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2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Rwanda

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANNOUNCEMENT: The Department of State will release an addendum to this report in mid 2021 that expands the subsection on Women in Section 6 to include a broader range of issues related to reproductive rights.

Rwanda is a constitutional republic dominated by a strong presidency. The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front led a governing coalition that included four smaller parties. In 2017 voters elected President Paul Kagame to a third seven-year term with a reported 99 percent of the vote and a reported 98 percent turnout. One independent candidate and one candidate from an opposition political party participated in the presidential election, but authorities disqualified three other candidates. In the 2018 elections for parliament’s lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, candidates from the Rwandan Patriotic Front coalition and two other parties supporting Rwandan Patriotic Front policies won all except four of the open seats. For the first time, independent parties won seats in the chamber, with the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda and the Social Party Imberakuri winning two seats each. In both the 2017 and 2018 elections, international monitors reported numerous flaws, including irregularities in the vote tabulation process. In September 2019, 12 new senators were elected to the 26-member Senate via indirect elections. Faculty at public and private universities elected two other senators. President Kagame appointed another four senators, and the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations designated two, in accordance with the constitution. In September the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations designated two new senators, including a member of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda.

The Rwanda National Police, under the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for internal security. The Rwanda Defense Force, under the Ministry of Defense, is in charge of providing external security, although the Rwanda Defense Force also works on internal security and intelligence matters alongside the Rwandan National Police. In 2018 the Rwanda Investigation Bureau began carrying out many of the investigative functions formerly performed by the Rwandan National Police, including counterterrorism investigations, investigation of economic and financial crimes, and judicial police functions. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over state security forces. Members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government; forced disappearance by the government; torture by the government; harsh and life-threatening conditions in some detention facilities; arbitrary detention; political prisoners or detainees; politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression, press, and the internet, including threats of violence against journalists, censorship, and website blocking; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, such as overly restrictive nongovernmental organization laws; and restrictions on political participation.

The government took some steps to prosecute or punish officials who committed abuses, including within the security services, but impunity involving civilian officials and some members of the state security forces was a problem.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports the government committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) is responsible for conducting investigations into such killings. Under the Ministry of Justice, the National Public Prosecution Authority (NPPA) is responsible for prosecuting abuse cases involving police, while the Rwanda National Police (RNP) Inspectorate of Services investigates cases of police misconduct.

For example, Kizito Mihigo, a popular gospel singer and a genocide survivor, was found dead in police custody on February 17. Mihigo was arrested on February 13 near the border with Burundi. Authorities charged him with illegally attempting to cross the border, attempting to join terrorist groups, and corruption. Previously, in 2015 a court convicted Mihigo of planning to assassinate the president and conspiracy against the government. He was

sentenced to 10 years in prison before being pardoned by the president in 2018. The NPPA found that Mihigo’s death was the result of suicide by hanging, but the autopsy results were not made public and the circumstances of his death remained unclear. Government critics asserted that authorities killed Mihigo and arranged for his death to be declared a suicide; a posthumously published work from Mihigo’s previous time in prison suggested he feared he would be killed. Mihigo told Human Rights Watch shortly before his arrest that he received threats, was asked to provide false testimony against political opponents, and feared for his safety. Many human rights defenders called on the government to conduct an independent investigation, which as of November had not taken place.

There were also reports the government failed to follow through on its obligation to conduct full, timely, and transparent investigations of killings of political opponents such as the March 2019 killing of Anselme Mutuyimana, a member of the unregistered United Democratic Forces-Inkingi (FDU-Inkingi) opposition party. FDU-Inkingi and Human Rights Watch (HRW) alleged government involvement in Mutuyimana’s killing. Although the RIB announced in March 2019 that it was investigating Mutuyimana’s death and had arrested one suspect, the investigation had not progressed since that time.

There were reports that police killed several persons attempting to resist arrest or escape police custody. In March officers killed two individuals in Nyanza District for resisting arrest when apprehended for not complying with COVID-19 lockdown measures. In July officers killed two Burundian refugees in Ngoma District suspected of trafficking illegal drugs from Tanzania. In August the RNP announced officers had killed two suspects attempting to escape from police custody in Gasabo District. In Rusizi District, officers killed an individual suspected of theft when he resisted arrest.

b. Disappearance

There were several reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. In June Venant Abayisenga went missing. Abayisenga was a member of DALFA-Umurinzi, an unregistered opposition party under the leadership of government critic Victoire Ingabire. Abayisenga worked as Ingabire’s assistant and was previously imprisoned on charges of terrorism, of which he was acquitted after more than two years in detention. Ingabire stated that she believed government agents kidnapped or killed Abayisenga. The RIB announced it was investigating the disappearance, but as of September 27, it had not disclosed the results of that investigation.

The government failed to complete investigations or take measures to ensure accountability for disappearances that occurred in 2019 and 2018 such as those of Eugene Ndereyimana and Boniface Twagirimana.

There were reports the Rwanda Defense Force’s (RDF) military intelligence personnel were responsible for disappearances, illegal detention, and torture. Some advocates reported that RDF intelligence personnel took suspected political opponents to unofficial detention centers where they were subject to beatings and other cruel and degrading treatment with the purpose of extracting intelligence information.

Domestic organizations cited a lack of independence and capacity for government officials to investigate security sector abuses effectively, including reported enforced disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, but there were numerous reports of abuse of detainees by police, military, and National Intelligence and Security Services officials.

In 2018 the government enacted a law that prescribes 20 to 25 years’ imprisonment for any person convicted of torture. The law mandates that when torture is committed by a public official in the course of his or her duties, the penalty for conviction is life imprisonment.

Prisoners were sometimes subjected to torture. In one case, 25 individuals were arrested and transferred from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the country on the grounds that they were involved in armed groups threatening the country’s security. During their court proceedings, some of these individuals claimed they had been tortured in custody. The court ruled there was no evidence that torture had occurred, but there were no reports the court investigated the allegations.

Human rights advocates continued to report instances of illegally detained individuals tortured in unofficial detention centers. Advocates including HRW claimed that military, police, and intelligence personnel employed torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment to obtain information and forced confessions, which in some cases resulted in criminal convictions. Some defendants in addition alleged in court they had been tortured while in detention to confess to crimes they did not commit, but there were no reports of any judges ordering an investigation into such allegations or dismissing evidence obtained under torture, and there were no reported prosecutions of state security forces personnel for torture.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions at prisons and unofficial detention centers ranged from harsh and life threatening to approaching international standards. The government took steps to make improvements in some prisons, but conditions varied widely among facilities.

Physical Conditions: Physical conditions in prisons operated by the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS) approached international standards in some respects, although reports of overcrowding and food shortages were common. According to the RCS, the prison population rose from fewer than 52,000 inmates in 2015 to approximately 66,000 during the year, which greatly exacerbated overcrowding. Convicted persons and individuals in pretrial detention in RCS prisons were fed once per day, and family members were allowed to deposit funds so that convicts and detainees could purchase additional food at prison canteens, but human rights advocates reported that lack of food continued to be a problem. Domestic media reported food insecurity among the prison population worsened due to COVID-19 restrictions, which prohibited family members from purchasing and delivering food rations. The government did not keep statistics on deaths in custody beyond deaths of prisoners due to illness (who received medical treatment in custody). Authorities held men and women separately in similar conditions, and authorities generally separated pretrial detainees from convicted prisoners, although there were numerous exceptions due to the large number of detainees awaiting trial. The law does not allow children older than age three to remain with their incarcerated mothers (see also section 6, Persons with Disabilities).

Conditions were generally harsh and life threatening in unofficial detention centers. Reports from previous years indicated individuals detained at such centers suffered from limited access to food, water, and health care.

