



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
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## Report

# Rwanda and President Kagame

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Paul Kagame cast his vote in Kigali, August 2017. [Reuters]

After winning 98.6 percent of the votes (1), President Paul Kagame was inaugurated for his third term in office on 18 August 2017. (2)

### **Introduction**

Rwandan political development is a holdover from its history of the 1994 Genocide and the political discourse that preceded it. Rwanda is also known for its fast-economic growth, and its President—Mr Kagame. Labelled by many media outlets as a 'one-horse race', the recent election in Rwanda, as in many developmental states led by dominant ruling parties, participatory, but uncompetitive.

## **The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis and Rwandese state building**

Opinions on Rwanda need to begin with the recognition of the extraordinary challenges the country has faced following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis and moderate Hutus.(3) The genocide frames Rwanda's political, economic and even social development. With the history of the genocide in mind, Rwanda's political and economic resuscitation and development cannot be considered as a normal democratization and nation-building process.

Rwanda's peculiar history and recent developments do not easily yield themselves to the archetypal assessment of democratization and the state building process. The historical peculiarities of Rwanda make stability as necessary as democracy. Therefore, effective government is as necessary as democracy. With this peculiar circumstance in the

background, it's remarkable that after two decades, Rwanda has managed to extricate itself from the debilitating economic effects of the genocide and has since become an example of the successful developmental state in Africa.

### **Exemplary developmental state**

Representing Africa's hope of successful economic growth, Rwanda is now one of the fastest growing African countries. Nowhere in Africa is the impact of economic growth and development as visible as in Rwanda. The 2015 Mo Ibrahim Index of African governance report, ranks Rwanda as 9th out of 54 countries on the continent, and in terms of a ten-year country trend, it ranks 7th. (4) Rwanda is ranked 2nd in terms of accountability and 4th in personal safety. Indicative of the grave challenges on the political front, Rwanda ranks 28th in civil society participation and human rights. In safety and the rule of law it ranks 21st. The task of transforming a country scarred by genocide, into an exemplary developmental state is a monumental African success that should be championed throughout our continent. Those who deny the development in Rwanda appear to either harbour sinister motives or misplaced judgement.

At the centre of the transformation of the Rwandese economy and the country's security are President Kagame and the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). Both need to be adequately credited for being instrumental in the transformation of Rwanda's economy and its current stability. President Kagame's dedication to Rwanda's progress is partly a product of his experiences as a rebel leader who stopped the 1994 Genocide, as recounted in his biography. Like many other developmental states, President Kagame's government has been effective in its delivery of public services and economic development, but restrictive on democracy. As a result, President Kagame enjoys performance legitimacy. President Kagame has become masterful in nation branding, so much so that others have attempted to copy his style. For many Africans, Rwanda exemplifies a model state. Many Africans admire Kagame, and aspire to share his values and standards. Observers and international actors have given President Kagame's leadership the benefit of the doubt in those areas of governance where he has been restrictive and less democratic.

Like Rwanda, developmental states are not regular states. The developmental state not only provides the necessary legislative, regulatory and enforcement mechanisms within which the market operates, but also determines the governmental effectiveness of that state, and defines the direction of its political economy, providing opportunities for all public and private actors engaged in economic activities. Accordingly, the State monopolizes not only the means and use of violence, norm-setting mandates, and

regulatory and enforcement powers, but also the economic space of the country. In a market economy, the State intervenes to correct market adjustments and failures. Contrary to this, in the developmental state, the government invests and the private sector intervenes to complement such public investment and economic actions. In a nutshell, the private sector fills the 'gaps' in the economy that are attributable to the state. The State dominates the economy, whereas the private sector plays a supportive role. This model is called 'The Ethiopian Way' by the World Bank.'

