



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

Rwanda

21

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	7 / ₄₀
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	14 / ₆₀

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

23/100 **Not Free**

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.



Overview

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Paul Kagame, has ruled the country since it ousted forces responsible for the 1994 genocide, ending the civil war that began in 1990. While the regime has maintained stability and economic growth, the government continues to suppress political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, arbitrary detention, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents.

Key Developments in 2024

- In July, Paul Kagame won a fourth term as president with 99.2 percent of the vote according to official results. Prominent opposition figures Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza and Diane Rwigara were among those who were disqualified from running.
- Also in July, the RPF won a majority of directly elected seats in the parliamentary elections, held concurrently with the presidential contest.
- Rwandan soldiers and fighters belonging to the March 23 Movement (M23)—an armed group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that claims to defend ethnic Tutsis against Hutu opponents—maintained an offensive near the Congolese city of Goma through much of the year. The Rwandan government denied involvement in a lethal attack on a camp near Goma in May.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0/4
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Rwanda’s 2003 constitution grants broad powers to the president, who has the authority to appoint the prime minister and dissolve the bicameral Parliament. Amendments passed in 2015 retained a two-term limit for the presidency and shortened terms from seven to five years. Incumbent Paul Kagame was explicitly

made eligible for an additional seven-year term and, having run in 2024, could seek one more five-year term—potentially extending his rule to 2034.

President Kagame was reelected in July 2024 with 99.2 percent of the vote according to official results. Frank Habineza of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda (DGPR) and Philippe Mpayimana, an independent—the only two other candidates allowed to run—respectively won 0.5 percent and 0.3 percent. Kagame was sworn in in August.

The electoral campaign was dominated by the ruling RPF and punctuated by the barring of political opponents. In March 2024, a local court ruled that Victoire Ingabire Umuhoya, a prominent opposition figure who spent eight years in prison, was ineligible to run despite having been pardoned and freed in 2018. In June, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) barred Diane Rwigara, another prominent opposition politician, from registering, citing a lack of proper documentation and for failing to prove she was a natural-born Rwandan citizen. The RPF additionally benefited from its incumbency and favorable media coverage from government-controlled outlets.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	1 / 4
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Rwanda has a bicameral Parliament consisting of a 26-seat upper house, the Senate, and an 80-seat lower house, the Chamber of Deputies. Members of both houses serve five-year terms. The Senate is made up of 12 members elected by regional councils, 8 appointed by the president, 4 chosen by the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations (NCFPO), and 2 chosen by faculty at the country’s universities. Of the 80 deputies, 53 are directly elected, 24 are women chosen by local councils, 2 are chosen by the National Youth Council, and 1 is a representative of the Federation of Associations of the Disabled.

In the July 2024 elections, held concurrently with the presidential contest, the RPF won 37 directly elected seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party each won 5. The Social Party Imberakuri, Ideal Democratic Party, and the DGPR each won 2.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

1/4

The electoral laws are not impartially implemented by the NEC, whose members are proposed by the government and appointed by the RPF-dominated Senate. Rwandan elections routinely feature unfair barriers to registration, campaigning, poll monitoring, and media access for opposition parties and candidates, among other problems.

In 2023, Parliament approved a measure to allow presidential and parliamentary elections to be held concurrently. In the July 2024 election, six of the nine people who submitted their presidential candidacies were disqualified, with some being rejected over documentation or the absence of sufficient signatures according to the authorities.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

1/4

While the right to join and operate a political party is constitutionally enshrined, the government-controlled Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), responsible for registering political parties, can deny registration at its discretion and without proper justification. The government has a long history of repressing political opponents and members of opposition parties.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0 / 4

The RPF has ruled Rwanda without interruption since 1994, banning and repressing any opposition group that could mount a serious challenge to it. All registered parties currently belong to the RPF-dominated NCFPO, a body meant to promote political consensus. The DGPR has parliamentary representation, but current conditions prevent it from meaningfully competing with the RPF. The Dalfa-Umurinzi party remains unregistered while its leader, Ingabire Umuhoya, faces restrictions on political activity and was disqualified from the July 2024 presidential election.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

0 / 4

Both voters and candidates face significant intimidation aimed at controlling their political choices. Rwandans living outside the country have been threatened, attacked, forcibly disappeared, or killed, apparently in retaliation for their public or suspected opposition to the regime.