Conditions were often harsh and life threatening at district transit centers holding street children, street vendors, suspected drug abusers, persons engaged in prostitution, homeless persons, and suspected petty criminals. Overcrowding was common in police stations and district transit centers. Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities at district transit centers frequently failed to adhere to the requirements of a 2018 ministerial order determining the “mission, organization, and functioning” of transit centers. For example, HRW found detainees were often held in cramped and unsanitary conditions and that the amount of food provided was insufficient, in particular at the Gikondo transit center. HRW also reported that state security forces beat detainees at district transit centers. Transit centers often lacked separate facilities for children. Medical treatment was reportedly irregular, and many detainees suffered ailments such as malaria, rashes, or diarrhea. The government discouraged further detentions in these transit centers due to the difficulties of preventing the spread of COVID-19 under such conditions. In a press interview, the minister of justice and the prosecutor general stated authorities could continue to pursue cases while defendants were on bail.

Conditions at the Iwawa Rehabilitation and Vocational Training Center operated by the National Rehabilitation Service (NRS) were better than those of transit centers. Young men detained at the center participated in educational and vocational programs and had access to ample space for exercise. A small number of medical professionals and social workers provided medical care and counseling to detainees.

The government held four prisoners of the Special Court for Sierra Leone in a purpose-built detention center that the United Nations deemed met international standards for incarceration of prisoners convicted by international criminal tribunals.

Administration: The RCS investigated reported abuses by corrections officers, and the same hierarchical structure existed in police and security forces; there was no independent institution charged with investigating abuses or punishing perpetrators.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted independent monitoring of prison conditions on a limited basis by diplomats, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and some NGOs. Nevertheless, it restricted access to specific prisoners and delayed consular notification of the arrest of some foreign nationals. The government permitted monitoring of prison conditions and trials of individuals whom the UN International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) had transferred to the country’s jurisdiction for trials related to the 1994 genocide, per agreement with the IRMCT. Journalists could access prisons with a valid press card but required permission from the RCS commissioner to take photographs or interview prisoners or guards.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but state security forces regularly arrested and detained persons arbitrarily and without due process. The law provides for the right of persons to challenge in court the lawfulness of their arrest or detention; however, few tried, and there were no reports of any detainees succeeding in obtaining prompt release or compensation for unlawful detention. Observers credited the RNP with generally strong discipline and effectiveness. The RNP institutionalized community relations training that included appropriate use of force and respect for human rights, although arbitrary arrests and beatings remained problems.

Human rights NGOs previously reported that individuals suspected of having ties to the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, the Rwanda National Congress, or other insurgent groups were detained unlawfully and held incommunicado for long periods in harsh and inhuman conditions.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires authorities to investigate and obtain a warrant before arresting a suspect. Police may detain suspects for up to 72 hours without an arrest warrant. Prosecutors must submit formal charges within five days of arrest. Police may detain minors a maximum of 15 days in pretrial detention but only for crimes that carry a penalty for conviction of five years’ or more imprisonment. Police and prosecutors often disregarded these provisions and held individuals, sometimes for months and often without charge, particularly in security-related cases. State security

forces held some suspects incommunicado or under house arrest. At times police employed nonjudicial punishment when minor criminals confessed and the victims agreed to a police officer’s recommended penalty, such as a week of detention or providing restitution.

The law permits investigative detention if authorities believe public safety is threatened or the accused might flee, and judges interpreted these provisions broadly. A judge must review such a detention every 30 days. By law it may not extend beyond one year; however, the RCS held some suspects at the behest of state prosecutors indefinitely after the first authorization of investigative detention and did not always seek reauthorization every 30 days. The minister of justice announced in a statement to domestic media in March 2019 that he encouraged authorities to comply with legal standards in these areas, and such irregularities reportedly decreased.

After prosecutors formally file a charge, detention may be indefinite unless bail is granted. Bail exists only for crimes for which the maximum sentence if convicted is five years’ imprisonment or less, but authorities may release a suspect pending trial if satisfied the person would not flee or become a threat to public safety and order. Authorities generally allowed family members prompt access to detained relatives, unless the individuals were held on state security charges, or in unofficial or intelligence-related detention facilities. Detainees were generally allowed access to attorneys of their choice, provided that said attorneys were registered with the Rwanda Bar Association (RBA), were members of another international bar association which had a reciprocal agreement with the RBA, or were from a foreign jurisdiction included in a regional integration agreement to which the country was a party. The government at times violated the right to habeas corpus.

Convicted persons sometimes remained in prison after completing their sentences while waiting for an appeal date or due to problems with prison records. The law provides that pretrial detention, illegal detention, and administrative sanctions be fully deducted from sentences imposed, but this was not always followed. The law does not provide for compensation to persons who are acquitted. The law allows judges to impose detention of equivalent duration and fines on state security forces and other government officials who unlawfully detained individuals, but there were no reports that judges exercised this authority.

Arbitrary Arrest: On August 31, the RIB announced it had apprehended Paul Rusesabagina, the internationally known hero of the film *Hotel Rwanda* and long-time government critic turned leader of the Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change (MRCD) opposition group. On September 14, prosecutors brought terrorism charges against Rusesabagina, most of which were related to a series of National Liberation Forces (FLN—the armed wing of the MRCD) attacks against the country in 2018. As of November Rusesabagina’s trial had not yet officially begun; he remained in pretrial detention while the prosecution prepared the government’s case against him. The exact circumstances of his apprehension remained unclear. Rusesabagina’s family members asserted to press that authorities “kidnapped” Rusesabagina while he was on a business trip to Dubai. On September 6, President Kagame denied Rusesabagina had been kidnapped and implied that Rusesabagina had somehow been lured or tricked into coming to the country of his own volition. In September Rusesabagina stated he intended to travel to Bujumbura, Burundi, via private jet, but he unexpectedly arrived in Kigali instead.

Unregistered opposition political parties reported authorities detained their officials and supporters, including for lengthy periods. For example, 11 FDU-Inkingi leaders spent significant periods in custody after being arrested in 2017 on various charges, including the formation of an irregular armed group. In January seven were convicted and given prison sentences ranging from two to 12 years. Four were acquitted. Attorneys for the defense argued the arrests were politically motivated and unsuccessfully petitioned the court to dismiss the case on grounds that prosecutors employed improper and illegal procedures in authorizing a communications intercept after the fact.

Although there is no requirement for individuals to carry an identification document (ID), police and the District Administration Security Support Organ (DASSO) regularly detained street children, vendors, suspected petty criminals, and beggars without IDs and sometimes charged them with illegal street vending or vagrancy. Authorities released adults who could produce an ID and transported street children to their home districts, to shelters, or for processing into vocational and educational programs. To address persistent reports of abuse of street vendors by DASSO employees, authorities continued to provide training to DASSO personnel. During the year 225 DASSO community security officer trainees participated in a course designed to promote professionalism and discipline. As in previous years, authorities held detainees without charge at district transit centers for weeks or months at a time without proactively screening and identifying trafficking victims before either transferring them to an NRS rehabilitation center without judicial review or forcibly returning them to their home areas. Detainees held at district transit centers or NRS rehabilitation centers could contest their detentions before the centers’ authorities but did not have the right to appear before a judge.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a serious problem, and authorities often detained prisoners for months without arraignment, in large part due to administrative delays caused by case backlogs. The NGO World Prison Brief reported, using 2017 data, that 7.5 percent of prisoners were pretrial detainees. The law permits detention of genocide and terrorism suspects until trial.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence. There were no reports of direct government interference in the judiciary, and authorities generally respected court orders. Domestic and international observers noted, however, that outcomes in high-profile genocide, security, and politically sensitive cases appeared predetermined.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. The law provides for a presumption of innocence and requires defendants be informed promptly and in detail of the charges in a language they comprehend.

