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Attacks on the Press 2010 - Rwanda

Top Developments

- Government drives Kinyarwanda-language papers out of print before presidential vote.
- Critical newspaper editor assassinated. Skepticism greets police investigation.

Key Statistic

- **93:** Percentage of vote taken by incumbent Paul Kagame in presidential election. He faced no credible opposition.

Before a crowd of thousands in Kigali, just days before he was re-elected in August in a virtually uncontested race, President Paul Kagame declared that "those who give our country a bad image can take a rope and hang themselves," the BBC reported. Kagame's antagonism toward critics guided his administration's approach to the press throughout the election year. The government shut the nation's two leading independent weeklies in April, silenced several other news outlets in the weeks before the vote, and harassed critical editors in court. In the most startling development, the acting editor of the independent weekly *Umuwugizi*, Jean-Léonard Rugambage, was gunned down outside his Kigali home in what appeared to be a planned assassination. Police immediately labeled the killing a reprisal for the editor's supposed involvement in the 1994 genocide, a conclusion that was greeted with deep skepticism from journalists.

Kagame, in power since 1994, took 93 percent of the vote in the August 9 election. Although the president could run on his record of economic success, his government left little to chance. Three opposition parties were effectively sidelined from the election, leaving Kagame with no credible challengers. Opposition party leaders Victoire Ingabire of the United Democratic Forces and Bernard Ntaganda of PS-Imberakuri were arrested in mid-year on charges of "genocide ideology" and "divisionism" under vague laws ostensibly designed to restrict hate speech but often used to silence dissent. André Kagwa Rwisereka, a leader of the opposition Green Party, was found dead in southern Rwanda in July. The three candidates left in the running were broadly supportive of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front. Observers from the Commonwealth group of nations, which Rwanda had recently joined, expressed concern about the lack of "critical opposition voices."

And so it was in the press. Beginning in early year, presidential allies and government agencies unleashed a barrage of legal and administrative attacks against critical news outlets. In February, a Kigali magistrate imposed prison sentences against three journalists for the weekly Kinyarwanda-language *Umuseso* – Deputy Editor Didas Gasana, reporter Richard Kayigamba, and exiled editor Charles Kabonero – on charges of privacy violation. The case stemmed from a story alleging that Cabinet Affairs Minister Protais Musoni and Kigali Mayor Aisa Kirabo Kacyira had engaged in a romantic relationship.

(Both officials denied having such a relationship.) The journalists' prison sentences were stayed pending appeal.

The next month, Kabonero and Gasana were prosecuted on criminal defamation in connection with a 2008 article about a prominent Rwandan businessman wanted in South Africa on fraud charges. Days after Tribert Rujugiro filed the defamation complaint back in 2008, the businessman was arrested at Heathrow Airport on a South African extradition warrant, according to news reports. "This ought to have stopped the libel case, but not in Rwanda," wrote Peter Noorlander of the Media Legal Defence Initiative, a U.K.-based nonprofit, in a commentary for the British daily *The Guardian*. In apparent disregard of Rujugiro's widely reported arrest, the Rwandan court convicted and fined Kabonero and Gasana for defaming the businessman. That verdict was also appealed. The criminal convictions, if upheld, could have lasting journalistic repercussions: Under Article 24 of the 2009 Rwandan Media Law, editors and publishers are barred from professional work if they have criminal records. "I believe the government was behind these cases against us, just to get us out of the profession," Gasana told CPJ.

Kagame put his personal stamp on efforts to demonize critical news outlets. After a grenade attack killed two people and injured 30 others in Kigali in March, the president told a televised news conference that two exiled, former military leaders, Kayumba Nyamwasa and Patrick Karegeya, were behind the attack. He went on to say that journalists had met with Karegeya in South Africa prior to the attacks, leaving a not-so-subtle implication of impropriety. "There are those [journalists] who found Karegeya in South Africa and spoke to him. There are even those who went there, but have not returned," he said. Although no journalists were named, the comment was clearly directed at journalists for *Umuseso* and *Umuwugizi* who had interviewed Karegeya. Godwin Agaba, a contributor to *Umuwugizi* who had broken stories about Nyamwasa, fled Rwanda soon after the president's televised remarks. Police sources warned Agaba that he was at risk, Amnesty International reported.

The government stepped up its repression the next month. In an address to parliament, Kagame warned that unnamed newspapers "that trade on rumors" would face undisclosed consequences, according to a BBC Kinyarwanda broadcast. Just hours later, the Media High Council announced on national radio and television that *Umuwugizi* and *Umuseso* would be barred from publication for six months on charges of insulting the head of state and provoking insubordination in the army. The council, which did not cite specific news articles for its decision, followed up with a civil lawsuit seeking an indefinite ban on the papers. That case was pending in late year.

