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Freedom on the Net 2021 - Rwanda

Not Free

38

/ 100

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Last Year's Score & Status

39 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom in Rwanda continued to decline during the coverage period, with the government taking steps to detain, intimidate, and block the content of online journalists and critics. Self-censorship online remains common, as the government increasingly tightens its control of the online media environment. Recent evidence implicates Rwandan authorities in the widespread use of commercial surveillance tools against journalists, activists, and opposition leaders.

President Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) have ruled Rwanda since 1994, and maintain tight control over the political system. The government habitually suppresses political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, arrest, and suspected assassinations of dissidents, including across borders.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- In December 2020, the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) suspended plans to require YouTube channels to register with the RMC, originally announced earlier that month, which would have required channels to present journalist credentials and pay a licensing fee (see B6).
- While Rwandans supported government-approved campaigns on social media during the coverage period, the online environment severely hampers online mobilization, especially due to the overwhelming pressure to self-censor criticism of the government (see B8).
- A leaked dataset indicated that Rwandan authorities considered targeting over 3,500 phone numbers linked to Rwandan activists, journalists, and politicians with Pegasus, a surveillance tool developed by the Israeli technology company NSO Group (see C5).
- Government officials increasingly targeted individuals associated with YouTube news channels through arrests and online harassment, particularly those that challenge the government's narrative on sensitive issues; some YouTubers experienced months-long pretrial detention (see C3 and C7).
- Rwanda's draft data protection bill—which would enshrine key data rights but presents a threat to media sites and requires data localization—advanced through the legislative process during the coverage period (see C6).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 3 /

6

Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Rwanda has improved notably in recent years. The government has invested in building its internet infrastructure and other ICTs in its efforts to develop a robust information economy.

The Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA), the sector regulator, reported an increase in internet usage by Rwandans, from 60.4 percent in 2019 to 62.5 percent in its December 2020.¹ The Digital 2021 report, in contrast, reported a 31.4 percent internet penetration rate in January 2021.² Most Rwandans access the internet via smartphones.

According to the government, over 90 percent of the population lives in areas covered by broadband networks.³ International Telecommunication Union (ITU) data reported that less than 1 percent of the population uses fixed-broadband internet as of 2019.⁴ Government investments in broadband technology across the country continued to grow during the reporting period (see A2). The ITU is collaborating with RURA to further expand broadband coverage (see A2).⁵

According to internet speeds aggregator Ookla, Rwandans averaged mobile download speeds of 16.9 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 6 Mbps as of November 2020, the most recent available data, and fixed broadband download speeds of 20.3 Mbps and upload speeds of 24.8 Mbps as of May 2021.⁶ During the COVID-19 pandemic, mobile broadband subscribers experienced drastic internet slowdowns. Subscribers of MTN and Airtel reported service disruptions and speeds as low as 55 Kbps in April 2020.⁷

Limited fixed-line infrastructure has negatively impacted internet access. Nevertheless, developments in the fixed-network market have improved connectivity and reliability. Operators have rolled out national fiber-optic backbone networks to connect to the international submarine fiber-optic cables on the east coast of Africa. These cables have provided the entire region with fiber-based international bandwidth for the first time, ending the dependency on satellites. As of April 2020, internet service provider (ISP) Liquid Telecom continued to expand fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) services in the capital city of Kigali and some small towns.⁸

In December 2019, Korea Telecom Rwanda Networks (KTRN) announced a \$10 million project aimed at improving connectivity across the country.⁹ KTRN is a wholesale provider of a universal mobile broadband network built on fourth-generation long-term-evolution (4G LTE) technology. National LTE coverage was achieved in 2018.¹⁰

Improved access to electricity via hydropower and solar energy projects has helped increase internet connection speeds and decrease costs. However, according to the government, 65 percent of the population had access to electricity as of June 2021,¹¹ which falls far short of the government's ambitious plan to achieve 100-percent electrification by 2024.

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 1
/
3

Internet access is primarily concentrated in Kigali and remains beyond the reach of many citizens, particularly those in rural areas who are limited by low income and low levels of ICT awareness.¹² However, there have been efforts to reduce costs and expand service to underserved communities.