The military was formally separated from the RPF after it won the civil war, but it retains close ties to the ruling party and is considered a key political stakeholder in practice.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

1 / 4

The constitution calls on the president to ensure “representation of historically marginalized communities” in the Senate through his appointees. However, asserting one’s ethnic identity in politics is banned, making the level of representation unclear. The prohibition on discussion of ethnicity makes it nearly

impossible for disadvantaged groups—including the Indigenous Twa—to organize independently and advocate for their interests. The Twa are additionally unrecognized as a marginalized community by the government.

The constitution requires women to occupy at least 30 percent of the seats in each chamber of Parliament. While women hold 53.8 percent of Senate seats and 63.8 percent of the lower house, they have little practical ability to engage in politics outside the RPF. The promotion of gender equity disproportionately privileges English-speaking Tutsis over French-speaking Hutus and rural Tutsis. Societal discrimination and the regime’s repressive activities prevent LGBT+ Rwandans from freely pursuing their communities’ political interests.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

1 / 4

Government policy is largely set and implemented by the executive branch, with the security and intelligence services playing a powerful role. The president is not freely elected. Article 98 of the constitution states that the president is “the defender of the Constitution and guarantor of national unity,” which some observers say gives Kagame unchecked power in practice.

Parliament generally lacks the independence to serve as a check on executive authority, and tends to merely endorse presidential initiatives, especially on political and security matters. It can play an oversight role on issues that are less politically sensitive, such as women’s rights, education, and public health.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

The government takes measures to limit corruption, including regular dismissals and prosecutions of officials suspected of malfeasance. There are a number of institutions dedicated to detecting and punishing misuse of public funds.

Nevertheless, graft remains a problem, and few independent organizations or media outlets can investigate or report on corruption due to the risk of government reprisals.

In 2018, Parliament passed penal code revisions to expand the list of corruption-related crimes, increasing penalties for those convicted. High-profile cases have been pursued in recent years, but a lack of transparency surrounding such prosecutions makes it difficult to assess whether they are politically motivated.

In the 2024 edition of its Rwanda Bribery Index, the Rwanda chapter of Transparency International reported that 80.5 percent of Rwandans considered government anticorruption efforts to be effective. Some 18.5 percent of respondents said they were either asked to pay a bribe or offered to pay one.

There is evidence that Kigali is tolerating the illegal trade of resources from the DRC. In a May 2024 report to the UN Security Council, a group of experts on the DRC reported that gold was being smuggled into or sent through Rwanda. The experts also noted that Rwanda's only gold refinery did not track the origin of gold it had handled.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to growing evidence that the government is tolerating illegal trade.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	1/4
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While a 2013 law provides for public access to government information, implementation has been weak. Data published on Sobanukirwa, a website created by the government to ease the process of requesting access to documents, suggest that only a small fraction of requests result in positive and timely responses. Given the government's active repression of dissent, citizens do not have the ability in practice to obtain information about state operations, nor do they have a meaningful opportunity to comment on policy without the threat of punishment.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0 / 4

While the constitution nominally protects freedom of the press, the government imposes legal restrictions and informal controls on the press sector. Rwandan journalists and outlets self-censor. Under the 2018 penal code revisions, cartoons and writings that “humiliate” Rwandan leaders were criminalized, though defamation was decriminalized. Many Rwandan journalists have fled the country and work in exile. Due in part to this phenomenon, the government has been known to block access to news services and websites based abroad.

Progovernment coverage is partially motivated by competition for state advertising revenue. Financial pressures have motivated outlets and journalists to use YouTube as a tool for monetization, but journalists face restrictions on online expression. Authorities have targeted bloggers and journalists, including those using YouTube, with intimidation, arrest, and prosecution.

Media rights groups have called upon the Rwandan government to release imprisoned journalist Dieudonné Niyonsenga after he said in January 2024 that he was being held under inhumane conditions. Niyonsenga appeared in court with a head wound and complained of hearing and vision problems.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

2 / 4

Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, but the government has taken steps to assert greater control over religious institutions. A 2018 law requires religious organizations to obtain legal status from the RGB, to which they must submit extensive documentation. Thousands of places of worship, including

churches and mosques, have been closed for allegedly violating health, safety, or noise regulations. In September 2024, *La Croix International* reported that 8,000 had been closed for allegedly violating various regulations.