Defendants have the right to a trial without undue delay. Human rights advocates and government officials noted, however, that shortages of judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys and resource limitations within the criminal justice system resulted in delays for many defendants, particularly those awaiting pro bono government-provided legal aid.

By law detainees are allowed access to lawyers, but the expense and scarcity of lawyers limited access to legal representation. Some lawyers were reluctant to work on politically sensitive cases, fearing harassment and threats by government officials, including monitoring of their communications. Rusesabagina’s family claimed the government did not allow him to have the defense team of his choosing during the first two months of his detention. Authorities insisted that Rusesabagina chose his legal team from a list of available local lawyers without compulsion.

Defendants have the right to communicate with an attorney of their choice, although many defendants could not afford private counsel. The law provides for legal representation of minors. The RBA and 36 other member organizations of the Legal Aid Forum provided legal assistance to some indigent defendants but lacked the resources to provide defense counsel to all in need.

The law requires that defendants have adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense, and judges routinely granted requests to extend preparation time. The law provides for a right to free interpretation, although availability of interpreters varied between urban and rural areas. Defendants have the right to be present at trial, confront witnesses against them, and present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf. By law defendants may not be compelled to testify or confess guilt. Judges generally respected the law during trial. The law provides for the right to appeal, and authorities respected this provision, although lack of access to computers necessary to file such appeals impeded some defendants’ ability to exercise that right.

State security forces continued to coerce suspects into confessing guilt in security-related cases. Judges tended to accept confessions obtained through torture despite defendants’ protests and failed to order investigations when defendants alleged torture during their trial. The judiciary sometimes held security-related, terrorism, and high-profile political trials in closed chambers. Some defense attorneys in these cases reported irregularities and complained judges tended to disregard the rights of the accused when hearings were not held publicly.

The RDF routinely tried military offenders, as well as civilians who previously served in the RDF, before military tribunals that handed down penalties of fines, imprisonment, or both for those convicted. Military courts provided defendants with similar rights as civilian courts, including the right of appeal. Defendants often appeared before military tribunals without legal counsel due to the cost of hiring private attorneys and the unwillingness of most attorneys to defend individuals accused of crimes against state security. The law stipulates military courts may try civilian accomplices of soldiers accused of crimes.

In 2012 the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda transferred its remaining genocide cases to the IRMCT. On May 16, French police arrested one of the fugitives subject to an IRMCT indictment, Felicien Kabuga, near Paris. In October French courts confirmed that Kabuga would be transferred to IRMCT custody. On May 22, the IRMCT confirmed that remains discovered in the Republic of Congo were of Augustin Bizimana, another fugitive, and that he had been dead for 20 years. The IRMCT continued to pursue the six remaining genocide fugitives subject to tribunal indictments. Of these cases, five were expected to be transferred to the country’s jurisdiction and observed by the IRMCT if apprehended; the remaining case would be tried by the IRMCT.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports that local officials and state security forces detained some individuals who disagreed publicly with government decisions or policies. Some opposition leaders and government critics faced indictment under broadly applied charges of genocide incitement, genocide denial, inciting insurrection or rebellion, or attempting to overthrow the government. Political detainees were generally afforded the same protections, including visitation rights, access to lawyers and doctors, and access to family members, as other detainees. The government did not generally give human rights or humanitarian organizations access to specific political prisoners, but it provided access to prisons more generally for some of these organizations. Occasionally authorities held politically sensitive detainees in individual cells. International and domestic human rights groups reported the government held a small number of political prisoners in custody, including Deo Mushayidi and Theoneste Niyitegeka.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

There were reports the government attempted to pursue political opponents abroad. Rusesabagina’s family and supporters maintained that Rusesabagina did not travel to the country freely or through internationally sanctioned law enforcement channels but rather was brought to the country through illicit government intervention after he boarded a private jet in Dubai that he believed was bound for Bujumbura, Burundi. Although the government initially stated Rusesabagina’s arrival in Kigali was an outcome of international law enforcement cooperation, Emirati authorities stated they were not involved in the case.

In 2019 the government of South Africa issued arrest warrants for two Rwandans accused of murder for the 2014 killing of Rwandan dissident Patrick Karegeya at a hotel in Johannesburg. According to media reports, South Africa’s special investigative unit stated in written testimony that both Karegeya’s killing and the attempted homicide in Pretoria, South Africa, of the country’s former army chief of staff General Kayumba Nyamwasa “were directly linked to the involvement of the Rwandan government.” The government had not yet cooperated with the arrest warrants.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The judiciary was generally independent and impartial in civil matters. Mechanisms exist for citizens to file lawsuits in civil matters, including for abuses of human rights. The Office of the Ombudsman processed claims of judicial wrongdoing on an administrative basis. Individuals may submit cases to the East African Court of Justice after exhausting domestic appeals.

Property Restitution

Reports of expropriation of land for the construction of roads, government buildings, and other infrastructure projects were common, and complainants frequently cited government failure to provide adequate and timely compensation. The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) investigated some of these cases and advocated on citizens’ behalf with relevant local and national authorities but was unable to effect restitution in a majority of the cases.

The government forcibly evicted individuals from dwellings across the country (primarily in Kigali) deemed to be located in swamp land or other zones at high risk of flooding or landslides. Some of those who were evicted said the government refused to offer them compensation on the basis that dwellings should never have been constructed in those locations.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although the constitution and law prohibit such actions, the government continued to monitor homes, movements, telephone calls, email, and personal and institutional communications. Private text messages were sometimes used as evidence in criminal cases. Government informants continued to work within internet and telephone companies, international and local NGOs, religious organizations, media, and other social institutions.

The law requires police to obtain authorization from a state prosecutor prior to entering and searching citizens’ homes. According to human rights organizations, state security forces at times entered homes without obtaining the required authorization.

The law provides legal protection against unauthorized use of personal data by private entities, although officials did not enforce these provisions during the year.

The government blocked some websites, including media outlets, that included content considered contrary to government positions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press “in conditions prescribed by the law,” but the government severely restricted this right. Journalists reported government officials questioned, threatened, and at times arrested journalists who expressed views deemed critical of the government on sensitive topics. Government failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and journalists led to de facto restrictions on freedom of assembly and association.

The Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), a self-regulatory body, sometimes intervened on journalists’ behalf but was generally viewed as biased towards the government. Journalists reported most positions on the RMC board were filled in close consultation with the government and called into question the board’s independence.

Freedom of Speech: There were no official restrictions on individuals’ right to criticize the government publicly or privately on policy implementation and other issues, but broad interpretation of provisions in the law had a chilling effect on such criticism. The government generally did not tolerate criticism of the presidency and government policy on security, human rights, and other matters deemed sensitive.

Laws prohibiting divisionism, genocide ideology, and genocide denial were broadly applied and discouraged citizens, residents, and visitors to the country from expressing viewpoints that could be construed as promoting societal divisions.

The law prohibits making use of speech, writing, or any other act that divides the populace or may set them against each other or cause civil unrest because of discrimination. Conviction of “instigating divisions” is punishable by five to seven years’ imprisonment and a substantial monetary fine. Authorities applied the laws broadly, including to silence political dissent and to shut down investigative journalism. The law also prohibits spreading “false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause public disaffection against the government,” for which conviction is punishable by seven to 10 years’ imprisonment. The government generally investigated individuals accused of threatening or harming genocide survivors and witnesses or of espousing genocide ideology.

A revised law enacted in 2018 incorporated international definitions for genocide and outlined the scope of what constitutes “genocide ideology” and related offenses. Specifically, the law provides that any person convicted of denying, minimizing, or justifying the 1994 genocide is liable to a prison term of five to seven years and a substantial monetary fine. Authorities applied the statute broadly, and there were numerous reports of its use to silence persons critical of government policy.