Poverty continues to be the primary impediment to internet access, with the majority of the population engaged in subsistence agriculture. The Inclusive Internet Index 2021 report ranks Rwanda 109th of 120 countries for affordability, but notes that Rwanda ranks second overall among the low-income countries assessed by the index.¹³

Expatisan, an online index that measures the cost of living across countries, estimated that the price of internet service at 8 Mbps in Kigali was nearly 36,799 Rwandan francs (\$37) per month as of February, 2021, which remains prohibitively expensive for the majority of residents.¹⁴ In March 2020, Liquid Telecom launched new fiber-optic broadband services in Kigali. According to Liquid Telecom officials, users would receive unlimited high-speed internet access, significant price reductions, and free installation.¹⁵ The company also announced a significant reduction in fiber-to-home internet service costs, with prices starting at 29,287 francs (\$30) for a month of unlimited connectivity at 5 Mbps.¹⁶ This remains on the costlier side for many Kigali residents.

Rwandans were critical about the poor quality of internet service amid the COVID-19 crisis lockdown measures, as the majority of office workers were forced to work from home. When schools closed during the lockdown, learning shifted online, primarily through content distributed via radio, television, and YouTube.¹⁷

Fewer than 10 percent of Rwandans are digitally literate as of 2019,¹⁸ and over 70 percent of the population speaks only Kinyarwanda, making internet content in English inaccessible to the majority of Rwandans.¹⁹

The joint ITU and RURA broadband expansion project aims to increase connectivity in rural areas and improve access to government services and information. According to the ITU, the project also aims to provide free or low-cost internet access to schools, hospitals, and underserved populations.²⁰ In February 2019, OneWeb, a UK-based company, launched a satellite that brings internet access to schools in remote areas.²¹ In April 2020, OneWeb filed a bankruptcy relief case in a U.S. bankruptcy court, which could disrupt its projects globally; Paula Ingabire, minister of information and community technology and innovation, said Rwanda's partnership with OneWeb would continue.²²

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for 5 / the purposes of restricting connectivity? 6

There were no restrictions on connectivity reported in Rwanda during the coverage period, though Article 52 of the 2001 Law Governing Telecommunications gives the government excessive powers over telecommunications networks in the name of preserving "national integrity." These powers include the ability to "suspend a telecommunications service for an indeterminate period, either generally or for certain communications."²³

The local internet exchange point (IXP), the Rwanda Internet Exchange (RINEX),²⁴ is managed by the Rwanda Information & Communications Technology Association, a nonprofit organization comprised of ICT institutions and professionals.²⁵

Since 2013, IHS Towers, Africa's largest operator of telecommunications towers, has managed most of these assets in Rwanda. Mobile service provider MTN sold over 500 towers to IHS Towers in 2014.²⁶ That same year, the company agreed to acquire 212 towers from mobile service provider Millicom and 171 from Airtel.²⁷ Internet activists believe the consolidation of telecommunications infrastructure under one company's ownership may permit the government to exercise greater control over these assets, and that the government collects massive intelligence data with the help of IHS Towers.²⁸

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service 3 / providers? 6

RURA is not transparent in its oversight of ISPs.

As of September 2020, at least 25 ISPs were licensed.²⁹ In 2019, an anonymous source from within RURA's legal department said that the majority of ISPs were no longer operational due to the dominance of MTN and Airtel. According to the source, the hegemony of these two companies is in the state's interest because centralization allows RURA to more easily monitor users.³⁰ According to local sources, government officials and agencies have shares in some telecommunications companies, which may enable the state to interfere in their operations.

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail 1 / to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 4

There are no legal guarantees for the autonomy of RURA. RURA reports directly to the office of the prime minister. The government audits RURA's budget, while the president nominates its seven board members, supervisory board, and director general, limiting its autonomy in practice.³¹ Ernest Nsabimana, previously a vice mayor of Kigali, was appointed director general of RURA in December 2020.³²

Appointments to RURA have raised concerns about the influence of the military and intelligence services over the regulation of the ICT sector.³³ Prior to Nsabimana, RURA's director general was Patrick Nyirishema, a senior military officer.³⁴ Former assistant police commissioner Anthony Kulamba, who also served as the Rwanda National Police (RNP) commissioner for Interpol,³⁵ currently serves as RURA's head of media regulation and consumer affairs.³⁶

There are no mechanisms for ISPs or other companies regulated by RURA to appeal its decisions.³⁷ Furthermore, no self-regulatory mechanism is available for ISPs.³⁸

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet 3 / content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

The government restricts the types of online content that users can access, particularly material that strays from the government's official narrative.

