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RWANDA: REPRESSION IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTIONS

Against the backdrop of severe restrictions on human rights, Rwandans will be heading to the polls on 15 July 2024 to vote in both presidential and parliamentary elections. The political opposition continue to face severe restrictions to their right to freedom of association, as well as threats, arbitrary detention, prosecution on trumped-up charges, killings and enforced disappearances. Independent civil society and the media also face many attacks, intimidation, harassment and reprisals for their work. This all has a chilling effect and limits the space for debate for people in Rwanda.

ELECTORAL CONTEXT AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The Constitution was amended in 2023 to allow presidential and parliamentary elections to be held at the same time. Incumbent President Paul Kagame from the ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), is widely expected to be elected to a fourth term in office (after receiving 98.79% of the vote in 2017, 93.07% in 2010, and 95.05% in 2003).¹

Rwanda's Constitution was revised in a 2015 referendum after more than 3.7 million people petitioned Parliament to lift the two-term presidential term limit to allow President Kagame to stand again. Under the revised Constitution, the president serves for a five-year term, renewable once. The new rules will only come into force this year. The revised Constitution provided that, "considering the petitions submitted by Rwandans that preceded the coming into force of this revised Constitution, which were informed by the particular challenges of Rwanda's tragic history and the choice made to overcome them, the progress so far achieved and the desire to lay a firm foundation for sustainable development",² there would be an additional seven-year presidential term of office before the new term limits and length would come into effect.

In practice, this amendment allowed President Kagame to be elected to serve a further seven-year term from 2017 to 2024, and he is eligible to stand for a further two five-year terms in 2024 and 2029. His candidacy is endorsed by a coalition of eight political parties in addition to the RPF. He is one of three presidential candidates, standing against Frank Habineza of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, and Philippe Mpayimana, an independent candidate. The same three men competed in the 2017 presidential election.

Six other people submitted their candidacies to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to stand for president, but the NEC ruled that they failed to meet the requirements – primarily on the basis of missing or incorrect documents, not collecting enough signatures of registered voters in support of their candidacies, or errors in the details of those listed supporters.³ Among those whose candidacies were rejected were Diane Rwigara and Fred Sekikubo Barafinda, whose candidacies were also rejected in 2017. Diane Rwigara was arrested in September 2017 after launching a new activist group and charged with "inciting insurrection or trouble among the population", "forging or alteration of documents" and "use of counterfeited documents", but eventually acquitted on all charges in December 2018.⁴

Two veteran political opponents who had previously been imprisoned sought legal rehabilitation from the High Court to enable their candidacies. Rehabilitation, if granted, "extinguishes a penalty and all its consequences".⁵ Victoire Ingabire, leader of the unregistered party Development and Liberty for All (DALFA-Umurinzi) party, had her sentence commuted and was released from prison in September 2018. The High Court had found her guilty in October 2012 on a conspiracy to terrorism charge and of "grossly minimizing the genocide" and sentenced her to eight years in jail, which was then increased to 15 years by the Supreme Court in 2013.

¹ International Federation for Electoral Systems, Election Guide: Republic of Rwanda, electionguide.org/countries/id/180/

² Constitution of Rwanda 2015, Articles 101 and 172

³ National Electoral Commission, List of Approved Candidates, 6 June 2024, nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Lisiti_y_Abakandida_2024.pdf

⁴ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Ensure fair trial for former presidential aspirant," 22 May 2018, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/8464/2018/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/8464/2018/en/)

⁵ Law N° 027/2019 of 19/09/2019 relating to the criminal procedure, Art. 252.