The RIB and RNP reported opening 55 new investigations related to genocide ideology statutes as of May, although none had resulted in arrests as of September 27.

Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media: Vendors sold newspapers published in English, French, and Kinyarwanda. According to the RMC, there were 36 print media outlets registered with the government, although many of these did not publish regularly. Sporadically published independent newspapers maintained positions in support of, or critical of, the government, but a lack of advertisement revenue and funds remained serious hurdles to continuing operations. Most independent newspapers opted not to publish print editions and released their stories online instead. There were 35 radio stations (six government-owned community radio stations and 29 independent radio stations) and more than 13 television stations, according to the RMC. Independent media reported a difficult operating environment and highlighted the reluctance of the business community to advertise on radio stations that might be critical of the government.

Media professionals reported government officials used ambiguities in laws governing media to influence reporting and used threats and intimidation to prevent journalists from reporting information deemed sensitive or critical of the government. The law regulating media provides journalists the freedom to investigate, express opinions, and “seek, receive, give, and broadcast information and ideas through any media.” The law explicitly prohibits censorship of information, but censorship occurred. The laws restrict these freedoms if journalists “jeopardize the general public order and good morals, an individual’s right to honor and reputation in the public eye and to the right to inviolability of a person’s private life and family.” By law authorities may seize journalists’ material and information if a “media offense” occurs but only under a court order. Courts may compel journalists to reveal confidential sources in the event of an investigation or criminal proceeding. Persons wanting to start a media outlet must apply with the “competent public organ.” All media rights and prohibitions apply to persons writing for websites.

Violence and Harassment: Media professionals reported the government continued to use threats of arrests and physical violence to silence media outlets and journalists. Journalist Jean Bosco Kabakura remained outside the country after fleeing in 2018 because of threats related to his publication of an article examining the roles of police, military, and civilian authorities in the shooting of refugees from the Kiziba refugee camp earlier in 2018. Several other journalists who fled in prior years remained outside the country. Failure to investigate or prosecute threats against journalists resulted in self-censorship.

In April the government enforced a general lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. During the lockdown numerous bloggers and journalists, including some who used YouTube channels to distribute their work, were arrested and detained. These journalists were largely known to be critics of government policies and practices. Dieudonne Niyonsenga (also known as Hassan Cyuma), owner of the YouTube channel Ishema TV, and his employee Fidele Komezusenge were arrested for violating lockdown measures, remanded for 30 days, and denied bail. Komezusenge was later released, but Niyonsenga remained in prison as of October 1. HRW considered the detention of Hassan Cyuma and several other bloggers working for outlets that reported on an incident of several rapes perpetrated by a group of RDF soldiers during the COVID-19 lockdown and the impact of the COVID-19 directives on vulnerable populations to be retaliatory. In April the RMC stated unaccredited individuals conducting interviews and posting them on personal YouTube channels did not qualify as journalists and were not permitted to move about freely to conduct interviews during the lockdown.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law allows the government to restrict access to some government documents and information, including information on individual privacy and information or statements deemed to constitute defamation. HRW reported harassment, suspicious disappearances, and the fear of prosecution pushed many journalists to engage in self-censorship. Reporters Without Borders continued to report that censorship remained ubiquitous, and self-censorship was widely used to avoid running afoul of the regime. Reporters Without Borders also reported that foreign journalists were often unable to obtain the visas and accreditation needed to report in Rwanda.

Radio stations broadcast some criticism of government policies, including on popular citizen call-in shows; however, criticism tended to focus on provincial leaders and local implementation of policies rather than on the president or ruling party leadership. Some radio stations, including Radio 1, Radio Isango Star, Radio 10, and Radio Salus, had regular call-in shows that featured discussion of government programs or policies. For example Radio Flash and Radio Isango Star hosted several debates in which participants criticized government policies on human rights and social issues.

Libel/Slander Laws: In April 2019 the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional provisions of the law that made it illegal to use words, gestures, writings, or cartoons to humiliate members of parliament, members of the cabinet, security officers, or any other public servant. The court upheld a provision stating that conviction of insulting or defaming the president is punishable by five to seven years’ imprisonment and a substantial monetary fine. In response the Office of the President issued a statement taking issue with the court’s decision to uphold that provision and called for continued debate of the issue, explaining that the president believed this should be a civil matter, not a

criminal matter. Parliament subsequently revised the law in August 2019 to decriminalize such speech, to include when related to the president. Defamation of foreign and international officials and dignitaries remains illegal under the law, with sentences if convicted of three to five years’ imprisonment. The penal code does not contain provisions criminalizing public defamation and public insult in general.

National Security: Under media laws, journalists must refrain from reporting items that violate “confidentiality in the national security and national integrity” and “confidentiality of judicial proceedings, parliamentary sessions, and cabinet deliberations in camera.” Authorities used these laws to intimidate critics of the government and journalists covering politically sensitive topics and matters under government investigation.

Internet Freedom

The law includes the right of all citizens to “receive, disseminate, or send information through the internet,” including the right to start and maintain a website. All provisions of media law apply to web-based publications. The government restricts the types of online content that users can access, particularly content that strays from the government’s official line, and continued to block websites. The government continued to monitor email and internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views online, including by email and social media, but were subject to monitoring. In May 2019 the minister of information and communications technology and innovation announced the government planned to impose regulations on social media content to combat misinformation and protect citizens. The government did not announce any further details.

According to a 2010 law relating to electronic messages, signatures, and transactions, intermediaries and service providers are not held liable for content transmitted through their networks. Nonetheless, service providers are required to remove content when handed a takedown notice, and there are no avenues for appeal.

Government-run social media accounts were used to debate and at times intimidate individuals who posted online comments considered critical of the government.

The government blocked access within the country to several websites critical of its policies, including websites of the Rwandan diaspora.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government generally did not restrict academic freedom or cultural events, but students and professors practiced self-censorship to avoid accusations of engaging in divisionism or genocide ideology. Local think tanks deferred to government officials in selecting subjects for research, and authorities often prevented or delayed the publication of studies that cast the government in a negative light. The government requires visiting academics to receive official permission to conduct research.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution, law, or both provide for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, but the government limited these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and law provide for freedom of peaceful assembly, but the government did not always respect this right. The law states it is illegal to demonstrate in a public place without prior authorization. Conviction of violating this provision is punishable by a prison sentence of eight days to six months or a substantial monetary fine. The penalties are increased for illegal demonstrations deemed to have threatened security, public order, or health.

Freedom of Association

While the constitution provides for freedom of association, the government limited the right. The law requires private organizations to register. Although the government generally granted licenses to private organizations, it impeded the formation of political parties, restricted political party activities, and delayed or denied registration to local and international NGOs seeking to work on human rights, media freedom, or political advocacy (see section 3). In addition the government imposed burdensome NGO registration and renewal requirements, especially on international NGOs, as well as time-consuming requirements for annual financial and activity reports (see section 5). The law requires faith-based organizations to obtain legal status from the government before beginning operations. It also calls for their legal representatives and preachers with supervisory responsibilities to hold academic degrees.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights. The government accepted former Rwandan combatants who returned from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, with international support, placed adult former combatants in a three-month re-education program at the Mutobo Demobilization Center in Northern Province. After completion, each adult former combatant was enrolled automatically in the RDF Reserve Force and received a cash allowance. The Musanze Child Rehabilitation Center treated former child combatants.

