave the reader's mind.

### **Book information**

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