

***LIBREVILLE, February 5 (Infosplusgabon) - The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and President Paul Kagame continued to exert control over the political landscape in Rwanda, as political opposition leaders have been intimidated and silenced, arrested, or forced into exile. The RPF won an overwhelming victory in legislative elections in September, following Kagame's re-election with a reported 98.8 percent of the vote in the 2017 presidential elections. A 2015 referendum changed the constitution and allowed Kagame to run for additional terms.***

In July, the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) cancelled its visit to Rwanda, due to a lack of cooperation from Rwandan authorities, making it the first time in 11 years the SPT would cancel a visit. The National Commission for Human Rights is yet to publish a report on the killing of Congolese refugees by police in the Western Province.

Civil society groups, local and international media, international human rights organizations, and political opponents cannot operate independently or criticize government policy. A Human Rights Watch researcher was denied access to the country in January 2018. That same month, a Rwandan consultant working with Human Rights Watch was detained and arbitrarily held for six days, the first twelve hours of which were incommunicado.

## **Freedom of Expression**

While some private radio stations occasionally broadcast programs on “sensitive” issues, most print and broadcast media continued to be heavily dominated by pro-government views. Most journalists were unable or unwilling to engage in investigative reporting on politically sensitive

issues and rarely criticized government policies, because of intimidation, threats, and prosecutions in previous years.

The BBC Kinyarwanda service remained suspended, as it has been since 2014.

After many years of state intimidation and interference, independent civil society organizations are very weak and few document and expose human rights abuses by state agents.

## **Political Pluralism**

The RPF won parliamentary elections in September, with 40 of the 53 elected seats. The Democratic Green Party of Rwanda won at least 5 percent of the vote, granting the party two parliamentary seats. This will be the first independent voice in Rwandan parliament in several years.

The trial of former would-be 2017 presidential candidate Diane Rwigara and her mother, Adeline Rwigara, opened in May 2018. The women, along with four others tried in absentia, were charged with “inciting insurrection or trouble among the population.” Diane Rwigara was also charged with “forging or alteration of documents” and “use of counterfeited documents,” and Adeline Rwigara with “discrimination and sectarian practices.” On October 5, the High Court

ordered their release on bail. The women were acquitted of all charges on December 6.

Diane Rwigara, her sister Anne, and their mother were arrested in September 2017, after Diane Rwigara had been barred from filing her candidacy for the August presidential elections. In the days leading up to her arrest, she spoke with international media outlets and criticized police actions and accusations against her. Hours before her arrest, Rwigara told one outlet that her family was being “persecuted for criticizing the government.” Anne Rwigara was later released, and the charges against her dropped.

The charges of inciting insurrection were related to comments Diane Rwigara made at a press conference in July 2017 in which she was critical of the government. The charges related to forged documents and their use stemmed from allegations from the National Electoral Commission that many of the signatures supporting her candidacy were invalid. The incitement and discrimination charges against Adeline Rwigara appeared to be based on private WhatsApp messages. Some of these messages that leaked to pro-government Rwandan press were critical of the government.

FIN/INFOSPLUSGABON/MLL/GABON2021

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