In October 2019, the Rwandan Senate accused 26 online radio stations and websites owned by Rwandan critics living in exile of genocide denial (see C7).³⁹ Out of the 26 websites named in the report, 11 are accessible in Rwanda as of May 2021.⁴⁰ As of late 2020, numerous independent news outlets and opposition blogs that have been blocked for years reportedly remained inaccessible,⁴¹ including the website of the *Rwandan* newspaper, as well as online publications Inyenyeri News and Le Prophete.⁴²

In August 2019, RURA blocked several Ugandan news sites, including the state-owned *New Vision* and the websites of the *Daily Monitor*, the *Observer*, SoftPower News, and the *Independent*, reciprocating the Uganda Communications Commission's (UCC) blocking of two Rwandan news sites, the *New Times* and Igihe. Both countries agreed to unblock the websites shortly afterwards.⁴³ As of May 2021 the websites of *New Vision*, the *Daily Monitor*, ChimpReports, *Nile Post*, and the *Independent* were inaccessible for some users in Rwanda.⁴⁴ The incident took place amid rising diplomatic tensions between the two countries in recent years. Each government, through state-sponsored media houses and social media platforms, has accused the other of espionage and intent to undermine state security. The website of SoftPower News, a Ugandan digital media company, was previously blocked in January 2018, and remained inaccessible through at least May 2019.

The websites for independent regional news outlets, such as *Great Lakes Voice*, and websites of the Rwandan diaspora, such as Rugali, are also blocked, and are only accessible via web proxy. The BBC Kinyarwanda/Kirundi website was made inaccessible in 2014 but became accessible during the previous coverage period. However, most international news sources, some of which are critical of the Rwandan government, are available online. These websites most likely remain unblocked because the majority of Rwandans engage with content in the local language, Kinyarwanda.

Social networking sites and communications apps such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are accessible.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force 2 publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that / is protected by international human rights standards? 4

The extent to which the government forces websites or digital platforms to delete content is unknown, though anecdotal evidence in recent years suggests the practice is common. According to journalists who have spoken on condition of anonymity, authorities often pressure editors of news sites to delete content that is critical of the government or avoid publishing such content altogether, threatening to block sites that do not comply.⁴⁵ Local journalists refer to the practice as *kunyonga* (shooting down anonymously).

Credible sources claim that the Office of the Government Spokesperson (OGS), an official propaganda entity, has administrative access to the websites of some nominally independent newspapers. Government employees reportedly remove stories deemed critical of the Kagame administration on a routine basis.

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to 1 / the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? 4

RURA generally does not provide explanations when local and international news sites are blocked. Website owners have no avenue of appeal when their sites are blocked.

In May 2019, the Rwandan government announced its intention to start regulating social media content, arguing that regulation was necessary to protect citizens from misinformation and that social media platforms were being used to rally people to disrupt society. Critics say the move targets the government's opponents and independent journalists.⁴⁶ As of July 2021, the regulations had not been announced.

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.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, service providers are required to remove content when handed a takedown notice, and there are no mechanisms for appeal.

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 0 / 4

While Rwandans are active on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, self-censorship has become more pervasive among both online journalists and ordinary users in recent years due to increasing government repression, social pressure to support the government, and fear of reprisals for those who criticize the authorities. The hostile environment for journalists, who risk prosecution and imprisonment for critical, independent reporting, contributes to self-censorship. The disappearance and murder of numerous opposition members similarly reinforces self-censorship (see C7).⁴⁸ Internet users typically avoid topics that can be construed as critical of the government or disruptive to national unity and reconciliation.⁴⁹

President Kagame has frequently threatened his critics and accused them of destabilizing the country, further entrenching self-censorship. In a May 2019 speech, Kagame warned opponents of his government in the diaspora when he said, "those making noise on the internet do so because they're far from the fire. If they dare get close to it, they'll face its heat."⁵⁰ Observers argued that Kagame's threats were genuine, in light of the fact that a number of Rwandan dissidents abroad have been killed or disappeared.

Financial challenges in Rwanda's media sector have driven many media houses and journalists to YouTube channels for monetization. In March 2020, one editor reported that their outlet is "exercising extreme caution" because of government restrictions on online speech (see C2). They stated that "the government started cracking down on youtubers—especially those who go against the official narrative."⁵¹

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?

