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## Freedom House (Author)

## Freedom in the World 2024 - Rwanda

NOT FREE

23

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 8 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 15 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE &amp; STATUS

23 / 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 it ousted forces responsible for the 1994 genocide, ending the civil war that began in 1990. While the regime has maintained stability and economic growth, it has also suppressed political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, arbitrary detention, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents.

## Key Developments in 2023

- In March, President Kagame commuted the prison sentence of Paul Rusesabagina, a critic of the regime known for sheltering hundreds of people during the genocide. Rusesabagina, a US resident, had been convicted of supporting terrorism in 2021; he returned to the United States after his release.
- In October, the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) accused Rwandan armed forces of entering Congolese territory to support the March 23 Movement (M23), an armed group in the DRC that claims to defend ethnic Tutsis against Hutu opponents.

## Political Rights

### A Electoral Process

#### A1 0-4 pts

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

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

Kagame easily won the 2017 presidential election with 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 campaign was marred by political intimidation, unfair registration practices, and the blocking of challengers on the part of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), among other things. Reports of ballot stuffing and a lack of ballot secrecy were also made during the election itself. The ruling RPF additionally benefited from favorable media coverage.

#### A2 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 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. 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. Members of both houses serve five-year terms.

In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the RPF won 40 of the lower house's 53 elected seats. Three parties allied with the RPF—the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, and the Social Party—won 5, 4, and 2 seats respectively. The DGPR won 2 seats. As with other elections in recent years, government repression and strict control of the media helped ensure an overwhelming RPF victory.

#### A3 0-4 pts

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

## **bodies?**

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, with some petition signatures reportedly being given involuntarily. 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 itself was not monitored by independent international observers.

In February 2023, NEC chairwoman Oda Gasinzigwa, an RPF member, said that authorities were considering holding the next presidential and parliamentary elections concurrently. The cabinet approved the idea in March, with the NEC saying the move would lower expenses. Parliament ultimately approved the changes in a July vote. In December, the date for presidential and parliamentary elections was set for July 2024.

## **B Political Pluralism and Participation**

### **B1 0-4 pts**

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

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

The government has a long history of repressing political opponents and members of opposition parties. They face the threat of disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and assassination. Several members of the unregistered Dalfa-Umurinzi party, led by 2010 presidential candidate Victoire Ingabire Umuhoya, were convicted in 2020 of involvement with an "irregular armed force" and "offenses against the state." They received prison terms of 7 to 10 years. One of the three defendants acquitted, Venant Abayisenga, was later reported missing and is believed to have been forcibly disappeared or killed. In December 2022, Théophile Ntirutwa, another party member, was convicted of disseminating false information to create "a hostile international opinion" against the government and received a seven-year prison sentence.

**B2 0-4 pts**

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

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

**B3 0-4 pts**

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

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

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

**B4 0-4 pts**

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

The constitution calls on the president to ensure "representation of historically marginalized communities" in the Senate through his appointees. However, asserting one's ethnic identity in politics is banned, 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 Twa are additionally unrecognized as a marginalized community by the government.

The constitution requires women to occupy at least 30 percent of the seats in each chamber of Parliament. While women currently hold 34.6 percent of Senate seats and 61.3 percent of the lower house's 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 and the regime's repressive activities prevent LGBT+ Rwandans from freely pursuing their communities' political interests.

## C Functioning of Government

### C1 0-4 pts

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

Government policy is largely set and implemented by the executive branch, with the security and intelligence services playing a powerful role. The president is not freely elected. Parliament generally lacks the independence to serve as a check on executive authority, and tends to merely endorse presidential initiatives, especially on political and security matters. It can play an oversight role on issues that are less politically sensitive, such as women's rights, education, and public health.

### C2 0-4 pts

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

The government takes measures to limit corruption, including regular dismissals and prosecutions of officials suspected of malfeasance. In the 2022 edition of its Rwanda Bribery Index, the Rwanda chapter of Transparency International reported that citizens largely considered government anticorruption efforts to be effective, but less so than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 29.1 percent of respondents to the related survey said they received an explicit or implicit bribe demand.

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

There are a number of institutions dedicated to detecting and punishing misuse of public funds, including the Rwanda Public Procurement Authority, the Office of the Auditor General, the Office of the Ombudsman, and specialized chambers for economic crimes. Nevertheless, graft remains a problem, and 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 dissent, citizens do not have the ability in practice to obtain information about state operations, nor do they have a meaningful opportunity to comment on policy without the threat of punishment.

## Civil Liberties

### D Freedom of Expression and Belief

#### D1 0-4 pts

**Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4**

While the constitution nominally protects freedom of the press, the government imposes legal restrictions and informal controls on the press sector. Rwandan journalists and outlets self-censor. Under the 2018 penal code revisions, cartoons and writings that "humiliate" Rwandan leaders were criminalized, though defamation was decriminalized. Many Rwandan journalists have fled the country and work in exile. Due in part to this phenomenon, the government has been known to block access to news services and websites based abroad. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), two journalists were imprisoned in Rwanda in 2023.

