

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World 2022 - Rwanda

Not Free

22

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 8 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 14 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

21 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Paul Kagame, has ruled the country since 1994, when it ousted forces responsible for that year's genocide and ended a civil war. While the regime has maintained stability and economic growth, it has also suppressed political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents.

Key Developments in 2021

- Political opposition figure Paul Rusesabagina, who had lived abroad until he was forcibly repatriated by Rwandan authorities in 2020, was sentenced to 25 years in prison on terrorism and other charges in September after a trial that lacked due process.
- Draconian lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic were generally eased during the year, though some restrictions remained in place or were reimposed by December.
- The Kagame regime continued its attempts to silence political opponents, with suspicious murders or disappearances reported abroad and further detentions of and threats against journalists, bloggers, and artists occurring within the country.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through 0 / free and fair elections? 4

Rwanda's 2003 constitution grants broad powers to the president, who has the authority to appoint the prime minister and dissolve the bicameral Parliament. Amendments passed in 2015 retained a two-term limit for the presidency and shortened terms from seven to five years. The changes also explicitly stated, however, that incumbent Paul Kagame was eligible for an additional seven-year term, after which he could run for two of the new five-year terms. This would extend Kagame's rule until 2034.

Kagame easily won the 2017 presidential election, taking 98.8 percent of the vote, according to official results. Frank Habineza of the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda (DGPR) and independent Philippe Mpayimana split the remainder. The electoral process was marred by numerous irregularities, including political intimidation, unfair registration practices, and alleged fraud during the balloting itself.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) blocked the candidacies of other would-be challengers, including independent and Kagame critic Diane Rwigara, who was barred from running on the grounds that some of the required signatures she had collected were invalid. She claimed that her

followers were harassed and jailed as they attempted to gather signatures. The government also orchestrated a campaign of media smears and intimidation against Rwigara, who was subsequently arrested along with her mother and sister.

Local authorities impeded the electoral campaigns of opposition presidential candidates, and some citizens were coerced into joining RPF rallies and voting for Kagame. Rwandans were also made to attend camps and listen to RPF propaganda, while local authorities tasked traditional leaders with persuading their communities to vote for Kagame. Access to the media and the content of electoral coverage were both skewed in favor of the RPF.

On election day, observers reported ballot stuffing, poll workers showing favoritism toward the RPF, and denial of access to the vote-counting process, among other violations. Ballot secrecy was not always respected.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair 1 / elections? 4

The 26-seat Senate, the upper house of Parliament, consists of 12 members elected by regional councils; 8 appointed by the president; 4 chosen by the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations (NCFPO), a public body meant to promote political consensus; and 2 elected by faculty at universities. Senators' terms were shortened from eight to five years as part of the 2015 constitutional reform. The 80-seat Chamber of Deputies, the lower house, includes 53 directly elected members, 24 women chosen by local councils, 2 members from the National Youth Council, and 1 member from the Federation of Associations of the Disabled, all serving five-year terms.

Six incumbent senators who had served eight-year terms were replaced in 2020; four were appointed by Kagame, and two were selected by the NCFPO.

The RPF dominated the Chamber of Deputies elections held in 2018, capturing 40 of the 53 elected seats. The DGPR gained 2 seats, marking the first time a genuine opposition party had won representation in Parliament. Three other parties allied with the RPF—the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, and the Social Party—won 5, 4, and 2 seats respectively. As with other elections in recent years, the government's repression of legitimate opposition parties and strict control of the media helped to ensure an overwhelming victory for the RPF.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the 1 / relevant election management bodies? 4

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

The 2015 constitutional amendments were adopted through a flawed petition and referendum process. Rights groups and news organizations cited reports that some signatures on the petition were not given voluntarily. The details of the amendments were not widely distributed or discussed ahead of the referendum, in which 98 percent of voters signaled their approval, according to the NEC. The government limited the political activities of groups opposed to the amendments, and the referendum was not monitored by any independent international observer groups.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive 1 political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise / and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4

The government-controlled Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) is responsible for registering political parties. In practice it can deny registration at its discretion without proper justification.

The government has a long history of repressing its political opponents, and members of opposition parties face the threat of disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and assassination. Diane Rwigara, who sought to contest the 2017 presidential election, was arrested and imprisoned that year, along with her mother and sister, on multiple charges. The charges against her sister were dropped; Rwigara and her mother were released on bail in 2018 and acquitted later that year. Separately, several members of the Dafa-Umurinzi party, led by 2010 presidential candidate Victoire Ingabire, were convicted in 2020 of involvement with an "irregular armed force" and "offenses against the state," receiving prison terms ranging from 7 to 10 years. One defendant who was acquitted, Venant Abayisenga, was reported missing later that year and was believed to have been forcibly disappeared or killed.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

The RPF has ruled Rwanda without interruption since 1994, banning and repressing any opposition group that could mount a serious challenge to its leadership. All registered parties currently belong to the NCFPO. While the DGPR won two parliamentary seats in 2018, current conditions generally prevent it from gaining further positions of authority or increasing its support to the point where it can viably compete with the RPF.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 0 / 4

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

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

The constitution calls on the president to ensure “representation of historically marginalized communities” in the Senate through his appointees. However, asserting one’s ethnic identity in politics is banned, meaning the level of representation is unclear. The prohibition on discussion of ethnicity makes it nearly impossible for disadvantaged groups—including the Twa, an Indigenous group—to organize independently and advocate for their interests.