1
/
4

Online information is manipulated by the government through editorial influence and coordinated social media campaigns.

In October 2019, the Rwandan Senate accused 26 online radio stations and websites owned by Rwandan critics living in exile of denying the 1994 genocide (see C7); the report was followed by a February 2020 campaign to share the results.⁵² The accusations limited the reach of the websites named in the report, contributing to greater government control of the online media environment.

Security officials and other government authorities frequently interfere with editors at online outlets to prevent the publication of stories on certain topics and alter content that criticizes the government.⁵³ Journalists say that editorial decisions are heavily influenced by government forces—including police officers, army officers, and powerful political leaders—whose demands are colloquially known as "I say this." For example, two anonymous sources confirmed that during the 2017 presidential campaign, editors of Igihe, an online news outlet, were not allowed to publish articles on candidates challenging President Kagame. According to journalists who were interviewed anonymously, security officials often review journalists' stories and photographs before they are published. One respondent said that authorities have tightened their control of the media by ensuring that each news organization employs a government representative to monitor editorial content.⁵⁴ A wide range of institutions are required to employ government agents, especially those that the government deems to handle potentially sensitive information.

Social media accounts with government affiliations regularly debate and harass individuals who post online comments considered critical of the government.⁵⁵ For instance, in July 2020, Edouard Bamporiki, culture and youth minister, targeted Aimable Karasira, then a University of Rwanda lecturer and YouTube commentator, with social media attacks and called for his dismissal (see C7). Karasira was dismissed a month later.⁵⁶ Karasira was later arrested on genocide denial charges (see C3).

President Kagame regularly encourages supporters to represent the government's interests online. In April 2021, for instance, he chastised party cadres for not attacking those who criticize the government on social media.⁵⁷

Progovernment accounts also mobilize to retweet and post positive comments in response to President Kagame's tweets, to project an image of widespread support. Through Itorero, a state-run traditional school of values, and Intore, the graduates of this school, the government has mobilized social media users to counter the views of individuals deemed to be "enemies of the state." The so-called "Twitter Army" has systematically attacked and discredited individuals and media outlets that criticize the government.

According to local sources, these social media users are rewarded for their attacks with access to jobs at government institutions and private companies that have ties to the ruling party. One source said that intelligence services monitor and report social media users who engage constructively with government critics.

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to 1 / publish content online? 3

Compared to their state-run counterparts, which receive income from government advertisements and direct subsidies, independent media outlets often struggle financially.⁵⁸ Large businesses generally only advertise with state-owned or progovernment media outlets, based on an unspoken rule.

An increasing proportion of media houses and journalists rely on YouTube channels to finance their content. In December 2020, the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) suspended plans to require YouTube channels to register with the RMC, which had originally been announced earlier that month. In justifying the plans, the RMC cited complaints filed against YouTube channels to argue that registration would impose accountability.⁵⁹ Registration reportedly required proof of journalist credentials and a fee of 50,000 francs (\$51).⁶⁰ Human rights groups argued that the proposed plans would give the government another avenue to target critics and censor online expression.⁶¹

Previously, in April 2020, the RMC released a statement saying that individuals running personal YouTube channels did not qualify as journalists.⁶² One editor said disqualifying YouTube channels as professional media sources could limit the already sparse safeguards for online journalists, potentially causing the collapse of online journalism in the country.⁶³

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 1 / 4

Government repression of the media greatly limits the diversity and reliability of the information landscape, both online and offline.

Critical and independent online journalism produced by opposition supporters overseas—mainly in Europe, the United States, and South Africa—is blocked in Rwanda. Proxy servers can be used to access blocked content, but few Rwandans are aware of the extent of blocking or the means to circumvent it.⁶⁴

Though misinformation about COVID-19 spread on social media platforms, online fact-checking efforts coordinated by the Rwandan government mitigated the potential for harm.⁶⁵

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, 2 / particularly on political and social issues? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because the online environment in Rwanda severely hampers online mobilization, particularly because of the overwhelming pressure to self-censor criticism of the government.

Digital activism on political and social issues is uncommon, despite the widespread availability of mobilization tools; no social media campaigns that criticize the government have been noted in recent years. Rampant surveillance and SIM card registration requirements have made users fearful of using digital tools for political activism that challenges the government (see C4 and C5).

