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Rwandan authorities have arrested, forcibly disappeared, and threatened political opponents since the August 2017 presidential elections, Human Rights Watch said today. The incumbent, Paul Kagame, won the election with a reported 98.79 percent of the vote.

Those targeted include a would-be independent presidential candidate, Diane Rwigara, and her family members and supporters, and several leaders and members of the Forces démocratiques unifiées (FDU)-Inkingi opposition party.

"The Rwandan government's crackdown shows that it is unwilling to tolerate criticism or accept a role for opposition parties, and it sends a chilling message to those who would dare challenge the status quo," said Ida Sawyer, Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "With each arrest in Rwanda, fewer and fewer people will dare to speak out against state policy or abuse."

Rwandan authorities took no chances with the August 4 presidential vote, despite the weak prospects for any opposition candidate. Several presidential aspirants were barred from participating. The only two allowed to enter the race and compete against Kagame, Frank Habineza and Philippe Mpayimana, said they experienced harassment, threats, and intimidation. In the days following the vote, Human Rights Watch interviewed local activists and private citizens who spoke of intimidation and irregularities in both the campaign period and during the voting.

On August 29, police showed up at Rwigara's office in Kigali, the capital, and took her to her home, where they interrogated Rwigara and her family members and barred them from leaving their house. On August 30, following rumors that Rwigara may have been arrested or forcibly disappeared, the police announced that she was not in detention but that she was under investigation.

After several weeks of intimidation, questioning, and restrictions on their movements, Rwigara and her sister, Anne, a dual Rwandan and American citizen, and her mother, Adeline, a dual

Rwandan and Belgian citizen, were arrested on September 23. They are being held in police custody in the capital, Kigali.

The police say that they arrested the three, in part, for "publicly revealing information that is, by law, supposed to be confidential." During the interrogations in the weeks before her arrest, Rwigara told Human Rights Watch that she was being accused of forgery linked to alleged invalid signatures to establish her candidacy, of illegally forming and leading a political organization, and of inciting insurrection or trouble among the population. The family was also accused of non-payment of taxes.

In the days leading up to her arrest, Rwigara spoke with international media outlets and criticized the police actions and the accusations against her. Hours before her arrest, Rwigara told one outlet that her family was being "persecuted for criticizing the government."

The harassment of Rwigara began in May, when - 72 hours after she announced her intention to run in the presidential election - nude photos of her were published on social media in an apparent attempt to humiliate and intimidate her. Rwigara said the photos were photoshopped. In July, the National Electoral Commission rejected her candidacy, claiming that many of the required signatures supporting her candidacy were invalid. Rwigara rejected the accusations and said she had fulfilled the eligibility requirements.

"This is all linked to my political activities," Rwigara told Human Rights Watch on September 13. "They would not let me campaign freely, and now they are after me and my family."

Since Rwigara has come under police investigation, some of her supporters have been arrested or harassed. On September 12, police arrested a supporter at his home, where they found t-shirts supporting Rwigara. He was held in an unknown location and questioned about Rwigara, then released five days later. Two of his family members were also arrested and one was released after being held in an unknown location for a week. The other remains in police custody.

Rwigara's arrest comes amid growing pressure on other political opponents. On September 6, seven FDU-Inkingi members were arrested, including four of the party's leaders: Boniface Twagirimana, first vice-president; Fabien Twagirayezu, head of party mobilization; Léonille Gasengayire, assistant treasurer; and Gratien Nsabiyaremye, assistant commissioner. Théophile Ntirutwa, Kigali representative of the party, went missing on September 6. Police arrested other FDU-Inkingi members in the following days.

The FDU-Inkingi has faced serious challenges since 2010. The party has not been allowed to register or take part in elections, and its members have been arrested and harassed repeatedly. The party's president, Victoire Ingabire, has been in prison since 2010 and is serving a 15-year sentence following a flawed trial.

On September 26, charges were confirmed against eight FDU-Inkingi members, including the four leaders, and they are being held in preventative detention in Remera, a suburb of Kigali. They are charged with forming an irregular armed group and offenses against the president. One party member was released.

Ntirutwa, the FDU-Inkingi member who went missing on September 6, was forcibly disappeared and held incommunicado for 17 days, before a family member could visit him at the Remera police station on September 23. During this period, the police would not confirm to Human Rights Watch or his family whether he was in custody. Ntirutwa has not been charged.

A person taken with Ntirutwa later told Human Rights Watch that he and Ntirutwa were crossing the street in Kicukiro, a Kigali suburb, "when a private car pulled up and we were forced in by

men with guns. One said, 'You are being taken because you want to cause insecurity in Rwanda.' Our heads were covered so we could not see where we were going."

He was later interrogated about the party. "When I asked for a lawyer, I was told, 'We will kill you.' They pushed me to the ground and kicked me and said I was an idiot." Later, a man in civilian clothes pulled the mask off, put a gun to his face and said, "If you continue to refuse answers to our questions, you will see." After about 20 hours, he was released from the Remera police station.

Ntirutwa had previously been detained on September 18, 2016, allegedly by the military, in Nyarutarama, a Kigali suburb. He was detained, beaten, and questioned about his membership in the FDU-Inkingi, then released two days later.

Gasengayire, another of those arrested, was previously arrested after visiting Ingabire in prison in March 2016. The police detained her for three days, beat her, questioned her, and denied her access to a lawyer. The police released her without charge, but re-arrested her in August 2016, and charged her with inciting insurrection and disorder among the population. They also accused her of stirring up local opposition to the expropriation of land belonging to residents in her home district and of promoting the FDU-Inkingi. Residents who tried to testify on her behalf at her trial were intimidated. A court acquitted and released her on March 23, 2017.

Enforced disappearances, unlawful arrest and detention, and ill-treatment clearly violate Rwandan and international law. Human Rights Watch has documented numerous cases in recent years in which government critics, especially those accused of threatening state security, have been held in military detention and often tortured or ill-treated in attempt to get information or force confessions. Political opponents have also been convicted of state security crimes and sentenced to long prison terms after flawed trials.

Rwandan authorities should clarify the circumstances around Ntirutwa's incommunicado detention and ensure that those responsible for such unlawful detention are held accountable, Human Rights Watch said. The authorities should also ensure that courts are not used for political purposes and that political opponents accused of crimes are given free and fair trials.

"The government is using its standard playbook to crush dissent," Sawyer said. "Rwanda's donors and other international actors should condemn this blatant clampdown on the political opposition."

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