In the developmental state, there is no generic roadmap. Each country seeking to embark upon the journey of the developmental state needs to design its own map for constructing the road to economic success. Dynamism and pragmatism are both essential elements of the developmental state. It is hegemonic in its use of power. The scale, depth, extent, and pace as well as natural change is transformational. The developmental state requires strong professional meritocratic bureaucracy that is determined to effectively implement plans designed by the leadership. The developmental state is thus an autonomous polity capable of bringing political economic transformation through the settlement of political elites and massive service delivery programs. It requires a highly-disciplined leadership with an extraordinary sense of public purpose and urgency. Such a leadership also exercises an extraordinary fusion of power, relying on the will of the leadership to hold itself accountable. This makes it vulnerable to self-serving corrupt elites. It requires a political party with foresight which focuses on future generations beyond the impact of regular elections. A successful developmental state entails decades-long uninterrupted control of political power. For this reason, it calls for an exceptionally enlightened political and economic elite that exhibits prudence and supports the trade-off between delivery and democracy. A critical mass of the political and economic forces of the country needs to share a common vision of the developmental state in order to sustain it. More importantly, in a country exhibiting diverse cultural and political forces, a national vision is vital. Without it a developmental state cannot be successful. With national consensus, the developmental state could exercise autonomy from external interference, which is an essential element of such a state.

### **Delivery and stability first, democracy later**

Expressed briefly, the developmental state relies heavily on the fast delivery of services that promote an improved livelihood. If it does not serve that objective, the state loses its legitimacy. Democracy in Africa can generally, but not exclusively, be equated with uncertainty, instability and inefficacy, while the developmental state is a sine-qua-non in terms of stability and delivery. Democracy is relegated to secondary, even lower level of

importance in developmental state. Short of popular legitimacy, the developmental State relies on its delivery capability in order to gain legitimacy.

The developmental state has two cardinal shortcomings: state hegemony instead of democratic plurality; weak accountability heavily dependent on personality and party oversight, instead of democratic institutional accountability. The developmental state could become viscerally hostile to the rule of law and accountability. Hegemony is a monopolistic exercise of power, while democracy is a system designed more about how to handle differences as opposed to similarities. The developmental state can also lead to a 'political party emperor' that exercise state power in a hegemonic monopoly. Democracy assumes that all officials and parties, including a president and ruling parties, are replaceable. This contradicts the nature of the developmental state.

Moreover, delivery can help to bring stability and potentially the democratic propensity of its population. However, impressive economic performance cannot be a substitute for constitutional democracy. Effectiveness in delivery and stability is a source of legitimacy, but only democracy ensures the sustainability of the legitimacy of authority. Development and freedom are strongly related. (Sen, Amartya (1999): *Development as Freedom*. New York: Random House). When poverty is rampant freedoms will remain in danger, and without freedom, poverty eradication will be almost impossible. (Gay, John (2003): *Development as Freedom: A Virtuous Circle?* Afrobarometer Paper No. 29). When delivery and stability are pursued at the expense of democracy, a country may lose all.

### **Rwandese Politics of fear and fear of politics**

Genocide is not only a historical fact informing Rwandan socio-political development, but it is also a predominant truth in the public sphere. Fear looms large in the calculus of Rwandese politics. In a poor country with such a troubled history, there are thousands of things that can go awfully wrong. Fear of ethnic conflict is understandable, and concerns about the unpredictability of democracy are justifiable. Petrified by concerns about a future Genocide, a significant percentage of Rwandese justify the restrictions on democracy as legitimate and proportionate. Consequently, Rwandese may prefer stability and delivery over democracy. This is partially attributable to the fear of politics and the politics of fear.

Needless to say, there might be justifiable, even necessary, restrictions on some of the components of democracy in Rwanda. In the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against Tutsis and the role of the mass media in the genocide, stricter curbs on freedom of expression and particularly freedom of the press remain a regrettable political necessity.