Government-aligned accounts sometimes organize social media campaigns to spread progovernment narratives. For instance, the *ndi Umunyarwanda* ("I am Rwandan") program purports to build national unity and counter the spread of "genocide ideology"—a criminal act in Rwandan law that bars incitement to genocide and ethnic divisionism but is often applied to silence any dissenting views of the government's preferred narrative about the 1994 genocide (see C2). *Ndi Umunyarwanda* remained ongoing as of August 2021, with social media users posting in support of the campaign.⁶⁶

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, 1 access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they / enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 6

Freedom of press, of expression, and of access to information are recognized and guaranteed by the state in Article 38 of the Rwandan Constitution,⁶⁷ though Rwanda's legal framework is used to restrict fundamental rights, including online. The Rwandan judiciary is not independent, and many journalists who publish material online view the threat of imprisonment as a key constraint on their work.

In March 2020, the Rwandan government enforced measures to restrict the spread of COVID-19, including a lockdown directive that did not explicitly exempt members of the media.⁶⁸ Authorities continued to enforce the lockdown, especially in the capital Kigali, until it was lifted in March 2021.⁶⁹

The government later issued statements to indicate that journalists must comply with the lockdown.⁷⁰ At least a dozen journalists were arrested under the directive as of July 2020 (see C3).

In April 2019, the Supreme Court repealed a law that banned the publication of political cartoons, but upheld criminal defamation against the president (see C2). The decision draws an explicit distinction between the head of state and other public officials,⁷¹ and was viewed as evidence of the judiciary's deference to the executive.

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 1 / 4

Rwandan law restricts free expression and imposes criminal and civil penalties for legitimate online activities, sometimes with high fines and maximum sentences.

A cybersecurity law passed in 2018 imposes up to five years' imprisonment and a fine between 1 million francs (\$1,024) and 3 million francs (\$3,072) for publishing "rumors that may incite fear, insurrection, or violence... or that may make a person lose their credibility."⁷² Additionally, anyone who "establishes, publishes, or uses a site of a terrorist group" faces imprisonment of 15 to 20 years and a fine between 20 million (\$20,486) and 50 million francs (\$51,215).⁷³ The government considers many exiled opposition organizations "terrorist groups," which has contributed to concerns that the law will be used to further crack down on opposition activities.⁷⁴

Defamation of the president is a criminal offense in Rwanda. Revisions to the penal code signed into law in 2018 impose penalties of five to seven years' imprisonment for defaming the president.⁷⁵ However, defamation against private individuals was decriminalized under the revised code. A provision in the code that criminalized the "humiliation of national authorities," including through cartoons, was overturned by the Supreme Court in April 2019 (see C1).⁷⁶ Many other provisions in the revised penal code, often vaguely worded, contain undue restrictions on freedom of expression that can be applied to online activities. Notably, the spread of "false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against [the] Rwanda government" carries penalties of between seven and ten years' imprisonment in peacetime and life imprisonment during wartime.⁷⁷

An ICT law enacted in 2016 created a new legal and regulatory framework for the ICT sector and codified specific restrictions on internet activities that are antithetical to internet freedom.⁷⁸ Most notably, provisions in the law prohibit the dissemination of "grossly offensive" or "indecent" messages as well as the use of ICTs to cause "annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety."⁷⁹

The law against "genocide ideology"—amended in 2013—also threatens freedom of expression both online and off, prescribing heavy prison sentences of up to nine years and fines for any offender "who disseminates genocide ideology in public through documents, speeches, pictures, media, or any other means."⁸⁰

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 2 / 6

Citizens and journalists are periodically arrested for online activities in Rwanda, though the high degree of self-censorship practiced by online journalists and ordinary users alike has resulted in fewer arrests in recent years. Cases may also be underreported, given the government's strict control of the media.

In May 2021, police arrested Karasira Aimable, a YouTube commentator and former university professor, and charged him with genocide denial for his social media activity.⁸¹ He was later charged with "illicit enrichments" over funds that authorities allege he possessed with no adequate explanation. As of late July, Karasira remained in detention as court proceedings continued.⁸²

On March 9, 2021, authorities arrested journalist Agnes Uwimana Nkusi, YouTuber and editor of the Umurabyo news site. Nkusi was arrested after refusing to delete a recording of Idamange Iryamugwiza Yvonne's bail hearing, on which Nkusi was reporting.⁸³

On February 15, 2021, Rwandan authorities arrested Idamange Iryamugwiza Yvonne, an online commentator, because of comments she made on her YouTube channel criticizing government programs and the implementation of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. On March 4, Iryamugwiza was charged with inciting insurrections or public uprising, denigrating genocide commemoration artifacts, publication of rumours, along with other charges.⁸⁴ As of March 9, Iryamugwiza was ordered remanded for 30 days.⁸⁵ The status of the case was not publicly available as of August 2021.

