



Subcommittee Hearing: Developments in Rwanda
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, members of the Subcommittee: thank you for holding this important hearing on the human rights situation in Rwanda and for inviting me to testify. I am glad to be a part of it.

Just 21 years after the genocide, Rwanda has come a long way. By any measure, there have been real, concrete improvements in terms of economic growth and access to public services. The numbers show a dramatic turnaround for a country left devastated and traumatized by unspeakable brutality. According to the United Nations Development Program, a million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty; annual economic growth has averaged 8 percent; more than 95 percent of children have access to a full cycle of primary education; infant mortality is down 61 percent, three quarters of the population have access to drinking water. The country is on track to meet most of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. The parliament is majority female, at nearly 65 percent.

By the sound of it, Rwanda is not a country in crisis. It is a country where things work.

But in reality, it is only some things that work. The same government that has helped many Rwandans **out of poverty and propelled the country's economic growth** has done so while severely restricting their fundamental civil and political freedoms.

Indeed these gains are undermined by two persistent trends:

- systematic domestic repression that stifles – sometimes very violently – dissent, opposition, and independent thought; and
- repeated cross-border meddling and support for abusive armed rebels groups in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo, or the DRC.

International and regional attention on Rwanda has often been an outgrowth of its interference in the DRC – which has happened at least four times since 1996. Each cross-border intervention by Rwanda has included a range of support for extremely violent armed groups responsible for killing, raping, and looting. And until recently, the reaction from governments has never come close to adequately addressing the scale and scope of their abusive support. Three years ago, however, things started to change when **Rwanda's support for the M23 rebel group was forcefully criticized by the United States (and other governments)**. This condemnation brought about serious diplomatic activity and a suspension of security assistance by the US, as well as suspension of other forms of assistance by European governments – all of which ultimately contributed to **Rwanda's decision to cease its military support** for the M23.

While these measures set an important precedent for US policy, today **I'd like to** switch gears and focus on **Rwanda's** domestic challenges because it is within this environment that government accountability and transparency need to begin. In fact, if there had been a viable Rwandan independent civil society and media able to denounce these repeated cross-border interventions, perhaps the authorities in Kigali might have stopped their most recent meddling operation.

Rwanda is a country of double realities. Visitors are impressed with the façade, the apparent security. The streets are clean, the traffic lights work, economic growth is strong, and tourism is high. In many ways this is a smokescreen: many Rwandans live in fear, not only because of the legacy of the genocide, but because the current government – the only one since the end of the genocide in 1994 – runs the country with a tight grip on power.

The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) dominates all aspects of political and public life. It won the last parliamentary elections (2013) with more than 76 percent of the vote, and President Paul Kagame won the last presidential elections (2010) with 93 percent of the vote. The absence of political space means opposition parties cannot operate in a meaningful way. This is not new – it has been a constant feature of RPF rule since the end of 1994.

Independent civil society is extremely weak as a result of years of state intimidation, infiltration, and heavy administrative burdens. One by one, activists have either fled the country for fear of ending up in prison or been silenced through repeated threats. The last remaining national independent human rights group, the Rwandan League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LIPRODHOR), was taken over by members sympathetic to the government in 2013. The Rwandan government and pro-government media regularly and publicly attack and misrepresent the work of my own organization, Human Rights Watch – for example falsely accusing us of supporting the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a predominately Rwandan armed group operating in eastern Congo, some of whose members participated in the 1994 genocide.

Along similar lines, the Rwandan media remains heavily dominated by pro-government views with most journalists unable – or unwilling – to investigate and report on sensitive issues because of the constant threats they face. The Rwandan government introduced new media laws and reforms in 2013, which enshrine **journalists' rights to freedom of opinion and expression and introduced self-regulation** by the media. But for the most part these reforms have not translated into reality, as years of intimidation have led to self-censorship and decreased interest in investigating alleged abuse or even dissent. And even after the passage of these reforms in 2013, **the Rwandan government suspended the BBC's Kinyarwanda service in 2014** – following the broadcast of a television documentary entitled **"Rwanda's Untold Story"** – on the grounds that it was inciting, among other things, hatred and divisionism. The suspension of the BBC local language service deprives many Rwandans of a precious source of independent information they **can't find elsewhere** because it often broadcast issues and angles not covered by the pro-government, domestic media.

The Rwandan government invokes the need to prevent a resumption of ethnic violence as justification for restricting freedom of expression. This practice is disingenuous, because it silences all forms of dissent and criticism, including many that have nothing to do with ethnic violence – a tactic that could end up **reversing Rwanda’s** apparent stability and its economic successes.

One of the ways the Rwandan government silences opposition and dissent is by engaging in tactics such as arbitrary detention, arrest, and even enforced disappearances of those who criticize the government. Human Rights Watch has documented scores of cases of individuals held unlawfully by the military or police in unofficial detention centers – some for several weeks or months. Some of these detainees have been tortured and their families not notified of their whereabouts. There is also a phenomenon of killings, attacks, and threats against government opponents and critics in exile. The most prominent example of this is **Patrick Karegeya, the former head of Rwanda’s external intelligence services and leading member of the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), an opposition group in exile.** On January 12, 2014, Karegeya was found murdered in a hotel room in South Africa. The South African authorities launched an investigation, the outcome of which is not yet known.