In March 2024, the High Court refused Victoire Ingabire's request for legal rehabilitation, effectively barring her from standing for election. As a condition of her release from prison almost six years ago, she is also required to report to the local prosecutor on a monthly basis and seek authorization to travel abroad.⁶ These conditions would ordinarily cease on the date her prison sentence would have been completed (that is, October 2025).⁷ Victoire Ingabire has publicly stated that her repeated requests for authorization to travel abroad have gone unanswered, constituting a violation of her right to freedom of movement.⁸

Bernard Ntaganda, founder of the Ideal Social Party (PS-Imberakuri), also sought legal rehabilitation, but the High Court denied his request in May 2024 on the grounds that he had unpaid court fees.⁹ Amnesty International has seen receipts that would indicate that those fees had in fact been paid.¹⁰ Bernard Ntaganda was arrested at dawn on 24 June 2010, coinciding with the start of the presidential candidate registration period that year, and went on to serve four years in prison. In February 2011, he was found guilty of "divisionism" for making public speeches criticizing government policies ahead of the elections, breaching state security and attempting to plan an "unauthorized demonstration".¹¹ The PS-Imberakuri, which was able to officially register as a political party after it was taken over by a dissident faction favourable to the ruling RPF in March 2010, opted not to field a candidate for the 2024 presidential elections.¹²

In the parliamentary elections to be held on the same day as the presidential elections, 53 deputies will be directly voted in. Vying for direct election are 345 candidates from an RPF-led coalition of six parties (Centrist Democratic Party (PDC), Party for Progress and Concord (PPC), Rwandan Socialist Party (PSR), Prosperity and Solidarity Party (PSP), Democratic Union of the Rwandan People (UDPR) and RPF), as well as the Liberal Party (PL), Social Democratic Party (PSD), Green Party, Ideal Democratic Party (PDI), PS-Imberakuri and one independent candidate. The NEC also approved 199 candidates standing in indirect elections for 24 positions as women MPs; 31 candidates for two seats elected by the National Youth Council; and 13 candidates for one seat elected by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities.¹³

After his defeat in the presidential elections of 2017, Green Party president Frank Habineza was able to run for office again in the 2018 legislative elections under the previous electoral system. He and the party's secretary general Jean Claude Ntezimana were elected as Green Party members of parliament for the first time. In 2024, with both presidential and legislative elections happening on the same day, Frank Habineza is not on the Green Party's list of 50 parliamentary candidates.¹⁴

LONGSTANDING CHALLENGES AND ATTACKS ON POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Restrictions on opposition candidates and parties are nothing new in Rwanda. Opposition parties face significant obstacles to registration, including hurdles to obtaining the necessary security clearance to organize meetings they need to hold in order to be registered. The Democratic Green Party of Rwanda was able to register in 2013 after several years of trying (three days before the deadline to submit candidate lists for the parliamentary elections that year). Victoire Ingabire's former party, the FDU-Inkingi, has never succeeded in getting registered. Her current party, DALFA-Umurinzi, which was launched in November 2019, remains unregistered. Christopher Kayumba, the founder of The Chronicles newspaper, established the Rwandese Platform for Democracy (RPD) in 2021. Shortly afterwards, he was accused of

⁶ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Releases must be followed by opening up of political space", 19 September 2018, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/9123/2018/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/9123/2018/en/)

⁷ Presidential Order N° 131/01 of 14/09/2018 Exercising the Prerogative of Mercy

⁸ Victoire Ingabire, "On this year's Global Day of Parents, I still long to be with my children," Al Jazeera, 1 June 2024, [aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/6/1/on-this-years-global-day-of-parents-i-still-long-to-be-with-my-children](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/6/1/on-this-years-global-day-of-parents-i-still-long-to-be-with-my-children)

⁹ TRT Afrika, "Court bars Rwanda opposition figure from seeking election", 14 May 2024, [trtafrika.com/africa/court-bars-rwanda-opposition-figure-from-seeking-election-18161682](https://www.trtafrika.com/africa/court-bars-rwanda-opposition-figure-from-seeking-election-18161682)

¹⁰ Copy of receipt on file with Amnesty International

¹¹ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Opposition Politician Jailed for Exercising Rights", 11 February 2011, [amnesty.org/en/pressreleases/2011/02/rwanda-opposition-politician-jailed-exercising-rights/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/pressreleases/2011/02/rwanda-opposition-politician-jailed-exercising-rights/)

¹² Post by The Chronicles on X, 26 May 2024, x.com/ChroniclesRW/status/1794728206093996522

¹³ National Electoral Commission, Press release, 14 May 2024,

nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Press_Release__Abakandida_bemejwe_burundu.pdf