In February 2021, Innocent Bahati, a poet and singer who published poems on YouTube that were critical of government, went missing. Authorities have not reported any information on his disappearance, and he is feared dead or held in custody (see C7).[86](#)

In July 2020, Ruben Hamuli, a photographer, was arrested and charged with publication of rumors over a Twitter post. Hamuli tweeted that police incorrectly detained him for violating COVID-19 lockdown rules earlier that day. The status of Hamuli's case is not known as of August 2021.[87](#)

In March and April 2020, at least ten journalists, including five online journalists, were arrested as security forces were enforcing the COVID-19 measures. Eight of the journalists were briefly detained.[88](#) On April 15, 2020, Rwandan authorities arrested Diodonne Niyonsenga and Fidèle Komezusenge, both affiliated with YouTube news outlet Ishema TV, in circumstances that appeared retaliatory, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Ishema TV had previously reported on the impact of COVID-19 directives on vulnerable populations. Niyonsenga and Komezusenge were released on March 13, 2021 after being acquitted of numerous charges; they served close to 11 months in pretrial detention.[89](#) Others were held in pretrial detention for shorter terms: Theoneste Nsengimana of Umubavu TV, a YouTube news channel, was arrested in March 2020 and released in May, while Valentin Muhirwa and David Byiringiro of Afrimax TV, also a YouTube news channel, were arrested in March 2020 and released in April.[90](#)

In March 2019, Rwandan authorities arrested and detained a local journalist, Olivier Habimana for allegedly spreading rumors and propaganda against President Kagame through YouTube.[91](#) Habimana was released from detention by March 2020. In October 2018, the authorities arrested Damascene Mutuyimana, Jean Baptiste Nshimiyimana, and Shadrack Niyonsenga on similar charges; all three worked as journalists for Iwacu TV, a Kinyarwanda-language news broadcaster on YouTube.[92](#) They were still detained and were awaiting trial as of June 2021.[93](#) In March 2020, an expert on Rwandan law said the Iwacu TV journalists were detained illegally, as their pretrial detention has exceeded the potential punishment associated with the charges against them.[94](#)

The authorities have used private conversations on mobile chat apps as evidence in prosecutions of dissidents, heightening concerns about the government's ability to intercept communications on social media platforms. In 2017, a few months after announcing her presidential election bid, Diane Rwigara was arrested, along with her mother Adeline and sister Anne (who was quickly released), for alleged tax evasion and incitement against the government.[95](#) Rwigara was disqualified from running in the election, with the government claiming that signatures on her petition were forged.[96](#) At a pretrial hearing in October 2017, prosecutors presented WhatsApp audio messages allegedly taken from the mobile phones of Diane and Adeline as evidence against them.[97](#) The defendants asked for the files to be disregarded as evidence, citing that they were obtained through phone interceptions.[98](#) The judges in the case acquitted the accused in December 2018 amid increased international scrutiny of the case, as well as a social media campaign for their release, which included a #FreeDianeRwigara campaign on Twitter.[99](#)

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 3 / 4

The ability to communicate anonymously is compromised by mandatory SIM card registration requirements in place since 2013.[100](#) Under the law, RURA has unfettered access to SIM card databases managed by operators, while other "authorized" individuals or institutions may also be granted access.[101](#)

In recent years, RURA has sought to revise regulations on SIM card registration, ostensibly to tackle fraud, including SIM boxing, identity theft, and phishing. In January 2019, RURA announced that mobile phone users could not use more than three SIM cards on each network. The new regulations required users to register each SIM card with their national identification by the end of the month. Foreigners, meanwhile, can use only one SIM card. RURA justified the regulations on security grounds, arguing that the proliferation of SIM cards made it more difficult to track criminal activity.[102](#) Critics argued that the regulations were meant to collect users' data, since many people have evaded state monitoring by buying and registering SIM cards with false identities. The various legal provisions that enable surveillance and limit anonymity are particularly troubling in the absence of a comprehensive data protection law. A data-protection provision is included in the ICT law passed in 2016, but it is limited by provisions that provide for broad national security exceptions.[103](#)