Religious leaders must hold a degree in religious studies from a recognized educational institution, religious organizations must report grants to the RGB, and donations to faith-based groups must be deposited in Rwandan banks. Jehovah's Witnesses face arrest for refusing to participate in localized security duties like night patrols or oath-taking involving the national flag.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1 / 4

The government restricts academic freedom by enforcing official views on the genocide and other sensitive topics. Any critical discussion of the RPF's actions during the war or its politicization of memorialization projects is heavily policed. Scholars and students are subject to suspension for "divisionism" and engage in self-censorship to avoid such penalties. Public and private universities generally lack any robust political debate.

Since 2008 the government has increasingly mandated the use of English as the language of instruction. The policy has raised concerns that it could disadvantage segments of society that speak only Kinyarwanda, the common national language, or French, previously the main language of higher education and administration.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

0 / 4

The constitution affirms freedom of speech within vaguely defined legal constraints. The practical space for free private discussion is limited in part by indications that the government monitors personal communications. Social media is heavily monitored, and the law allows for government hacking of telecommunications networks. Rwandan authorities reportedly use informants to infiltrate civil society, further discouraging citizens from voicing dissent.

Individuals have been forcibly disappeared, arrested, detained, and assassinated for expressing their views.

Innocent Bahati, a popular poet who had shared his critical social commentary on social media, remained missing following his 2021 disappearance; he had been arbitrarily detained by police in the past. Aimable Karasira, a former university lecturer and YouTube commentator who was arrested in 2021 for alleged genocide denial and divisionism, was still on trial in 2024. Karasira alleged at a 2022 hearing that he had been tortured and denied medical treatment.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0/4

The constitutionally guaranteed freedom to assemble is sharply limited and rarely exercised in practice except in churches, schools, and other formal institutions. Fear of arrest or police violence serves as a deterrent to protests, and gatherings are sometimes disrupted even when organizers obtain official authorization. Police impose strict guidelines on approved events and can deny approval in the interest of public order and on other vaguely defined grounds.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

1/4

Registration and reporting requirements for both domestic and foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are onerous, and activities that the government defines as divisive are prohibited. NGOs that focus on governance and human rights issues face particular scrutiny, with the risk of closure encouraging self-censorship. Many domestic organizations receive funds from the RGB, which challenges their independence, and those that operate freely tend to

be led by RPF loyalists, as more critical activists have faced repression or fled the country.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

1 / 4

The constitution provides for the rights to form trade unions, engage in collective bargaining, and strike. However, free collective bargaining and strikes are limited by binding arbitration rules and are rare in practice. Public-sector workers and employees in broadly defined “essential services” are generally not allowed to strike. Enforcement of rules against antiunion discrimination is weak. The country’s largest union confederation has close ties to the RPF, and the government allegedly interferes in union elections.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0 / 4

Despite constitutional provisions that declare its independence, the Rwandan judiciary lacks autonomy from the executive in practice. Top judicial officials are appointed by the president and confirmed by the RPF-dominated Senate. Judges rarely rule against the government in politically sensitive cases. Judges who have asserted their independence in sensitive cases have seen their careers end suddenly with no prospect of being considered for employment, prompting others to toe the government line.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

1 / 4

The constitution affirms the right to due process, but the security services regularly engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, targeting opposition figures

and dissidents as well as homeless people, street vendors, and suspected petty criminals. Detainees are often held beyond the 72 hours allowed for those arrested without a warrant, denied access to legal counsel, and charged based on coerced confessions.

The government is known to pursue arbitrary detentions and the forced returns of Rwandans living in exile, including refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals who hold the citizenship of another country.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

1 / 4

Both ordinary criminal suspects and political detainees are routinely subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in custody. Extrajudicial executions of suspected criminals by security personnel have been reported, as have disappearances, physical assaults, and assassinations targeting journalists, opposition members, and other regime critics. While such abuses remain a serious threat, the worst forms of violence against dissidents within the country have apparently become less common than in previous years.