The constitution requires women to occupy at least 30 percent of the seats in each chamber of Parliament. While women currently hold more than 38 percent of Senate seats and about 61 percent of the lower house seats, they have little practical ability to engage in politics outside the RPF structure. The promotion of gender equity disproportionately privileges English-speaking Tutsis over French-speaking Hutus and rural Tutsis. Societal discrimination, as well as the regime’s general repression of dissent, prevents LGBT+ Rwandans from freely pursuing their communities’ political interests.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

Government policy is largely set and implemented by the executive branch, with the security and intelligence services playing a powerful role, and the president is not freely elected. Parliament, which generally lacks the independence to serve as a check on executive authority, tends to merely endorse presidential initiatives.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

The government takes measures to limit corruption, including regular dismissals and prosecutions of low-level officials who are suspected of malfeasance. In 2018, Parliament passed penal code revisions that expanded the list of corruption-related crimes and increased penalties for those convicted. In 2019, several mayors and other local officials resigned or were dismissed for alleged corruption and other misconduct, though the lack of transparency surrounding the cases made it difficult to assess whether any of them were politically motivated. In 2021, Rwanda’s Office of the Ombudsman launched investigations following a civil society report that found corruption in the public procurement and infrastructure sectors.

Despite these actions, graft remains a problem, and only a few independent organizations or media outlets are able to investigate or report on corruption issues due to the risk of government reprisals.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

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

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

While the constitution nominally protects freedom of the press, the government imposes legal restrictions and informal controls on the media, and most outlets practice self-censorship. The few journalists in the country who engage in independent reporting are subject to criminal charges and intimidation. The penal code revisions passed in 2018 criminalized cartoons and writings that “humiliate” Rwandan leaders, but also decriminalized defamation, which the Rwanda Journalists Association considered an improvement to the highly restrictive legal framework.

Many Rwandan journalists have fled the country and work in exile. Due in part to this phenomenon, the government has increasingly blocked access to news services and websites based abroad. The British Broadcasting Corporation’s Kinyarwanda-language service has been suspended in the country since 2014.

Authorities continued to target journalists and bloggers—particularly those broadcasting via the online video platform YouTube—for intimidation, arrest, or prosecution during 2021, using a broad interpretation of media laws that allow them to restrict content that is deemed offensive, false, or contrary to public safety and public morals.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 2 / 4 and private?

Religious freedom has historically been respected, but the government has recently taken steps to assert greater control over religious institutions. Over the past several years, authorities have shut down Pentecostal churches and some mosques, banned mosques in Kigali from broadcasting the call to prayer, passed a law requiring religious leaders to obtain a theology degree before establishing churches, mandated that religious organizations report grants to the RGB, and required that donations to faith-based groups be deposited in Rwandan banks. Jehovah’s Witnesses face arrest for refusing to participate in security duties or oath-taking involving the national flag.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 1 / 4 indoctrination?

The government restricts academic freedom by enforcing official views on the genocide and other sensitive topics. Any critical discussion of the RPF’s actions during the war or its politicization of memorialization projects is heavily policed. Scholars and students are subject to suspension for “divisionism” and engage in self-censorship to avoid such penalties.

In 2019, the government announced that primary schools would conduct lessons in English, even though most of the population speaks Kinyarwanda. French-speaking students and educators could also be disadvantaged by the decision. School closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic delayed enforcement of the new policy during 2020, but implementation began in early 2021 as schools reopened.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 0 / 4 without fear of surveillance or retribution?

The space for free private discussion is limited in part by indications that the government monitors personal communications. Social media are heavily monitored, and the law allows for government hacking of telecommunications networks. In 2019, WhatsApp disclosed that its messaging service had been exploited to target Rwandan dissidents with Pegasus, a suite of surveillance software. Rwandan authorities have also used mobile data and geolocation tools as part of their response to COVID-19.

In addition to electronic surveillance, the authorities reportedly use informants to infiltrate civil society, further discouraging citizens from voicing dissent. Individuals have been forcibly disappeared, arrested, detained, and assassinated for expressing their views. Innocent Bahati, a poet known for reciting his social commentary on YouTube, went missing in February 2021; his location and condition remained unknown at year’s end.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, this right is strictly limited in practice. Fear of arrest or police violence serves as a deterrent to protests, and gatherings are sometimes disrupted even when organizers obtain official authorization. Public gatherings have been restricted to varying degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic, with those deemed to be in violation of the rules facing arrest and possible mistreatment in custody. Nevertheless, some officially sanctioned events proceeded peacefully during 2021. LGBT+ activists organized Rwanda's first pride celebrations in June.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 1 / 4

Registration and reporting requirements for both domestic and foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are onerous, and activities that the government defines as divisive are prohibited. Many organizations receive funds from the RGB, which challenges their independence. Several NGOs have been banned in recent years, leading others to self-censor. The government has been accused of employing infiltration tactics against human rights organizations.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

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

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The Rwandan judiciary lacks independence from the executive. Top judicial officials are appointed by the president and confirmed by the RPF-dominated Senate. Judges rarely rule against the government in politically sensitive cases.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

The police and military regularly engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, targeting opposition figures and dissidents as well as homeless people, street vendors, and suspected petty criminals. A 2017 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report detailed a system of secret unlawful detention at military facilities for suspected members of armed rebel groups or exiled opposition factions. Such detainees are allegedly denied basic due-process rights, and many who are later brought to trial are convicted based on coerced confessions.