¹⁴ National Electoral Commission, List of Approved Parliamentary Candidates, 6 June 2024,

nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/ABAKANDIDA_DEPITE_B_IMITWE_YA_POLITIKI_-_2024.pdf

rape for which he was acquitted in February 2023. In November 2023, he was convicted on appeal and given a two-year sentence (suspended for one year). The RPD remains unregistered.¹⁵

Since the previous elections in 2017, one member of the FDU-Inkingi has been killed and another found dead in mysterious circumstances. Victoire Ingabire's assistant, Anselme Mutuyimana, was found dead on the outskirts of a forest on 9 March 2019. At the time, the Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) (the state agency with responsibility for carrying out criminal investigations) told Amnesty International that the case was under investigation and that one person had been arrested.¹⁶ Anselme Mutuyimana had been released from prison less than a year earlier after serving six years for "inciting insurrection or trouble among the population", on the basis of having held an "illegal meeting".¹⁷ FDU-Inkingi's national coordinator Sylodio Dusabumuremyi was killed on the night of 23 September 2019. The FDU-Inkingi reported that two unidentified men had arrived by motorbike at a canteen he ran in Muhanga district and stabbed him to death.¹⁸ At the time, RIB reported that they were investigating and that they had two suspects in custody.¹⁹

Two FDU-Inkingi and one DALFA-Umurinzi members have disappeared. On 7 October 2018, Boniface Twagirimana, FDU-Inkingi's vice-president, was reported to have escaped from Mpanga International Prison, a maximum-security prison in Nyanza district. The circumstances of his alleged escape make it seem likely that he was the victim of an enforced disappearance.²⁰ His fate and whereabouts remain unknown. In January 2020, Boniface Twagirimana was sentenced in absentia to ten years in prison for forming an armed group and threatening state security; five colleagues were also convicted and received sentences of between seven and 12 years.²¹ On 15 July 2019, Eugène Ndereyimana, another member of FDU-Inkingi, was reported missing by his colleagues when he failed to show up for a meeting in Nyagatare in Eastern Province.²² One of Victoire Ingabire's aides in DALFA-Umurinzi, Venant Abayisenga, disappeared in June 2020, five months after he had been acquitted on charges of forming an illegal armed group and released from detention. Before his disappearance, he told the media that he had been tortured in detention.²³ There has been no accountability or independent and effective investigations into these cases or those from previous years.²⁴

Eight DALFA-Umurinzi members who were arrested in October and December 2021 respectively, plus one of their colleagues in absentia, are being prosecuted in relation to a training that they planned and attended on non-violent action, and actions that they are alleged to have planned to mobilise the population and inspire non-cooperation, for example through the non-payment of taxes.²⁵ The state alleges that the actions were supposed to start around "Ingabire Day", 14 October. The training was based on the book *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* by Srđa Popović, a leader of the student movement that helped bring down former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević.

In its indictment dated March 2022, the prosecution charged the group with conspiracy to commit an offence against the ruling power or the President of the Republic, to cause uprising and unrest amongst the population, to attack the force of the law (by allegedly planning to mobilize the population not to pay tax), and unlawful demonstration or public meeting.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Rwanda Annual report 2023*, [amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/rwanda/report-rwanda/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/rwanda/report-rwanda/)

¹⁶ Email communication from RIB, 17 March 2019.

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Opposition politician found dead", 18 March 2019, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/0063/2019/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/0063/2019/en/)

¹⁸ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Ensure justice for opposition politician stabbed to death", 24 September 2019, [amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/rwanda-ensure-justice-for-opposition-politician-stabbed-to-death/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/rwanda-ensure-justice-for-opposition-politician-stabbed-to-death/)

¹⁹ RIB post on X (formerly Twitter), 24 September 2019, twitter.com/RIB_Rw/status/1176368876029919234?s=20

²⁰ Amnesty International, "Rwanda: Opposition politician found dead", 18 March 2019 (previously cited)