"Almost 70 percent of Rwandans speak only Kinyarwanda, not English or French, and only 3 percent have Internet access, so without these tabloid newspapers they will have no independent news," said Jean Bosco Gasasira, chief editor of the Kinyarwanda-language *Umuwugizi*. The suspensions, and fears of further reprisals, prompted Gasasira and *Umuseso* editor Gasana to flee the country in the spring. Gasana told CPJ that he was under "intense surveillance" at the time.

The dangers appeared to intensify in June. An assailant shot Jean-Léonard Rugambage, acting editor and senior reporter for *Umuwugizi*, as he drove through the gate of his home in Kigali on June 24, police spokesman Eric Kayiranga told CPJ. At the time, the journalist had been investigating an assassination attempt against the exiled military leader Nyamwasa in South Africa, according to local reports. Rugambage had reported to friends and colleagues that he was being followed and had received death threats from unidentified callers, local journalists told CPJ. On the day of his murder, *Umuwugizi* published a story alleging that Rwandan intelligence officials were linked to Nyamwasa's shooting. "He had gotten more clues on the case and was ready to meet me in exile to provide more information," Gasasira said.

Days after the killing, security forces rounded up two suspects and lodged murder charges. Speaking at a press conference, Internal Security Minister Moussa Fazil Harelimana said one of the suspects "admitted guilt. ... He told the police he committed the act to take revenge against this journalist, who killed his brother in the 1994 Tutsi genocide," Agence France-Presse reported. The suspects were convicted on homicide charges in November, but journalists expressed deep skepticism about the government's case.

In 2007, a traditional "gacaca" court had cleared Rugambage of any involvement in the genocide, according to local journalists. Rugambage had been the target of official persecution over several years because of his critical coverage of the government, CPJ research showed. While working as a reporter for the now-defunct independent tabloid *Umuko*, Rugambage was imprisoned for 11 months in 2005-06 over a story alleging mismanagement and witness tampering in Rwanda's traditional courts.

A third private weekly, *Umurabyo*, was silenced a month before the election when police arrested editor Agnès Uwimana and assistant editor Saidati Mukakibibi on charges of incitement to violence, genocide denial, and insulting the head of state. The Kinyarwanda-language weekly, which ceased publication after the arrests, had risen to prominence after the government banned *Umuseso* and *Umuwugizi*. Although given at times to tabloid sensibilities – it once superimposed a Nazi swastika on a photo of Kagame – the paper also devoted in-depth coverage to sensitive topics such as the murder of Rugambage, the activities of the two dissident military leaders exiled in South Africa, and allegations of lavish government spending on luxury jets, according to local journalists.

Only a handful of independent papers continued to publish in the weeks ahead of the election, according to local journalists. In July, the Media High Council moved suddenly to enforce the provisions of a 2009 media law. The council ordered all media outlets to register with the government within eight days in compliance with the restrictive media law. On July 21, the council ordered security forces to shut down newspapers and radio stations that it said failed to meet registration requirements. The list included the already-suspended *Umuseso* and *Umuwugizi*, along with Kinyarwanda-language newspapers *Umurabyo*, *Rushyashya*, and *Umuseke*, and the English-language papers *Rwanda Dispatch* and *Business Daily*, local journalists told CPJ. The 2009 media law requires local journalists to hold a university degree or certificate in journalism from a recognized institution, a requirement that few practicing Rwandan journalists could meet. The German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle was also suspended for not providing adequate documentation.

From afar, exiled Rwandan journalists tried to fill the vacuum in critical reporting. Gasasira continued to produce the *Umuwugizi* website with reporters working undercover in the country, he told CPJ. In June, exiled *Umuseso* journalists launched an independent English-language weekly, *Newsline*, and tried to ship the paper by bus into Rwanda. But police detained the bus driver and conductor at the border and confiscated the copies, Gasana told CPJ. *Newsline* workers surreptitiously delivered subsequent issues across the border, but in far smaller numbers, Kabonero told CPJ.

Little seemed open for debate as voters went to the polls in August. State media slanted coverage toward Kagame, although most private outlets gave equal coverage to the four presidential candidates. It didn't matter much, journalists said. "Of course, the media can cover all of the candidates without losing favor with Kagame – none of them are genuine contenders," a local journalist told CPJ. He requested anonymity for fear of reprisal.

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