Kigali allegedly supports rebel forces in the DRC, and Rwandan authorities have reported occasional clashes with Congolese soldiers or rebel fighters along the border. Kigali is specifically believed to support the M23. In their May 2024 report, the UN group of experts on the DRC said that 3,000 to 4,000 Rwandan troops were present within Congolese territory. In September, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Rwandan soldiers and M23 fighters maintained an offensive near the Congolese city of Goma through much of the year. The Rwandan government denied involvement in a lethal attack on a camp near Goma in May.

Insurgent activity and violent crime on Rwandan territory are rare, and the population seldom faces threats to physical security from nonstate actors.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1 / 4

Equal treatment for all citizens under the law is guaranteed, with legal protections against discrimination. However, not all Rwandans receive identical treatment in employment and education. English-speaking elites are perceived to be overrepresented in government and the private sector. Those Rwandans not closely associated with the political elite reportedly face discrimination when seeking public employment or scholarships. Twa people, of which there are as few as 20,000, have long been marginalized and suffer from multiple exclusions from education, employment, and health care.

Women enjoy broad legal equality with men, with a significant presence in the economy as workers and business owners, but gender-based discrimination persists, especially in rural areas, and gender-equality measures have largely favored English-speaking elites in urban areas.

Same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized in Rwanda. LGBT+ people face social stigma, no laws specifically protect this group against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and police can arrest individuals using public morality laws.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

The constitution affirms the right of Rwandans to move freely within the country, with exceptions for public order and national security. Changing one's residence requires registration with local authorities using a national identity card, though not all Rwandans can easily gain such documentation.

Government critics, who themselves live abroad, have faced restrictions on their freedom of movement, as have family members living in Rwanda. Several members of the Rwanda National Congress, an exiled opposition group, had their passports cancelled in the early 2010s. In a 2023 report, HRW noted that the

relatives of several exiles had been denied access to passports or have had those documents confiscated.

All government officials must receive approval from the president or prime minister's office before traveling for personal or professional reasons; some current and former security officials have been arrested for unauthorized travel. Members of opposition groups have also reported restrictions on foreign travel or reentry to Rwanda.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the government has used its monopoly over identification documents to coerce its citizens, with individuals who are perceived as opposed to the government being refused documentation, without which they cannot travel.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

2 / 4

While the government is generally supportive of economic growth through private business activity, it has been criticized for seizing land for infrastructure and urban development projects without proper compensation, and for imposing agricultural and land-consolidation policies without adequate input from farmers or “historically marginalized” people. Land rights have also been affected by the division of land into smaller plots along with the introduction of a communal farming scheme in the 1990s, under which participants could access publicly provided housing. Twa people are not allowed to partake in that program. Business owners who are seen as critical of the government have sometimes faced politically motivated investigations and asset seizures.

The law grants the same property and inheritance rights to men and women, though women are not always able to assert their rights in practice.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2 / 4

The law generally grants equal rights to men and women regarding marriage and divorce, but informal marriages under customary law, including polygamous unions, lack such protections. Same-sex marriages remain illegal. The penalties for spousal rape are much lighter than that for other forms of rape, and domestic violence is likely to be underreported despite numerous government programs to combat it.

Abortion is a criminal offense except in cases of rape, incest, forced marriage, or if pregnancy poses a serious health risk. In February 2023, the Protestant Council of Rwanda ordered health-care facilities under its jurisdiction to stop performing abortions; Catholic-run facilities had already stopped performing the procedure. Convictions for illegal abortions carry significant prison terms, though the government has pardoned women since 2016.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	1/4
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Regulations governing wage levels and conditions of work in the formal sector are poorly enforced, particularly among private employers.

A 2018 law prohibits human trafficking for sex or work. However, the US State Department said in the 2024 edition of its *Trafficking in Persons Report* that enforcement was faltering during the reporting period.

Children are trafficked internally for domestic service under abusive conditions or for commercial sex work. Few internal traffickers are held to account. Many children work informally in the agricultural sector. Young Congolese and Burundian refugees are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and coerced recruitment into armed groups linked to Rwandan security forces. Victim and witness support programs are lacking, even for genocide survivors.



On Rwanda

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Country Facts

Population

13,780,000

Region

Africa

Global Freedom Score

21/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

36/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2024

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