Foreign Travel: The law allows a judge to deprive convicted persons of the right to travel abroad as a stand-alone punishment or as punishment following imprisonment. Government officials must obtain written permission from the Office of the Prime Minister or the president before traveling abroad for official or personal reasons. The government restricted the travel of existing and former security-sector officials. The government continued to advise citizens to avoid traveling to Uganda due to safety concerns. The government at times characterized travel warnings as advisories rather than prohibitions, but nevertheless there were reports authorities prevented some Rwandans from traveling to Uganda and Burundi.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. As of August the government hosted approximately 71,000 Burundian refugees and asylum seekers and more than 76,000 Congolese refugees and asylum seekers.

UNHCR, under an agreement with the government and 14 host countries, recommended in 2015 the invocation of the “ceased circumstances” clause for Rwandans who fled the country between 1959 and 1998 with an agreement with African states hosting Rwandan refugees that refugees were to be assisted in returning to Rwanda or obtaining legal permanent residency in host countries by the end of 2017. The cessation clause forms part of the 1951 Refugee Convention and may be applied when fundamental and durable changes in a refugee’s country of origin, such that they no longer have a well-founded fear of persecution, remove the need for international protection. As of September approximately 3.5 million exiled Rwandans had returned. The government worked with UNHCR and other aid organizations to assist the returnees, most of whom resettled in their districts of origin.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees, and Stateless Persons: Authorities generally provided adequate security and physical protection within refugee camps. The RNP worked with UNHCR to maintain police posts on the edge of and station police officers in refugee camps. Refugees were free to file complaints at both camp and area police stations. There were no major security incidents at refugee camps during the year.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status. UNHCR, with government and donor support, assisted approximately 149,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The government continued to grant prima facie refugee status to Burundian refugees fleeing instability after Burundi’s 2015 presidential election. For other nationalities significant delays existed in the application of individual refugee status determinations. An interagency committee that makes individual refugee status determinations in cases where claimants are not eligible for prima facie refugee status met infrequently.

Freedom of Movement: The law does not restrict freedom of movement of asylum seekers, but refugees continued to experience delays in the issuance of identity cards and convention travel documents. Authorities sometimes restricted access to the camps, in part due to COVID-19 prevention measures. As part of the joint verification exercise the government conducted with UNHCR, eligible refugees received identity cards allowing them to move around the country, open bank accounts, and enroll refugees in social service programs.

Employment: No laws restrict refugee employment, and in 2016 the Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs launched a livelihoods strategy with UNHCR aimed at increasing the ability of refugees to work on the local economy. UNHCR saw some success in livelihood and financial inclusion projects in the agriculture sector, which benefited both refugees and their host communities. Many refugees, however, were unable to find local employment. A 2019 World Bank study found that local authorities and businesses often were unaware of refugees’ rights with respect to employment.

Durable Solutions: The government assisted the safe, voluntary return of refugees to their countries of origin and sought to improve local integration of refugees in protracted stays by permitting them to accept local employment and move freely in the country and by establishing markets to facilitate trade between refugees and local citizens. In September 2019 the government, UNHCR, and the African Union signed a memorandum of understanding to set up a transit mechanism for evacuating refugees from Libya. The mechanism provided a framework for Rwanda to temporarily host these individuals, who would eventually be resettled in third countries, helped to return to countries where asylum had previously been granted, helped to return to their home countries, or granted permission to remain in Rwanda. More than 300 refugees arrived under the transit mechanism before COVID-19 restrictions brought arrivals to halt. As of September 27, 49 individuals brought to Rwanda via the transit mechanism had already been resettled in third countries. In cooperation with UNHCR and the government of Burundi, the government facilitated the voluntary repatriation of refugees to Burundi, reaching a total of approximately 1,500 persons by October 1.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees.

g. Stateless Persons

UNHCR reported providing technical support to help the government conduct national assessments on statelessness

and draft a multiyear action plan to this end.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government through free and fair elections based on universal and equal suffrage, but government restrictions on the formation of opposition parties and harassment of critics and political dissidents limited that ability. The law provides for voting by secret ballot in presidential and parliamentary—but not local—elections. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and allied parties controlled the government and legislature, and RPF candidates dominated elections at all levels.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2018 the government held parliamentary elections for all 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of parliament. Of those, 53 seats were filled through general voting; the remaining 27 seats were reserved for women, youth, and persons with disabilities and were allocated by special electoral colleges. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) claimed that 6.6 million voters participated in the general voting, which equated to a 93 percent turnout. According to the NEC, the RPF coalition won 74 percent of the vote and was awarded 40 of the 53 contested seats. The RPF-allied Social Democratic Party and Liberal Party claimed five and four seats, respectively. The Democratic Green Party of Rwanda (DGPR) and the Social Party Imberakuri (PS-Imberakuri) were awarded two seats each. Neither the DGPR nor PS-Imberakuri was represented in the previous parliament.

As had been the case in 2017 when the NEC announced that voters had re-elected President Kagame to a third seven-year term with a reported 99 percent of the vote, irregularities and instances of ballot stuffing undermined confidence in the integrity of the results. Observers were unable to effectively monitor the process of vote tabulation at polling stations and vote consolidation at the sector, district, and national levels due to inconsistent levels of access and transparency. Ballots were not numbered or adequately controlled and accounted for, either at the individual polling station or at the sector, district, or national level. Observers noted that reported results in some polling rooms exceeded the number of voters observed throughout the day. Some independent aspirants experienced politically motivated difficulties in obtaining the number of signatures required to register their candidacies ahead of the elections. For example, some independent candidates reported residents and local authorities attempted to prevent them from gathering signatures in certain areas. Four independent candidates managed to qualify for the ballot, but the compressed three-week campaign timeline and the prohibition on fundraising prior to the NEC’s certification of candidacies severely hampered their ability to compete against registered parties. Of the four independent candidates, none received enough votes to obtain a seat in the chamber.

In September 2019, 12 new senators were elected to the 26-member Senate via indirect elections. Members of district councils and sector councils elected the 12 via secret ballot. Faculty at public and private universities elected an additional two senators. President Kagame appointed another four senators, and the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations designated two, in accordance with the constitution. In September the National Consultative Forum designated two new senators, including a DGPR member.

In 2015 the government held a referendum on a set of constitutional amendments that would allow the president to run for up to three additional terms in office. The NEC reported 98 percent of registered voters participated, and 98 percent endorsed the amendments. The text of the amendments was not generally available to voters for review prior to the referendum, and political parties opposed to the amendments were not permitted to hold rallies or public meetings to express their opposition to the amendments.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution outlines a multiparty system but provides few rights for parties and their candidates. It was common for RPF principles and values to receive prominent attention during civic activities and for government officials in private to encourage citizens to join the RPF. Political parties allied to the RPF were largely able to operate freely, but members faced legal sanctions if found guilty of engaging in divisive acts, destabilizing national unity, threatening territorial integrity, or undermining national security. DALFA Umurinzi, an opposition political party that spun off from the FDU-Inkingi, remained unregistered. There were reports the government harassed or otherwise targeted DALFA Umurinzi and FDU-Inkingi members. For example, in May DALFA Umurinzi member Theophile Ntirutwa was arrested in connection with the killing of a pastor named Theoneste Bapfakurera. DALFA Umurinzi members told journalists that Ntirutwa was the target of a botched operation where the assailants killed Bapfakurera in a case of mistaken identity. His case was pending as of October, and Ntirutwa remained in prison, having been denied bail.

The government no longer required, but strongly encouraged, all registered political parties to join the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations. The forum sought to promote consensus among political parties and required member parties to support publicly policy positions developed through dialogue. At year’s end all 11 registered parties were members of the organization. Government officials praised it for promoting political unity, while critics argued it stifled political competition and public debate.