In July 2019, Airtel and MTN both reportedly sought authorization to launch biometric SIM card registration systems, pending authorization from RURA.[104](#) No further details were available as of May 2021.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 1 / 6

The full extent of the authorities' surveillance capabilities is unknown, though the government is known to use commercial spyware tools and there is a strong sense among observers that surveillance is pervasive. The government closely monitors social media discussions, as evidenced by the prevalence of progovernment commenters that frequently appear on social media platforms (see B5). Exiled dissidents have been attacked and murdered, despite their efforts to protect their identities, following threats from individuals inside or associated with the government.[105](#)

The Rwandan government is known to use Pegasus, a surveillance software developed by Israeli technology firm NSO Group, against opposition figures, journalists, and human rights defenders. In July 2021, Amnesty International and Forbidden Stories identified more than 3,500 phone numbers linked to Rwandan activists, journalists, and politicians in a leaked dataset.[106](#) Investigators describe the dataset as a list of people of interest to NSO Group clients; the investigation identified the Rwandan government as likely client, though the government denied using Pegasus.[107](#) In October 2019, WhatsApp disclosed that a vulnerability in the application was exploited to target Rwandan dissidents with Pegasus. WhatsApp identified at least 1,400 people targeted by the vulnerability, of which a "considerable number" were Rwandan. Confirmed targets included a journalist and a member of the opposition who were both living in exile.[108](#) In a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian internet watchdog, Rwanda is listed as one of 45 countries worldwide in which devices were likely breached by Pegasus.[109](#)

Dissidents and other targets of the Rwandan government report credible fears that their devices have been compromised by Pegasus. These include David Batenga, nephew of assassinated Kagame critic and former intelligence chief Patrick Karegeya, and members of the RNC and the United Democratic Forces-Inkingi, opposition parties the Rwandan government has accused of terrorism.[110](#) Members of opposition groups in exile suspect that devices belonging to Paul Rusesabagina, a prominent critic of Kagame who was abducted while traveling through the United Arab Emirates, were compromised, possibly by Pegasus.[111](#) A July 2021 investigation found that Carine Kanimba, Rusesabagina's daughter and an advocate for his freedom, was targeted by attempted Pegasus attacks throughout 2021, and identified several Pegasus infections on Kanimba's phone.[112](#)

In July 2018, the government passed a law that extended surveillance powers to a civilian institution, the Office of the Ombudsman, to investigate corruption-related crimes.[113](#) The law came into effect as part of the new penal code in September 2018.[114](#) Previously, interception powers were only held by security agencies such as the police, military, intelligence services and Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB). The legislation was vague about whose communications could be intercepted. Press freedom advocates believe that the law could further threaten independent journalism (see C2). The interception of communications without prior authorization of a judge is still legally permissible.

The 2013 Law Relating to the Interception of Communications expanded the government's surveillance powers, authorizing high-ranking security officials to tap the communications, including online activity, of individuals considered potential threats to "public security."[115](#) While the law requires government officials to apply for an interception warrant, warrants are issued by the national prosecutor, who is appointed by the justice minister. The national prosecutor can also issue warrants verbally in urgent security investigations, to be followed by a written warrant within 24 hours. The law also provides for the appointment of "inspectors" to ensure that authorized interceptions are carried out in accordance with the law, though the inspectors are appointed by the president and lack independence.[116](#) There is no requirement to justify surveillance as necessary and proportionate to a legitimate aim.[117](#)

In 2015, email leaks from Italian surveillance firm Hacking Team revealed that the government attempted to purchase sophisticated spyware known as Remote Control System (RCS) in 2012.[118](#) While the leaked emails did not confirm that a sale took place, they illustrate the government's interest in acquiring technology that can monitor and intercept user communications.

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?

2 / 6

Rwandan authorities are presumed to compel service providers to assist in monitoring and surveillance.