Despite abundant evidence of serious repression by the Rwandan government over the last 21 years, there has been only muted international criticism. Instead, Kigali has enjoyed strong support from key donor countries like the United States, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, and a range of other political actors and independent foundations. The absence of a comprehensive policy approach that addresses Rwanda’s disregard for fundamental rights is stark. Indeed, because Rwanda is held up as an all too rare model of successful development in Africa, the focus stays there, to the exclusion of all else. The repressive domestic environment has been treated as an ancillary problem – or not treated at all – for the most part because, it seems, because it is just too difficult to reconcile with the positive narrative.

But there is good reason – beyond just moral considerations – for donor governments, financial institutions, and foundations to support the exercise of civil and political rights by Rwandan citizens alongside economic growth. Indeed, in a case study on Rwanda for the **World Bank’s World Development Report 2011**, Omar McDoom argued that **“peace is most likely to endure if Rwanda’s political space is gradually opened up”** and that **“post-conflict stability premised on economic growth and strong leadership – but without political liberalization on the longer term – may have a finite duration and a possibly dramatic ending.”**¹ His conclusion is an important warning for all donor governments and particularly for this Congress as it considers the FY16 foreign operations budget. To the extent that

¹ Specifically he says “The long-term durability of peace depends also on the gradual opening of political space and de-concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elite to allow Rwanda’s state institutions and civil and political society to evolve into responsible and independent counterweights to the regime. In the absence of such a shift in political culture Rwanda’s prospects for a peaceful and constitutional change of regime one day may be diminished and the remarkable achievements of the current regime after the genocide undone.” See Omar McDoom, **“Rwanda’s exit pathway from violence: a strategic assessment,”** World Development Report, April 2011, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_1089.pdf (accessed May 20, 2015). For articles by a range of authors on different aspects of post-genocide Rwanda, see Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, eds., *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

Rwanda's development success depends on use by the Rwandan Patriotic Front of repression and fear to maintain its rule, that success is likely to be fragile.

So what does this mean for US policy?

There are a number of steps the US could take to help shift international perceptions of Rwanda so they take into account **the government's human rights record**. Congress has a big role to play in making sure this happens.

For starters, the Obama administration and members of Congress should keep speaking out against abuses by the Rwandan government. Recent statements by the administration – and by senior members of this committee – have had tremendous impact. **Rwandan officials' insistent denials** of repression in their country make it clear that these statements matter. International legitimacy is very important to the Rwandan government; it wants to be a key regional player and condemnation of poor domestic behavior **doesn't fit that model**. So sustained pressure is important.

Second, the administration needs to make unequivocally clear its support for the VOA Central Africa service. Here, Congress has a specific role to play in ensuring there is full funding for services in local languages, including Kinyarwanda. Robust support to the VOA Central African service, particularly in light of the recent BBC Kinyarwanda service shut down, sends a doubly important message about the **United States' commitment to press freedom**. Many Rwandans who live in the countryside, far from the cities, can frequently be seen listening to the VOA on their radios. They rely on it as one of the most precious and dependable sources of impartial, objective information. If this VOA service were to end, it would leave a major gap that could not be filled. As with the absence of the BBC, there is no similar service to replace it.

The United States should also urge the Rwandan government to permit the development of a truly independent civil society by allowing human rights groups to operate freely and by minimizing registration and administrative burdens. There should be absolutely no toleration of arbitrary arrests and detention, and in particular enforced disappearances, as tools to silence criticism. Congress can make a valuable contribution by making sure there is adequate funding for democracy and governance initiatives and that it is allocated smartly. For example, in FY13, USAID spent \$3.2 million on democracy and governance in Rwanda but only \$500,000 went to civil society and no funds were specifically allocated to support the rule of law or human rights.² **The absence of funds does not necessarily mean the US isn't engaging on** some of these issues, but it does signal the absence of a strategic approach to support independent and critical voices in a difficult environment.

Finally, the United States should use its prominent role at the World Bank and with other financial institutions to urge broader guiding principles that are not only rooted in the freedom from want but also the freedom from fear. In Rwanda, this would mean the multilateral development banks pursuing more

² See USAID, “Dollars to Results: Rule of Law and Human Rights in Rwanda,” 2013, <http://results.usaid.gov/rwanda/democracy-and-governance/rule-law-and-human-rights#fy2013> (accessed May 20, 2015).

than just a narrow development agenda but also raising concerns about the impact of the **government's** repression on sustainable, effective development. The US should also be a leader in making sure that international financial institutions take all necessary measures to ensure that in complex environments like Rwanda, they aren't **directly or indirectly** supporting rights abuses.

I'll close by saying that I am aware of concerns expressed by some in the administration – and even here in Congress – that a more public stance on **Rwanda's** domestic environment might undermine the bilateral partnership between Kigali and Washington – including cooperation on important regional issues and **Rwanda's** active role in peacekeeping. But the US has often underestimated its own leverage and been overly cautious as a result. The US may need Rwanda – but Rwanda needs the US too. Instead, the US should continue refining its policy on Rwanda and send a strong signal of support to the many Rwandan citizens who crave freedom of expression and greater political space but whose fight for dignity and freedom has been all but quashed.