In accordance with the constitution, which states a majority party in the Chamber of Deputies may not fill more than 50 percent of cabinet positions, independents and members of other political parties allied with the RPF held key positions in government, including that of prime minister. As of October 1, the PS-Imberakuri and the DGPR were not represented in the cabinet.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. The constitution calls for women to occupy at least 30 percent of positions in decision-making organs, including the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The government consistently implemented this requirement.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for conviction of corruption by officials and private persons transacting business with the government that include imprisonment and fines, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year. The Office of the Auditor General submitted a report to Parliament in May covering the office’s anticorruption efforts. The report identified multiple instances of irregular expenditures and diversion of funds in government spending. The law also provides for citizens who report requests for bribes by government officials to receive financial rewards when officials are prosecuted and convicted.

Corruption: The government investigated and prosecuted reports of corruption among police and government officials. Police frequently conducted internal investigations of police corruption, including sting operations, and authorities punished offenders. For example, in July the RNP dismissed 56 police officers for corruption-related offenses. This included several relatively senior officials, such as an assistant commissioner and a senior superintendent of the RNP.

The NPPA prosecuted civil servants, police, and other officials for fraud, petty corruption, awarding of public tenders illegally, and mismanagement of public assets. A 2018 law states corruption offenses are not subject to any statute of limitations. Specialized chambers at the intermediate court level handled corruption cases.

On April 5, the government arrested several senior government officials, including a permanent secretary of the Ministry of Finance, a former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Infrastructure, a director general of the Rwanda Housing Authority, and two directors general in the Ministry of Infrastructure, for misconduct in procuring a government building. The previous owners of the building were also arrested. The minister of infrastructure had not been arrested as of September but was the subject of an investigation. In May President Kagame denounced the “corrupt behavior” of such officials during a meeting of the RPF. Separately, four prominent businesspersons and financiers of the RPF who had received government procurement contracts for providing fertilizer to farmers were also arrested for mismanagement of funds.

The government utilized a “bagging and tagging” system to aid companies with regional and international due diligence requirements related to conflict minerals. The law prohibits the purchase or sale of undocumented minerals from neighboring countries. A 2019 UN report found irregularities in official statistics on exports of gold from Rwanda to the United Arab Emirates. Observers and government officials reported smugglers trafficked an unknown amount of undocumented minerals through the country.

Financial Disclosure: The constitution and law require public officials to report income and assets annually as well as to report them upon entering and leaving office. There is no requirement for public disclosure of those assets, except in cases where irregularities are discovered. The Office of the Ombudsman, which monitors and verifies disclosures, reported 99 percent of officials complied with the requirement. In cases of noncompliance, the Office of the Ombudsman has the power to garnish wages and impose administrative sanctions that often involved loss of position or prosecution. State-owned enterprises did not fully and transparently disclose their investments and investors.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic human rights groups operated in the country, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases, and international groups also published reports on human rights abuses. The government was often intolerant of public reports of human rights abuses and suspicious of local and international human rights observers, and it often impeded independent investigations and rejected criticism as biased and uninformed. Human rights NGOs expressed fear of the government, reported state security forces monitored their activities, and self-censored their comments. NGOs such as HRW working on human rights and deemed to be critical of the government experienced difficulties securing or renewing required legal registration. For example, HRW had no representatives operating in the country since the government refused to renew its previously lapsed memorandum of understanding with HRW.

The government conducted surveillance on some international and domestic NGOs. Some NGOs expressed concern that intelligence agents infiltrated their organizations to gather information, influence leadership decisions, or create internal problems.

Individuals who contributed to international reports on human rights reported living under constant fear that the government could arrest and prosecute them for the contents of their work.

Some domestic NGOs nominally focused on human rights abuses, but self-censorship limited their effectiveness. Most NGOs that focused on human rights, access to justice, and governance matters vetted their research and reports with the government and refrained from publishing their findings without government approval. Those NGOs that refused to coordinate their activities with progovernment organizations and vet their research with the government reported they were excluded from government-led initiatives to engage civil society.

A progovernment NGO, the Rwanda Civil Society Platform, managed and directed some NGOs through umbrella groups that theoretically aggregated NGOs working in particular thematic sectors. Many observers believed the government controlled some of the umbrella groups. Regulations require NGOs to participate in joint action and development forums at the district and sector levels, and local governments had broad powers to regulate activities and bar organizations that did not comply.

The NGO registration process remained difficult, in part because it required submission of a statement of objectives, plan of action, and detailed financial information for each district in which an NGO wished to operate.

The government sometimes used the registration process to delay programming and pressure organizations to support government programs and policies (see also section 2.b., Freedom of Association).

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The government sometimes cooperated with international organizations, but it criticized reports that portrayed it negatively as inaccurate and biased.

In 2012 the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, based in Tanzania, transferred its remaining genocide cases to the IRMCT, which maintained an office in Tanzania and continued to pursue genocide suspects. From 1994 through July 2019, the tribunal completed proceedings against 80 individuals; of these, 61 were convicted, and 14 were acquitted. Two cases were dropped, and in the remaining three cases, the accused died before the tribunal rendered judgment. As of October 1, six suspects remained fugitives. The government cooperated with the IRMCT, but it remained concerned by the IRMCT's past practice of granting early release to convicts, especially when those released had not professed remorse for their actions.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The adequately funded Office of the Ombudsman operated with the cooperation of executive agencies and took action on cases of corruption and other abuses, including human rights cases (see section 4).

The government funded and cooperated with the NCHR. According to many observers, the NCHR did not have adequate resources to investigate all reported abuses and remained biased in favor of the government. Some victims of human rights abuses did not report them to the NCHR because they perceived it as biased and feared retribution by state security forces.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape of men and women and spousal rape, and the government handled rape cases as a judicial priority. Penalties for conviction of rape range from 10 years' to life imprisonment with substantial monetary fines. Penalties for conviction of committing physical and sexual violence against one's spouse range from three to five years' imprisonment. In March and April, several RDF soldiers allegedly committed rape while enforcing COVID-19 lockdown measures, media reported. The RDF issued a press release on April 4 stating it had arrested five suspects and was investigating the cases.

Domestic violence against women and children remained common. CSOs and NGOs reported this trend appeared to increase during COVID-19, although precise data was unavailable. Authorities encouraged reporting of domestic violence cases, although most incidents remained within the extended family and were not reported or prosecuted.

Police headquarters in Kigali had a hotline for domestic violence. Several other ministries also had free gender-based violence hotlines. Each of the 78 police stations nationwide had its own gender desk, an average of three officers trained in handling domestic violence and gender-based violence cases, and a public outreach program. The government operated 44 one-stop centers throughout the country, providing free medical, psychological, legal, and police assistance to victims of domestic violence.

The government continued its whole-of-government, multistakeholder campaign against gender-based violence, child abuse, and other types of domestic violence. Gender-based violence was a required training module for police and military at all levels and was included for all troops and police preparing for deployment to peacekeeping missions abroad.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment and provides for penalties for conviction of six months' to one year's imprisonment and monetary fines. The penalties are increased when the offender is an employer or other person of authority and the victim is a subordinate. Nevertheless, advocacy organizations reported sexual harassment remained common.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: Women have the same legal status and are entitled to the same rights as men, including under family, labor, nationality, and inheritance laws. The law allows women to inherit property from their fathers and husbands, and couples may make their own legal property arrangements. Women experienced some difficulties pursuing property claims due to lack of knowledge, procedural bias against women in inheritance matters, multiple spousal claims due to polygyny, and the threat of gender-based violence. The law requires equal pay for equal work and prohibits discrimination in hiring decisions. There are no known legal restrictions on women’s working hours or employment in the same occupations, tasks, and industries as men. Studies in previous years indicated few persons reported gender-based discrimination in workplaces, and most people were either unaware of it or unwilling to discuss it. Experts concluded gender-based discrimination remained underreported, in part because victims of discrimination feared losing their employment.