In May 2021, the Chamber of Deputies passed a draft data protection bill, which was approved by the cabinet in October 2020 and remains under legislative consideration as of August 2021. The bill includes provisions on data subject rights, general rules for data collection and processing, and a requirement to store persona data in Rwanda.[119](#) ARTICLE 19 East Africa, a freedom of expression organization, noted that the draft bill would harm digital and traditional media outlets, which are not granted a public interest exception under the law and would face risk of criminal and civil sanction

for reporting. The organization's analysis also raised concerns that the draft bill designates Rwanda's cybersecurity authority, which is not independent from government influence, as the data protection authority.[120](#)

Under the 2013 Law Relating to the Interception of Communications (see C5), communications service providers are required to ensure that their systems have the technical capability to intercept communications on demand. Security officials also have the power to "intercept communications using equipment that is not facilitated by communication service providers," which effectively allows the authorities to hack into a telecommunications network without a provider's knowledge or assistance.[121](#)

In 2018, interviews with anonymous local sources confirmed that government representatives are systematically embedded within the operations of telecommunications companies for the purposes of surveillance. Telecommunications technicians also routinely intercept communications on behalf of the military.

According to a staff member of a major telecommunications company active in Rwanda interviewed in 2015, security agents routinely provide the company with phone numbers to target for monitoring. In most cases, these are phone numbers of journalists, opposition politicians, or government officials suspected to have ties to the opposition in exile.[122](#)

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

2
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5

Independent journalists frequently face violence and harassment when attempting to cover news stories. As a result, many journalists have fled the country.[123](#) Progovernment trolls regularly harass journalists and ordinary users on social media for posts that are critical of the authorities.

YouTube journalists and commentators increasingly face online harassment for posting videos that discuss the 1994 genocide or crimes committed by the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in its aftermath. For instance, Aimable Karasira, a commentator on the YouTube channel Ukuri Mbona TV, and Etienne Gatanazi, a commentator on Real Talk Channel, faced online harassment campaigns accusing them of working for dissident groups in exile after they posted YouTube videos expressing views critical of the government.[124](#) Gatanzi reports that he was threatened with prosecution for genocide denial.[125](#) Aimable was summarily dismissed from his position as a lecturer at the University of Rwanda over the allegations,[126](#) and subsequently arrested (see C3).

Extralegal violence against dissidents, including journalists and other government critics, creates an atmosphere of intimidation. In February 2021, Innocent Bahati, a poet and singer who published poems on YouTube that are critical of the government, went missing. Authorities have not reported any information on his disappearance, and he is feared dead or held in custody.[127](#)

In February 2020, during the previous coverage period, prominent gospel singer Kizito Mihigo was found dead in police custody. While the authorities claim he died by suicide after attempting to cross the border into Burundi, critics and human rights groups fear he was killed by security forces.[128](#) Mihigo first faced government scrutiny after a song of his that grieved both Tutsi and Hutu deaths during the 1994 genocide was distributed, including online; he was previously convicted of conspiring to overthrow the government in 2015, after prosecutors used private Skype and WhatsApp messages against him.[129](#)

In October 2019, the Rwandan Senate released a report on genocide denial in foreign countries, defining genocide denial to include claims of a second genocide against Hutus. The report listed the social media accounts and websites of 26 groups and individuals that it claims deny the genocide. The list includes prominent opposition politicians and parties in exile, online radio stations, and online news sites. The report called for government agencies to monitor genocide denialism in newspapers and online, and for young people to use social media to protest genocide deniers.[130](#) The report prompted a wave of online harassment that targeted the websites named by the Senate. The media websites are no longer accessible in Rwanda (see B1).

Human rights organizations allege that Rwandan security forces perpetrate human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, ill treatment of detained people, torture, and forced disappearances.[131](#) Government officials regularly question, threaten, and arrest journalists and bloggers who express critical views on sensitive topics online.[132](#)

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

2
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3

Although some incidents of hacking and cyberattacks occur, the problem is not widespread.

In February 2020, during the previous coverage period, news site Tarifaa reported a cyberattack against a Rwandan government data center that hosts sensitive servers. The attack reportedly brought down government websites, including those of the president and the ministry of defence.¹³³

The cybersecurity law passed in 2018 includes provisions that address hacking and other threats to online security (see C2). The law was passed during a period when hacking had increased. According to the authorities, hackers most commonly target financial institutions.

There were no reported technical attacks against online news outlets during the coverage period. The last reported attack occurred in April 2014, when investigative news site Ireme faced a seemingly targeted cyberattack from an unknown source.

Footnotes

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