

'Worse Than a Dictatorship': Rwanda's 2024 General Election

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, SEP 29 2024

My first-experience of Rwanda was while serving with the UN in the months after the horrific civil war and genocide of 1994. In the months preceding July, 1994, the Tutsi minority ethnic group, moderate Hutu and Twa, were brutally murdered by armed Hutu militias. In the immediate aftermath, a community leader from the Tutsi (himself living clandestinely in fear of his life in Kigali) told me, "It was a hundred days of mass murder and unparalleled bestiality of man against man, mass rape and attacks on women, and followed tens of hundreds of days of covert attacks and underlying mass fear, when everyone in Rwanda had sleepwalked into such wholesale atrocity". I returned for several subsequent elections, including that of July 2024.

In polls that were immediately criticised for disqualifying genuine opposition, the incumbent President Kagame, was ostentatiously elected for a fourth term. If the figures provided by the Rwandan Electoral Commission can be believed, Kagame got over 99% of the vote and a 98.2% turnout. He was then ceremoniously inaugurated to continue his rule on 11 August. This writer spoke to a motley crew of what might count as political opposition, in the wake of this apparently unanimous victory. As you might expect the opposition were angry and unconvinced. One person told me under conditions of secrecy:

We are worse than a dictatorship – this man does not even have any immediate succession plan and the only way he would ever be stopped is with a bullet – the same way he forced his way into power. Things have never been so far, and it breaks our hearts to know there is no hope.

As another opposition figure acknowledged at our closed-door meeting in a church hall, Kagame was methodical in securing his power:

A referendum in 2015 approved constitutional amendments that would allow him to run for a third term in office in 2017, as well as shortening presidential terms from seven to five years. This was a kind of camouflage to weaken the secrecy in which the incumbent was effectively stealing his way to stay in control for good. Again, nothing was done about it. He openly told the French Ambassador in the presence of the French Press that he intended to run for president yet again in the 2024 election, despite having already served three terms in office, and there was only the feeblest of objections. Even the EU said very little at the time.

A prominent Tutsi statesman summarised the situation which the latest election now consolidated:

Kagame's rule is not only authoritarian it is absolute and with the July 2024 election he has taken another step towards positioning himself as yet another of the old-style African leader-for-life that most of us thought were largely ghosts of a bitter past. One of the leading objective analysts, Freedom House, describe Kagame as an autocrat ordering relentless levels of surveillance, intimidation, torture and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents. Another top international body, Human Rights Watch show the widespread extent to which Kagame's forces have "arrested and threatened political opponents.

Freedom House described the July 2024 elections in Rwanda as entirely flawed, citing "widespread ballot stuffing,

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political intimidation, the elimination or silencing or arrest or blocking of opposition leaders and systematically undemocratic practices. Kagame had announced his Presidential bid on 20 September 2023, declaring "I am happy with the confidence that the Rwandans have shown in me. I will always serve them, as much when I can". Kagame's campaign was endorsed by all of Rwanda's ruling government coalition, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), including the Ideal Democratic Party, the Democratic Union of the Rwandan People, the Prosperity and Solidarity Party, and the Rwandan Socialist Party. He was also endorsed by the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party.

In the years preceding, Kagame had done everything possible to undermine opposition activist Victoire Ingabire's credibility with imprisonment, an alleged smear campaign, police intimidation of her party base and numerous alleged dirty tricks which made Ingabire look politically inept. Worse still, her potential voter base experienced mixtures of the Rwandan state's administration crude attempts to persuade them to endorse Kagame. Ingabire had been convicted in 2010 for threatening state security and downplaying the Rwandan genocide by asking why no Hutu victims were included in the state's official memorial. There was a large-scale if sometimes subtle campaign to undermine her political influence, culminating in her being formally excluded from running on 13 March 2024.

On 7 June the Rwandan electoral commission confirmed Kagame, Frank Habineza and Philippe Mpayimana, an independent, as the final candidates for the presidential election, a re-run of 2017. The applications of six other candidates, including Diane Rwigara of the People Salvation Movement, were rejected. The Independent dubbed his election as "widely criticised as unfair", while Amnesty International regretted the "a chilling effect" of Kagame's censorship laws.

During the 2024 election campaign Kagame had pledged to continue his policies upon re-election. Opponent, Habineza opposed arbitrary detentions under Kagame. Another "rival" Mpayimana had said he offered "political maturity" in the country. With the election results declared the question now remains one of whether he will become a dictator for life or will put into place some sort of succession process.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.