After the 1994 genocide that left many women as heads of households, women assumed a larger role in the formal sector, and many operated their own businesses. A 2016 law governing matrimonial regimes stipulates joint land title ownership for a husband and wife who are legally married. Nevertheless, men owned the major assets of most households, particularly those at the lower end of the economic spectrum, making bank credit inaccessible to many women and rendering it difficult to start or expand a business.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship from their parents. Children born to at least one Rwandan parent automatically receive citizenship. Children born in the country to unknown or stateless parents automatically receive citizenship. Minor children adopted by Rwandans, irrespective of nationality or statelessness, automatically receive citizenship. Children retain their citizenship in the event of dissolution of the parents’ marriage. Birth registrations were performed immediately at hospitals and birth centers for the most part. If a birth occurred elsewhere, the birth could be registered upon the presentation of a medical birth certificate at the sector level. There were no reports of unregistered births leading to denial of public services.

Education: The government’s 12-year basic education program includes tuition-free universal public education for six years of primary and six years of secondary education. Education through grade nine is compulsory. Parents were not required to pay tuition fees, but they often had to pay high fees for teachers’ incentives and meal expenses, according to domestic observers.

Child Abuse: While statistics on child abuse were unreliable, such abuse was common within the family, in the village, and at school. As in previous years, the government conducted a high-profile public awareness campaign against gender-based violence and child abuse. The government supported a network of one-stop centers and hospital facilities that offered integrated police, legal, medical, and counseling services to victims of gender-based violence and child abuse. In partnership with UNICEF, the National Commission for Children (NCC) maintained a corps of 29,674 community-based “Friends of the Family” volunteers (two for each of the country’s 14,837 villages) to help address gender-based violence and child protection concerns at the village level.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum age for marriage is 21; the government strictly enforced this requirement. Anecdotal evidence suggested child marriage sometimes occurred in line with traditional norms in rural areas and refugee camps but rarely in urban areas, and not with government recognition.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: By law, sexual relations with a child younger than 18 constitutes child defilement for which conviction is punishable by 20 years to life in prison, depending on the age of the victim.

The law prohibits sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, for which conviction is punishable by life imprisonment and a substantial monetary fine. Conviction statistics were not available. The 2018 antitrafficking law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation of children, conviction of which is punishable by life imprisonment and a substantial monetary fine.

Child Soldiers: The government supported the Musanze Child Rehabilitation Center in Northern Province that provided care and social reintegration preparation for children who previously served in armed groups in the DRC (see section 2.d., Freedom of Movement).

Displaced Children: There were numerous street children throughout the country. Authorities gathered street children in district transit centers and placed them in rehabilitation centers. In January HRW reported authorities abused street children in the transit centers and held them under harsh conditions (see section 1.c., Prison and Detention Center conditions). Conditions and practices varied at 29 privately run rehabilitation centers for street children.

UNHCR continued to accommodate in the Mahama refugee camp unaccompanied and separated minors who entered the country as part of an influx of refugees from Burundi since 2015. Camp staff provided additional protection measures for these minors.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases_.

Anti-Semitism

There was a very small Jewish population, consisting entirely of foreigners; there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities, and the government generally enforced these provisions. The law mandates access to public facilities, accommodations for taking national examinations, provision of medical care by the government, and monitoring of implementation by the NCHR. Despite a continuing campaign to create a barrier-free environment for persons with disabilities, accessibility remained a problem throughout the country, including in public buildings and public transport, although a limited number of public buses could accommodate persons with disabilities. There were generally limited resources in terms of accessibility at police stations and detention centers for persons with disabilities, including a lack of sign language interpreters. The National Council on Persons with Disabilities and the National Union of the Deaf reported working to compile a sign language dictionary.

There were no legal restrictions or extra registration steps for citizens with disabilities to vote, and registration could be completed online. Braille ballots were available for the 2018 parliamentary elections. Observers noted some polling stations were inaccessible to persons with disabilities and that some election volunteers appeared untrained on how to assist voters with disabilities.

Many children with disabilities did not attend primary or secondary school. Those who attended generally did so with peers without disabilities. Few students with disabilities reached the university level because many primary and secondary schools were unable to accommodate their disabilities.

Some citizens viewed disability as a curse or punishment that could result in social exclusion and sometimes abandoned or hid children with disabilities from the community.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

The constitution provides for the eradication of ethnic, regional, and other divisions in society and the promotion of national unity. Long-standing tensions in the country culminated in the 1994 state-orchestrated genocide that killed between 750,000 and one million citizens, including approximately three-quarters of the Tutsi population. Following the killing of the president in 1994, an extremist interim government directed the Hutu-dominated national army, militia groups, and ordinary citizens to kill resident Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The genocide ended later in 1994 when the predominantly Tutsi RPF, operating from Uganda and northern Rwanda, defeated the national army and Hutu militias and established an RPF-led government of national unity that included members of eight political parties.

Since 1994 the government has called for national reconciliation and abolished the policies of the former government that created and deepened ethnic cleavages. The government removed all references to ethnicity in official discourse—with the exception of references to the genocide, which is officially termed “the genocide against the Tutsi”—and eliminated ethnic quotas for education, training, and government employment.

Some individuals said the government’s reconciliation policies and programs failed to recognize Hutu victims of the genocide or crimes committed by the RPF after the end of the genocide, whereas others noted the government focused positive attention on Hutus who risked their lives to save Tutsis or members of mixed families during the genocide.

Indigenous People

After the genocide the government banned identity card references to Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa ethnicity and prohibited social or political organizations based on ethnic affiliation. As a result the Twa, who numbered approximately 34,000, lost their official designation as an ethnic group. The government no longer recognizes groups advocating specifically for Twa needs, and some Twa believed this government policy denied them their rights as an indigenous ethnic group.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

No laws criminalize sexual orientation or consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. The law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons in housing, employment, nationality laws, or access to government services such as health care. Cabinet-level government officials expressed support for the human rights of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, but LGBTI persons reported societal discrimination and abuse, including challenges to officially registering NGOs.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

The law provides for imprisonment of up to six months or a monetary fine or both for persons convicted of stigmatizing a sick person without the intention to protect the sick person or others. There were no reports of prosecutions under this statute. Discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS occurred, although such incidents remained rare. The government actively supported relevant public education campaigns, including establishing HIV/AIDS awareness clubs in secondary schools and making public pronouncements against stigmatization of those with the disease.

The law also provides stiffer penalties for conviction of rape and defilement in cases of transmission of an incurable illness. In most cases of sexual violence, the victim and alleged perpetrator both undergo HIV testing.

According to RDF policy and in keeping with UN guidelines, the military did not permit its members with HIV or AIDS to participate in peacekeeping missions abroad but allowed them to remain in the RDF.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right to form and join unions and employer associations, bargain collectively, and strike, but it places restrictions on these rights. An employer may refuse a recognized union access to the workplace, and the union must appeal this to the labor inspector. A union must include a majority of workers in the enterprise. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination but does not automatically provide for reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Labor disputes are mediated by local and national labor inspectors before they may be referred to a court, which may refuse to hear the case. The law applies to all employees with contracts. The law applies to informal-sector employees with regard to occupational health and safety (OSH) and the right to form trade unions and employers' associations, but it does not address strikes in the informal sector.

A March ministerial order defines the implementation of the 2018 labor law and specifies guidelines for labor inspections, provides the modalities of electing employee representatives, lists acts considered gross misconduct, determines the core elements of a written employment contract, and defines essential services that may not be interrupted by a strike or lockout.