Some critics have found Kagame's third term presidency legally and normatively unjustifiable. Indeed, since the End of the Cold War, the age of the inherent lifelong presidency has been over, and currently remains a largely unpopular concept. Furthermore, some popular opinion surveys have indicated that many Africans prefer a stable and effective government than unstable democratically elected system. This is, of course, a matter for debate. However, term limits are not a universal rule in democracy. Many democratic governments in Europe and Asia have no term limits for executive power even when democratically elected. Marked by coups and the prevailing "permanent" emplacement of incumbents, a valid concern exists that is specific to Africa. This concern relates to a political history of the abuse of office and the emplacement of presidents in power through force, manipulation and intimidation. Fear could also be a factor for the support of President Kagame's successful bid for a third term. President Kagame has the ability to inspire both fear and enthusiasm.

### **The Shock Absorber President: from personal to institutional power**

During the election campaign, President Kagame announced that he would serve as a 'shock absorber' for Rwanda. (5) As discussed elsewhere, a vehicle's shock absorber reduces excessive suspension movements and the chances of that vehicle rolling downhill. (6) It ensures stability. For now, President Kagame is the shock absorber of Rwanda. However, institutionalized public shock absorbers would serve the future of Rwanda far better than a personal shock absorber that can be adjusted at will. Constitutional institutions play a sustainable critical role in times of crisis similar to shock absorbers. In a constitutional system, independent institutions such as the judiciary, the legislature, the army and police (although part of the Executive) all serve as shock absorbers when such a system faces a serious political crisis and travels a rough road towards transition. An empowered democratic citizenry, not the presidency, is the indisputable guarantee for pluralism and stability.

### **Breaking the prison of genocidal history**

George Santayana wrote that, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." (7) There are lessons from national success, just as there are from historical failures. Dynamism and pragmatism are two important pillars of the developmental state. As durable as this may be, in the long-term delivery and democracy dynamics need to be calibrated, taking into account a growing middle class and popular demands. If the 1994 Genocide offers any lesson for Rwanda and other aspirant developmental states, it is the

need for strong and reliable democratic constitutionalism guided by the rule of law. Rwanda's political development should certainly take into account its past genocidal history as a central facet of its successes and failures. Nonetheless, Rwanda's future should not be a prisoner of its dark past. Its past should not totally define its future. Rwanda's history of genocide should not shackle today's Rwandese and future generations to the past. Unless dealt with through stronger democratic state institutions and open public discourse, the frightful legacy of genocide will be kept alive and could hobble Rwanda's progress.

Neither a dominant political party, nor a strong leader can serve as a substitute for a strong constitutional democracy where the majority of the citizenry has the right to rule and the rights of the minority are fully respected. Democratic accountability increases tolerance of diversity and plurality. An empowered democratic citizenry is key to increasing the accountability of officials through constitutional democratic institutions. Ultimately, building genocide-proof governance would depend on empowered democratic citizenship rather than sectarianism and exclusion. More deliberations and recognition of pluralism will not undermine Rwanda's security. On the contrary, a fixation on stability at any cost could totally undermine the future stability and even viability of Rwanda as a state.

### **Burden of the developmental president**

The future of Rwanda and the legitimacy of President Kagame's leadership is importantly tied to the democratization of Rwandese politics, in addition to improving the overall livelihoods of the Rwandan people. Actually, the leadership burden for President Kagame is even greater now in his third term. President Kagame's next best and greatest contribution for Rwanda's future generations will be on the political front. Given that he has brought stability and economic delivery for Rwandans, and has been in power for so long, he now has to install vibrant democracy in his country. The post-genocide generations will increasingly require a leadership that can thrive in freedom, not in fear. President Kagame and the post genocide generations of Rwanda need to rid themselves of the yoke of fear politics in the wake of Rwanda's history of genocide.

Pluralism cannot be guaranteed by term limit of an office. A change of presidency does not necessarily usher pluralism particularly in developmental dominant party system.

Development, social justice and poverty reduction could be a relevant rallying agenda for many Africanist. But poverty reduction could be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy.

For this reason, if developmental state designed, as a transitional governance that phases out towards vibrant democracy, it could serve Africa very well in both delivery and democracy. A developmental state should phase out by design not by default. Thus, it requires preparations.

Rwanda's extremely dependence on President Kagame, makes it a victim of its own success. His indispensability is his weakness.

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