

Rwandan crisis deepens as Kagame begins seven-year term

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13 September 2003

Rwandan President Paul Kagame was sworn in Friday to a seven-year term. Kagame won a landslide victory in the August 25 presidential election, which took place amid a clampdown on organized political opposition in the country and widespread allegations of electoral fraud.

The international press generally presented the elections, the first since the 1994 ethnic genocide between majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, as a democratic transition. However, the social conditions facing the country and the repressive run-up to the elections themselves show that Kagame's government has been unable to solve any of the social and economic problems that led to the genocide.

According to official voting results, the US-backed Kagame won 95.1 percent of the vote. The challenger attracting the most attention, French- and Belgian-backed Hutu moderate Faustin Twagiramungu, received 3.6 percent. A third candidate, Jean Nepomuscene Nayinzira, whom some press reports described as running on a platform of divine inspiration, received 1.3 percent of the vote.

Observers indicated that the outcome of the elections was never in doubt, as Kagame accused his opponents of stoking ethnic "divisionism," a serious crime in post-1994 Rwanda. Thanks to this charge, Kagame arrested Twagiramungu supporters, denied them the right to hold meetings and confiscated their campaign leaflets. The Rwandan government reportedly confiscated so much of Twagiramungu's campaign materiel that he was reduced to a couple of cars. On election night Twagiramungu announced that his campaign was "ready for prison."

The US humanitarian organization Human Rights Watch issued a statement accusing Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) of "tightening control in the name of unity." It quoted Kagame as saying in a speech: "I can even say that the outcomes of these elections are known. Those elected will be individuals who are 100 percent in line with the current political agenda, aimed at building the country.... Anyone who would bring in division—because I know that the views of those who intend to come back are based on division—will not be elected."

La Mõne, French voting daily observer Flesch praised the elections as an "important step" towards democracy. However, she went on to say that she had seen evidence of ballot-stuffing in several voting precincts and that Kagame's supporters, present at all polling stations, were "intimidating." For unstated reasons rival candidates decided not to send their supporters to the polling stations. Flesch also noted widespread evidence that Kagame had misused public funds for his re-election campaign.

The *New York Times* wrote that the "election had all the trappings of democracy," adding that "observers dispatched at polling places across the country on Monday had few complaints." However, in a more accurate comment on Kagame's real social support, it added that Kagame's backers were terrified that his opponents might draw attention to the fact that, under him, benefits have largely accrued to a layer of Tutsi businessmen and government officials.

Under the tutelage of the IMF, the Rwandan government under Kagame has tried to create a favorable climate for international investment, reducing corporate taxes and eliminating taxes on exports. Rwanda is scheduled to join the southern and eastern Africa free trade area in 2004. The government's economic policy has been to promote its connections with the Tutsi diaspora and depend on its relatively well-educated urban workforce to attract investors seeking to develop a cheap-labor service industry, thus getting around Rwanda's lack of manufacturing and industrial infrastructure.

Social and economic conditions in Rwanda are disastrous. Over 65 percent of the population live under the official UN world poverty line of \$1 per day. Although the official life expectancy figure is 49 years, 9 percent of the population has AIDS. The CIA World Factbook states that, with higher mortality due to AIDS taken into account, life expectancy is in fact only 40 years. Rwanda, the most densely populated country in Africa, has a large and poor population in the countryside—85 percent of the population lives off farming. As its agriculture switched to coffee and tea for export under

the recommendations of the IMF in the early 1990s, it faced a serious soil erosion and depletion problem. Coffee and tea exports provide 80 percent of Rwanda's export revenue. The population also suffers from the long-term effects of the 1994 genocide, with hundreds of thousands of Rwandans displaced within the country or as refugees in nearby countries.

Under these conditions, the country's tenuous economic development is largely dependent on outside influence. The Rwandan government obtains substantial revenues by selling coltan and other precious minerals pillaged from the neighboring Congo by militias trained by and associated to the Rwandan army. It also depends on international financial institutions' temporary willingness to extend it credit. According to Rwandan Minister of Finance and Economic Planning Donald Kaberuka, "Luckily our budget deficit [of 9 percent of Rwanda's GDP] is financed by the African Bank for Development and the World Bank. Our creditors know this deficit is healthy, since it finances social investments.... The long-term objective is to arrive at a budget deficit of 6 percent of GDP."

These institutions' forbearance, relative to their gutting of social spending in other African countries, comes in part from the privileged relations between the US and Kagame's regime, which the US is using as a client state, principally to undermine French and Belgian influence in the region.

Kagame, a Tutsi exiled since childhood from Rwanda to Uganda, got his start as a rebel fighter and military intelligence operative in Uganda and came to political prominence as a member of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) operating there. He obtained military and strategic training in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in the US in 1990. With training and active logistical support from the US, Great Britain and US-backed Ugandan forces, the RPF took control of Rwanda during and after the 1994 genocide, launched by the French-backed "Hutu Power" Rwandan government, that targeted Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled the country; many were tracked down and slaughtered by RPF forces. The extent of RPF massacres remains a hotly contested topic—estimates range between "several thousand" to 30,000 or even 200,000 killed—but Kagame himself has acknowledged that RPF officials "committed violations of international humanitarian law."

After coming to power, the RPF benefited from counterinsurgency and combat training from US Special Forces. Although Pentagon officials claimed this training consisted of simple "classroom" exercises stressing respect for human rights, documents leaked to *Washington Post* reporter Lynne Duke indicated that the US training "was

extensive and included combat training," according to Duke's August 16, 1997 article.

The 1996-1997 Rwandan-backed military campaign to overthrow neighboring Zaire's dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who had close links to France and Belgium, started a few weeks after a visit by Kagame to Washington. According to Duke, the campaign benefited from frequent liaison visits from officials of the US embassy in Kigali, the Rwandan capital. US officials also told Duke that "the United States may have trained some of the fighters who ousted Mobutu." At this time Rwandan forces also began extracting mineral resources from eastern Zaire, now called the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In February 2001, shortly after President Bush arrived at the White House, Kagame visited Washington DC to request a continuation of the military support obtained under the Clinton administration. Kagame's regime has continued to function as a US protectorate, lending diplomatic cover to the Bush administration in its various criminal international adventures.

In a March 5 visit to Washington, during which he spoke to a gathering of US investors and briefed President Bush and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on the political situation in Central Africa, Kagame repaid the Bush administration with cover for its own criminal adventures abroad. In a move that is all the more significant as details of US involvement in Rwanda at the time of the genocide continue to come to light, Kagame signed an accord with Bush exempting US and Rwandan nationals from lawsuits from the other country at the International Criminal Court. Kagame also voiced his support for the Bush administration's preparations for its invasion of Iraq in mid-March 2003.

Kagame also depends on US backing at the UN to shield his government from investigations of atrocities committed by the RPF. International war crimes tribunal prosecutor Carla del Ponte was recently removed from her post as head prosecutor in Rwanda, amid complaints of pro-genocide bias by the Rwandan government. Rwanda essentially halted her investigation of RPF war crimes by denying her access to witnesses and documents. The US has up to now blocked moves by the Security Council to force Kagame's government to comply with the tribunal.



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