²¹ Reuters, "Rwanda jails opposition figures for 7-12 years for 'conspiracy'", 24 January 2020, [reuters.com/article/world/rwanda-jails-opposition-figures-for-7-12-years-for-conspiracy-idUSKBN1ZN19I/](https://www.reuters.com/article/world/rwanda-jails-opposition-figures-for-7-12-years-for-conspiracy-idUSKBN1ZN19I/)

²² Amnesty International, *Human Rights in Africa: Review of 2019* (Index: AFR 01/1352/2020), 8 April 2020, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr01/1352/2020/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr01/1352/2020/en/)

²³ Amnesty International Report 2020, 7 April 2021, [amnesty.be/infos/rapports-annuels/rapport-annuel-2020/rapport-annuel-2020-afrique/article/rwanda-rapport-annuel-2020](https://www.amnesty.be/infos/rapports-annuels/rapport-annuel-2020/rapport-annuel-2020-afrique/article/rwanda-rapport-annuel-2020)

²⁴ For information on similar cases before the 2017 elections, see pp14-15 of Amnesty International, *Setting the scene for elections: Two decades of silencing dissent in Rwanda*, 7 July 2017, [amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AFR4765852017ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AFR4765852017ENGLISH.pdf)

²⁵ Copy of indictment on file with Amnesty International

Additionally, all the defendants are charged with forming or joining a criminal association. In one case, additional charges were brought of spreading false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against the Rwandan Government and publication of rumours (under the cyber-crimes law). The prosecution is seeking prison sentences of 20 years to life imprisonment. However, the trial is not scheduled to start until early 2025, after more than three years in pre-trial detention.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

Standing trial alongside the DALFA members is journalist Theoneste Nsengimana. He is accused of forming or joining a criminal association and publishing rumours. He had announced on his online TV channel that he was planning to cover the Ingabire Day events. Serious concerns about his wellbeing in detention were raised in June 2024. His wife reported that she had been denied access to visit him in early June, and was informed by a spokesperson of Rwanda Correctional Services that he “had committed a mistake and received a corresponding disciplinary action.”²⁶ The mistake was understood to be submitting a candidacy to stand for president and then to complain to the NEC when he did not receive a response.²⁷ When his wife was eventually able to see him on 15 June, he appeared very weak and told her that he been held in isolation in cold conditions for 12 days, of which he was denied food for the first three days.

The case of Theoneste Nsengimana is emblematic of the reprisals faced by journalists in Rwanda on account of their work. Dieudonné Niyonsenga, also known as Cyuma Hassan, was arrested in 2020 with his driver Fidèle Komezusenge, after reporting on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on his YouTube TV channel. In March 2021, both were acquitted of forgery, impersonating journalists, and hindering public works, but Cyuma Hassan was rearrested in November after the prosecution successfully appealed the court’s decision. He appeared in court on 10 January 2024 looking weak and with a wound on his forehead, and described his punitive conditions of detention, saying that he is detained in a lightless “hole” that often fills with water, and is beaten frequently.²⁸

Several other YouTubers and commentators critical of the government remain in detention, including Yvonne Idamange and Aimable Karasira.

Rwanda’s leading investigative journalist John Williams Ntwali died in Kigali in suspicious circumstances in January 2023. The police said that he died in a road traffic accident on 18 January and that they had arrested the driver involved in the collision. The day before his death, John Williams Ntwali had raised concerns with another journalist about his safety.²⁹ In a trial that was held in the absence of independent observers, the driver was convicted of manslaughter and unintentional bodily harm. Despite the high level of interest in the case both nationally and internationally, journalists covering the case were not informed that the hearing was taking place and were only called to witness the reading of the verdict. One journalist known to be supportive of the Rwandan authorities did say, however, that he attended the trial, and that the small courtroom was packed.³⁰ Significant details were missing from the written verdict, including the precise location of the accident; there was no reference to any visual evidence from traffic police said to have attended the accident; and references to a medical report were vague.³¹

In the civil society sphere, there are fears that a proposed new law governing both national and international non-governmental organizations would place even more restrictions on their freedom to operate. The draft NGO bill would introduce new restrictions on budgeting and management decisions of national NGOs, including an obligation not to exceed 20% of its operating budget on activities that are “not in the interest of its beneficiaries”. (A similar provision already exists in the law governing INGOs.) Under the proposed law, NGOs would not be allowed to “commit acts that

