

Rwanda's August 4 Presidential Election

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Politics and the 2017 Presidential Election

The circumstances of Rwanda's August 4 presidential election highlight some of the policy challenges in approaching a country that arguably combines effective governance with political repression. President Paul Kagame, in office since 2000, is campaigning for a third term. A constitutional referendum in 2015 changed the presidential term from seven to five years but exempted the sitting President from the shortened term and from a two-term limit until 2024 ([Article 101](#), [Article 172](#)).

The referendum was scheduled following "[national consultations](#)" in which over 3.7 million Rwandans petitioned for changing the term limit. Over [98% of voters backed the](#) new constitution, which could permit Kagame to remain in office until 2034—and thereafter be immune from prosecution "for treason or serious and deliberate violation of the constitution" ([Article 114](#)).

Observers view a Kagame victory as [overwhelmingly likely](#). He won previous elections in 2010 and 2003 by over 93%. The State Department [characterized the political environment](#) in 2010 as "riddled by a series of worrying actions taken by the Government of Rwanda, which appear to be attempts to restrict the freedom of expression." Observers [reported](#) possible vote tabulation irregularities and other concerns with legislative elections in 2013.

Kagame faces two untested opponents, Frank Habineza of the Democratic Green Party and independent candidate Philippe Mpayimana. Habineza, the most well-known opposition candidate, was not allowed to register as a candidate in 2010 and spent two years in exile after his deputy was decapitated in what some viewed as a [possible political assassination](#). Mpayimana, a journalist, was a refugee from the 1994 Rwandan genocide and has spent much of his life outside of Rwanda.

In early July, the National Electoral Commission barred three other candidates, stating that they had not met nomination requirements. One of them, Diane Shima Rwigara, a Kagame critic and would-be first female independent presidential candidate, was the target of what many observers considered a [smear campaign](#) shortly after announcing her candidacy

in June, when purported nude photos of her were circulated online. Rwigara has asserted that the [death in 2015 of her father](#), a widely known businessman, was a [targeted assassination](#).

Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is the dominant force in Rwandan politics and has sharply restricted space for dissent. Political opponents, journalists, and human rights activists are reportedly subject to legal constraints, detention, intimidation, and sometimes deadly assault. Many have fled the country, and some have accused the government of [plotting assassinations](#). Amnesty International has [described](#) the 2017 elections as taking place in "a climate of fear."

In 2015, Obama Administration officials expressed concerns about the [referendum](#), Kagame's [decision](#) to run again, and [limits on political space](#). The Trump Administration has made few public statements on Rwanda to date, but in a July [press release](#) commemorating Rwanda's National Day, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed an interest in "continuing... to work with Rwanda on expanding efforts to strengthen democracy and respect for human rights."

Possible Issues for Congress

Rwanda has become known for its rapid development and security gains since the 1994 genocide, in which over 800,000 people were killed. The RPF, a former rebel movement, took power in 1994, stopping the genocide. Under President Kagame, the government's efforts to improve health systems, the economy, and gender equality have received substantial support from donors, including the United States, and poverty rates have reportedly decreased. For [some observers](#), Rwanda's economic dynamism and efficient state services are proof of progress. Others [question](#) whether the country's tightly controlled political environment may ultimately undermine stability.

Rwanda's development, political stability, and influence on regional security are of particular congressional interest. In the 114th Congress, the [House](#) and [Senate](#) held hearings on political and security trends in central Africa, and the House held an additional [hearing](#) focused specifically on Rwanda. Other potential issues for Congress include the authorization, appropriation, and oversight of bilateral aid (totaling \$159 million [in FY2016](#)), along with significant additional [military aid](#) in support of Rwanda's international peacekeeping deployments. The Trump Administration has [proposed](#) decreasing bilateral aid to \$105 million in FY2018, reflecting proposed cuts to global development funding.

Some Members of Congress have [paired](#) support for development efforts with expressions of concern over Rwanda's political climate, including alleged assassinations. Some have [raised concerns about U.S. support for](#) Rwanda in light of reports that Rwanda has [backed rebel movements](#) in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 ([P.L. 115-31](#)) requires the Secretary of State to certify that governments in Africa's Great Lakes region, including Rwanda, are not "facilitating or otherwise participating in destabilizing activities in a neighboring country" prior to receiving certain military aid. (See CRS's [Rwanda: In Brief](#) for more on legislative restrictions on U.S. aid.)

Outlook

President Kagame's likely third term victory arguably presents a challenge for longstanding U.S. efforts to promote democracy in a region where electoral transfers of power are rare. At the same time, the United States appears likely to continue to partner with the Rwandan government on development and peacekeeping initiatives.

As Congress considers FY2018 appropriations legislation, Members may assess U.S. funding and prioritization of democracy and human rights promotion in Rwanda. Members interested in Rwanda's development trajectory may also consider U.S. support for developing Rwanda's domestic energy resources—a current [area of focus](#) for Rwanda—and options for increasing Rwanda's utilization of tariff preferences under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, discussed in [CRS In Focus IF10149](#)). Rwanda's AGOA eligibility is currently under an [out-of-cycle review](#) in response to concerns by the U.S. used clothing industry regarding a regional import ban. AGOA eligibility determinations are made by the executive branch based on criteria established in statute by Congress, including some related to human rights and good governance.



Comparative size: slightly smaller than Maryland

Independence: 1962, from Belgium

Population, growth rate: 13 million, 2.5%

Languages: Kinyarwanda, French, English (all three official)

Religions: Roman Catholic 49.5%, Protestant 39.4%, other Christian 4.5%, Muslim 1.8%, other/none 4.8% (2002 est.)

Median age: 19 years

Life expectancy: 60.1 years

Infant mortality rate: 56.8 deaths/1,000 live births

HIV/AIDS adult prevalence: 2.9% (2015 est.)

Literacy: 70.5% (male 73.2%, female 68%) (2015 est.)

GDP: \$8.4 billion, \$729 per capita

GDP growth rate: 5.9%

Key exports: coffee, tea, hides, tin ore

Top export partners: Democratic Republic of the Congo 19.8%, US 10.8%, China 10.3%, Swaziland 7.9%, Malaysia 7%, Pakistan 6.2%, Germany 5.9%, Thailand 5.5% (2015)

Key imports: foodstuffs, machinery + equipment, steel, petroleum products, cement + construction material

Top import partners: Uganda 15.8%, Kenya 11.8%, India 8.7%, China 8.7%, United Arab Emirates 8.6%, Russia 6.6%, Tanzania 5.1% (2015)