Children facing homelessness, gay and transgender people, and sex workers in Kigali were arbitrarily detained and held in poor conditions in the months before the city was scheduled to host a high-profile international conference in June 2021.

The government is known to pursue arbitrary detentions of political opponents living in exile. In August 2020, Rwandan authorities effectively abducted Paul Rusesabagina—a Belgian citizen, US resident, and regime critic known for sheltering hundreds of people during the genocide—while he was visiting the United Arab Emirates. Upon arrival in Rwanda, he was immediately arrested and charged with supporting terrorism due to his leadership role in the opposition Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change (MRCD) and alleged links to the group's armed wing. In September 2021, Rusesabagina was found guilty and sentenced to 25 years in prison after a trial that lacked due process. Among other violations, the authorities reportedly intercepted privileged correspondence between Rusesabagina and his lawyers.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Both ordinary criminal suspects and political detainees are routinely subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in custody. Extrajudicial executions of suspected criminals by security personnel still occur with some frequency. Disappearances, physical assaults, arbitrary detention, and assassinations targeting journalists, opposition members, and other regime critics are commonly reported. In 2021, at least three regime critics were assassinated or forcibly disappeared abroad.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Equal treatment for all citizens under the law is guaranteed, and there are legal protections against discrimination. However, the Tutsi minority group is often accused of receiving preferential treatment for high-ranking jobs and university scholarships under the pretext of an affirmative action program for “genocide survivors.” English-speaking Tutsis are overrepresented in government. Members of the Hutu majority, who represent 85 percent of the population, face unofficial discrimination when seeking public employment or scholarships. The Twa, meanwhile, continue to suffer from de facto disadvantages in education, employment, and health care.

While women enjoy broad legal equality and have a significant presence in the economy as workers and business owners, gender-based discrimination persists, and gender-equality efforts have largely favored English-speaking Tutsis.

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

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

An easily obtainable national identity card is required to move within the country. However, all government officials must receive approval from the president or prime minister’s office before traveling for personal or professional reasons; some current and former security officials have been arrested for unauthorized travel. Members of opposition groups have also reported restrictions on foreign travel or reentry to Rwanda.

Rwandan authorities introduced COVID-19-related lockdowns and travel restrictions in 2020, and these were abusively enforced, in part through mass arrests affecting tens of thousands of people. Individuals accused of violating mask mandates and curfews, along with those performing essential errands during lockdowns, were routinely detained in stadiums and sometimes forced to attend overnight lectures before being released. Some detainees were denied food, water, and protection from the elements. Conditions improved in 2021, with lockdowns rolled back and schools reopening in February. Some 35,000 people were reportedly arrested in June as restrictions were temporarily reimposed to curb a rise in cases, but the rules were eased again beginning in July. When a new coronavirus variant emerged in December, authorities applied certain limited social-distancing measures only to unvaccinated people.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to an easing of the previous year’s disproportionate and abusively enforced COVID-19 restrictions.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

While the government is generally supportive of economic growth through private business activity, it has been criticized for seizing land for infrastructure and development projects without proper compensation, and for imposing agricultural and land-consolidation policies without adequate input from farmers.

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

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

The law generally grants equal rights to men and women regarding marriage and divorce, but informal marriages under customary law, including polygamous unions, lack such protections. Only marriages between a man and a woman are recognized under the country’s constitution. The penalties for spousal rape are much lighter than for other forms of rape. Domestic violence remains widespread and seldom reported despite government programs to combat it.

Abortion is a criminal offense unless the pregnancy is the result of rape, incest, or forced marriage, or it poses a health risk. Abortion convictions can lead to significant prison terms. The 2018 penal code revisions removed language requiring all abortions to be approved by a judge, leaving the final decision in the hands of the patient and doctor. In May 2020, 50 women who were jailed for having

abortions—six of whom were serving life sentences—were released after receiving presidential pardons. Human rights advocates welcomed the pardons but maintained calls for a liberalization of abortion laws.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Regulations governing wage levels and conditions of work in the formal sector are poorly enforced. Children are trafficked internally for domestic service under abusive conditions, or for commercial sex work, and little effort is made to hold internal traffickers to account. Many children work informally in the agricultural sector. Young Congolese and Burundian refugees are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and coerced recruitment into armed groups linked to Rwandan security forces. While Rwanda has increased prosecutions for transnational trafficking in recent years, the number of investigations and convictions remains low, and victim and witness support programs are lacking.

ecoi.net summary:



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rights and civil liberties in 2021

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