²⁶ Post on Theoneste Nsengimana’s account on X, 4 June 2024, x.com/theoneste_/status/1798044006494150789

²⁷ Post on Theoneste Nsengimana’s account on X, 23 June 2024, x.com/theoneste_/status/1804947935127359778

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Rwanda: End Abuses Against Journalists,” 18 January 2024, [hrw.org/news/2024/01/18/rwanda-end-abuses-against-journalists](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/18/rwanda-end-abuses-against-journalists)

²⁹ Amnesty International, “Rwandan authorities should ensure an independent investigation into John Williams Ntwali’s death”, 31 January 2023, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/6400/2023/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/6400/2023/en/)

³⁰ Forbidden Stories, “Collision course: An investigation into the death of a journalist hated by Rwandan authorities”, 28 May 2024, [forbiddenstories.org/collision-course-an-investigation-into-the-death-of-a-journalist-hated-by-rwandan-authorities/](https://www.forbiddenstories.org/collision-course-an-investigation-into-the-death-of-a-journalist-hated-by-rwandan-authorities/)

³¹ Amnesty International, “Rwanda: Questionable trial after journalist’s death”, 15 March 2023, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/6521/2023/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr47/6521/2023/en/)

jeopardise the unity of Rwandans, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom and fundamental rights of others or political activities” and those found to fall foul of these criteria – that lend themselves to a very broad interpretation – would be definitively closed down.

The Rwandan authorities actively obstruct the work of human rights organizations. In May 2024, Human Rights Watch’s senior researcher Clementine de Montjoye was denied entry when she arrived at the airport in Kigali, for “immigration reasons”. She was the fourth HRW researcher to be blocked from entering Rwanda since 2008.³²

While Rwandans have sought to use social media channels and online platforms such as YouTube to express themselves and share information, the authorities have also moved their repression into the digital space. In 2021, new evidence uncovered by Amnesty International and Forbidden Stories found that 3,500 Rwandan activists, journalists, political opponents, foreign politicians, and diplomats have been selected as targets for NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware.³³ These targets included Anne Rwigara, the late sister of Diane Rwigara.³⁴ This spyware is highly invasive, allowing the user full and unlimited access to all personal data on a device. Combined with the use of other surveillance methods in Rwanda, the overall result is a severe chilling effect on people exercising their right to freedom of expression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls on the Rwandan authorities to immediately end their persistent and severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and to allow space for differing opinions and approaches to be aired before, during and after the elections. The Rwandan authorities must ensure and provide access to justice and effective remedies to victims of human rights violations. In particular, the authorities should establish an independent judicial investigative mechanism to investigate suspected killings and enforced disappearances of opposition members, journalists, human rights defenders, activists and other critical voices. Those who remain arbitrarily detained on account of their peaceful exercise of their human rights should be immediately released. Authorities must uphold their international human rights obligations including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights to which Rwanda is a state party.

³² Human Rights Watch, “Rwanda: Human Rights Watch Researcher Barred,” 16 May 2024, [hrw.org/news/2024/05/16/rwanda-human-rights-watch-researcher-barred](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/16/rwanda-human-rights-watch-researcher-barred)

³³ Amnesty International, “Pegasus Project: Rwandan authorities chose thousands of activists, journalists and politicians to target with NSO spyware”, 19 July 2021, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/rwanda-authorities-chose-thousands-of-activists-journalists-and-politicians-to-target-with-nso-spyware-2/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/rwanda-authorities-chose-thousands-of-activists-journalists-and-politicians-to-target-with-nso-spyware-2/)

³⁴ Forbidden Stories, “Pegasus in Rwanda: Sister of presidential candidate, high-ranking Rwandan politicians added to spyware list”, 28 May 2024, [forbiddenstories.org/pegasus-in-rwanda-sister-of-presidential-candidate-high-ranking-rwandan-politicians-added-to-spyware-list/](https://www.forbiddenstories.org/pegasus-in-rwanda-sister-of-presidential-candidate-high-ranking-rwandan-politicians-added-to-spyware-list/)