Progovernment coverage is partially motivated by competition for state advertising revenue. Financial pressures have motivated outlets and journalists to use YouTube as a tool for monetization, but journalists face restrictions on online expression. Authorities have targeted bloggers and journalists, including those using YouTube, with intimidation, arrest, and prosecution. In 2021, Yvonne Idamange, a YouTube commentator, received a 15-year prison sentence on charges including inciting violence after she criticized the government's narrative on the 1994 genocide. In March 2023, a High Court chamber added two years to her sentence.

In January 2023 a web-based journalist, John Williams Ntwali, died in a road accident that was regarded as suspicious. Before his death, Ntwali told Human Rights Watch (HRW) that he had received threats.

#### D2 0-4 pts

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

Religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, but the government has taken steps to assert greater control over religious institutions. A 2018 law requires religious organizations to obtain legal status from the RGB, to which they must submit extensive documentation. Thousands of places of worship, including churches and mosques, have been closed for allegedly violating health, safety, or noise regulations. Religious leaders must hold a degree in religious studies from a recognized educational institution, religious organizations must report grants to the RGB, and donations to faith-based groups must be deposited in Rwandan banks. Jehovah's Witnesses face arrest for refusing to participate in localized security duties like night patrols or oath-taking involving the national flag.

#### D3 0-4 pts

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

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

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

#### **D4 0-4 pts**

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

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

Innocent Bahati, a popular poet who had shared his critical social commentary on social media, remained missing following his 2021 disappearance; he had been arbitrarily detained by police in the past. The trial of Aimable Karasira, a former university lecturer and YouTube commentator who was arrested in 2021 for alleged genocide denial and divisionism, was ongoing at the end of 2023, and he reported being tortured and denied medical treatment while in custody.

## **E Associational and Organizational Rights**

#### **E1 0-4 pts**

**Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4**

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

#### **E2 0-4 pts**



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

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

**E3 0-4 pts**

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

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

## F Rule of Law

**F1 0-4 pts**

**Is there an independent judiciary?** 0 / 4

Despite constitutional provisions that declare its independence, the Rwandan judiciary lacks autonomy from the executive in practice. Top judicial officials are appointed by the president and confirmed by the RPF-dominated Senate. Judges rarely rule against the government in politically sensitive cases.

**F2 0-4 pts**

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

The constitution affirms the right to due process, but the security services regularly engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, targeting opposition figures and dissidents as well as homeless people, street vendors, and suspected petty criminals. Detainees are often held beyond the 72 hours allowed for those arrested without a warrant, denied access to legal counsel, and charged based on coerced confessions.

The government is known to pursue arbitrary detentions and the forced returns of Rwandans living in exile, including refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals who hold the citizenship of another country. In June 2023, police in Uganda reportedly concluded that the wife of Sergeant Major



Robert Kabera, a Rwandan military officer who fled to Uganda in 2020, was kidnapped by Rwandan security officers and sent to Rwanda. Kabera's wife had gone missing in 2022.

In 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 charged with supporting terrorism due to his leadership role in the opposition Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change and alleged links to the group's armed wing. Rusesabagina was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2021 but was released in March 2023 after Kagame commuted his sentence. A government spokesperson cited a desire to improve relations between the Rwandan and US governments. Rusesabagina returned to the United States later that month.

### **F3 0-4 pts**

**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4**

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

The Rwandan government allegedly supports rebel forces in the DRC, and Rwandan authorities have reported occasional clashes with Congolese soldiers or rebel fighters along the border. Kigali is specifically believed to support the activities of the M23, an armed group active in the DRC. Rwandan military elements have also been active on Congolese territory since 2022, according to a June 2023 report issued by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC. Also in June, HRW reported that the M23 was responsible for war crimes in the DRC and that Rwandan officials were continuing to support the group. In October, the Congolese government said that Rwandan armed forces entered the DRC's North Kivu Province and supported M23 activity there.

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

### **F4 0-4 pts**

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

Equal treatment for all citizens under the law is guaranteed, with legal protections against discrimination. However, not all Rwandans receive

identical treatment in employment and education. There is the perception that English-speaking elites are overrepresented in government and the private sector. Those Rwandans not closely associated with the political elite reportedly face discrimination when seeking public employment or scholarships. Twa people, of which there are as few as 20,000, have long been marginalized and suffer from multiple exclusions from education, employment, and health care.

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

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

## G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

### G1 0-4 pts

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

The constitution affirms the right of Rwandans to move freely within the country, with exceptions for public order and national security. Changing one's residence requires registration with local authorities using an easily obtainable national identity card. 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.

### G2 0-4 pts

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

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

have sometimes faced politically motivated investigations and asset seizures.

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

### G3 0-4 pts

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

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

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

### G4 0-4 pts

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

Regulations governing wage levels and conditions of work in the formal sector are poorly enforced, particularly among private employers. Children are trafficked internally for domestic service under abusive conditions or for commercial sex work. Few internal traffickers are held to account. Many children work informally in the agricultural sector. Young Congolese and Burundian refugees are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and coerced recruitment into armed groups linked to Rwandan security forces. Rwanda has meanwhile increased prosecutions for transnational trafficking, but the number of convictions remains low. Victim and witness support programs are lacking, even for genocide survivors.

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