The law and ministerial orders provide some workers the right to conduct strikes, subject to numerous restrictions. The law states that employees have the right to strike when the arbitration committee has allowed more than 15 working days to pass without issuing a decision, the conciliation resolution on collective dispute had not been implemented, or the court award was not enforced. The law further states all strikes must be preceded by a notice of four working days. The law states that a strike or lockout must not interrupt the continuity of “essential services” as defined by the Ministry of Public Service and Labor. The ministry broadly defined essential services to include all modes of transportation and fuel sales, security, health, education, water and sanitation, and all forms of telecommunications, which severely restricted the right to strike in these fields. Employees and employers are prohibited from exercising a strike or lock-out within 10 days preceding or following elections in the country or during a state of national emergency. There were 35 labor unions organized into three confederations: 16 trade unions represented by the Rwanda Confederation of Trade Unions (CESTRAR), 12 by the Labor and Worker's Brotherhood Congress (COTRAF), and seven by the National Council of Free Trade Union Organizations in Rwanda. All three federations were officially independent of the government, but some maintained close links with the government.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining generally were not respected. The government did not enforce applicable laws effectively and restricted these rights.

The government severely limited the right to collective bargaining, and legal mechanisms were inadequate to protect this right. Labor union officials commented that many private-sector businesses did not allow collective bargaining negotiations. The government also controlled collective bargaining with cooperatives and mandatory arbitration. No labor union had an established collective bargaining agreement with the government.

Collective bargaining occasionally was practiced in the private sector, although there were few recent examples. In 2015 an international tea exporter renewed its 2012 collective bargaining agreement with its employees. CESTRAR, COTRAF, and the Ministry of Labor participated in the negotiations.

There were neither registered strikes nor anecdotal reports of unlawful strikes during the year; the most recent recorded strike was by textile workers in 2013. CESTRAR noted that in several cases, the government acted to resolve labor disputes in workers' favor to avert the threat of a strike. National elections for trade union representatives occurred on regular cycles depending on the trade union. Trade union leaders stated the government interfered in the elections and pressured some candidates not to run.

There were no functioning labor courts or other formal mechanisms to resolve antiunion discrimination complaints, and COTRAF reported it could take four to five years for labor disputes to be resolved through the civil courts. According to one trade union, employers in small companies frequently used transfers, demotions, and dismissals to intimidate union members.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced labor and states it is unlawful to permit the imposition of forced labor. In 2014 the government issued a national trafficking in persons action plan that included programs to address forced labor; the government continued to update the plan during the year. In 2018 the government enacted an updated law to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking in persons. The 2018 antitrafficking law prescribes penalties for conviction of imprisonment or fines. Penalties were commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape, with the penalties being higher if the victim is a child or a vulnerable person. Statistics on the number of victims identified in forced labor were not available. Suspected victims were sometimes detained in transit centers without proper screening or referral to care and assistance.

Government enforcement to prevent forced labor was inconsistent, particularly in cases involving domestic workers. Although not widespread, forced labor reportedly occurred in bars, restaurants, and mines.

Also see the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits all of the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for full-time employment is 16, but children ages 13 to 15 are allowed to perform light work in the context of an apprenticeship. The law prohibits children younger than age 18 from participating in physically harmful work, including work underground, under water, at dangerous heights, or in confined spaces; work with dangerous machinery, equipment, and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads; work that exposes the child to unsafe temperatures or noise levels; and work for long hours or during the night. The 2018 labor law determines the nature of other prohibited forms of work for a child.

In addition to national law, some districts enforced local regulations against hazardous child labor and sanctioned employers and parents for violations. Police, immigration officials, local government officials, and labor inspectors received training on identifying victims of trafficking.

The NCC took the lead role in designating responsible agencies and establishing actions to be taken, timelines, and other concrete measures in relation to the integrated child rights policy and various national commissions, plans, and policies related to child protection subsumed therein. At the local level, 149 child labor committees monitored incidents of child labor, and each district was required to establish a steering committee to combat child labor. At the village level, 320 child labor focal point volunteers were supported by 10 national protection officers appointed by the NCC and 48 social workers.

The Ministry of Public Service and Labor conducted labor inspections of sectors of the economy known to employ children, focusing on domestic work and the agriculture sector. The government removed 316 children from hazardous work situations and fined employers approximately \$3,000. The RNP operated a child protection unit. District government officials, as part of their performance contracts, enforced child labor reduction and school attendance benchmarks. Observers noted considerable political will to address child labor within the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, and the RNP, but the labor inspectorate remained underfunded and understaffed.

The government worked with NGOs to raise awareness of the problem and to identify and send to school or vocational training children involved in child labor. The government’s 12-year basic education program aided in reducing the incidence of child labor, although some children who worked also attended school because classes were held in alternating morning or afternoon shifts at some grade levels. The government fined those who illegally employed children or parents who sent their children to work instead of school.

The government enforced the law inconsistently. The number of inspectors was inadequate, but criminal penalties were commensurate with those for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping. The majority of child laborers worked in the agricultural sector and as household domestics. Child labor also existed in isolated instances in cross-border transportation and in the mining industry. Children received low wages, and abuse was common.

Also, see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings, and the Department of Labor’s *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor* at www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin, family or ancestry, clan, race, sex, region, religion, culture, language, and physical or mental disability, as well as any other form of discrimination. The constitution requires equal pay for equal work.

There were no known legal restrictions to women’s employment in the same occupations, tasks, and working hours as men. The government did not consistently enforce antidiscrimination laws, and there were numerous reports of discrimination based on gender and disability. Women generally enjoyed equal pay for the same work as men, although pay varied across occupations. Persons with disabilities are officially protected from employment discrimination but often faced discrimination in hiring. Migrant workers enjoyed the same legal protections, wages, and working conditions as citizens but sometimes faced discrimination due to societal bias and informal hiring quotas tied to citizenship status.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no official minimum wage. The law states the Ministry of Labor may establish a minimum wage by ministerial order, but as of October 1, such an order had not been issued. Laws on working conditions applied to all workers but were seldom enforced in the informal sector.

The law provides a standard workweek of 45 hours and 18 to 21 days paid annual leave, in addition to official holidays. The law provides employers with the right to determine daily rest periods. Most employees received a one-hour lunch break. The law states female employees who have given birth are entitled to a maternity leave of at least 12 consecutive weeks. A ministerial order issued during the year states overtime is accrued after 45 hours worked per week and is compensated by a “rest period equal to the extra hours performed” within the following 30 days. If employees are not provided the rest period within 30 days, they are to be paid for hours worked. The rate for overtime work is the worker’s regular salary.

The law states employers must provide for the health, safety, and welfare of employees and visitors and that enterprises are to establish occupational safety and health committees. Authorities conducted public awareness campaigns to inform workers of their rights and highlight employers’ obligation to register employees for social security and occupational health insurance and pay into those benefit systems. Orders from the Ministry of Labor determined appropriate OSH conditions and the establishment and functioning of OSH committees.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. The number of inspectors was not sufficient to enforce labor standards effectively. The many violations reported to labor unions compared to the few actions taken by the government and employers to remedy substandard working conditions suggested penalties and enforcement were insufficient. The law was seldom applied in the informal sector.

Families regularly supplemented their incomes by working in small businesses or subsistence agriculture in the informal sector, which included more than 75 percent of all workers. Most workers in the formal sector worked six days per week. Violations of wage, overtime, and OSH standards were common in both the formal and informal sectors. Employers frequently failed to register employees for social security or occupational health insurance and pay into those benefit systems.

Workers in the subcontractor and business process outsourcing sectors were especially vulnerable to hazardous or exploitative working conditions. Statistics on workplace fatalities and accidents were not available, but ministry officials singled out mining as a sector with significant problems in implementing occupational safety and health standards. The Ministry of Labor maintained a list of dangerous professions subject to heightened safety scrutiny.

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