



Document #2111037

# HRW – Human Rights Watch

## (Author)

### Rwanda: Respect Rights During Elections

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Uphold Freedom of Expression; End Arbitrary Detention, Prosecution

(Nairobi) – The authorities in [Rwanda](#) have cracked down on the opposition, media, and civil society ahead of general elections scheduled for July 15, 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should ensure that all Rwandans are able to freely express their views and exercise their vote fairly and peacefully and release people arbitrarily detained, including on politically motivated grounds.

Fourteen members of the unregistered Dalfa-Umurinzi opposition party and four journalists and critics are behind bars. Several are awaiting trial – some have been in pretrial detention for more than two years – and others have been convicted of offenses incompatible with international human rights norms. Since the country's last presidential election in 2017, at least five opposition members and four critics and journalists have died or disappeared in suspicious circumstances.

"The threat of physical harm, arbitrary judicial proceedings, and long prison sentences, which can often lead to torture, have effectively deterred many Rwandans from engaging in opposition activities and demanding accountability from their political leaders," said [Clémentine de Montjoye](#), senior researcher in the Africa division at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities should end arbitrary detentions and guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, essential to genuinely free and fair elections."

Three candidates are [running for president](#): the incumbent president Paul Kagame (Rwandan Patriotic Front, RPF); Frank Habineza (Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, DGPR); and an independent candidate, Philippe

Mpayimana. In 2017, when the same candidates were registered, both Habineza and Mpayimana said they experienced harassment, [threats](#), and intimidation after announcing their candidacy. Mpayimana won 0.73 percent of the votes and Habineza won 0.48 percent.

During President Kagame's decades in power, government authorities have committed numerous human rights violations against political opposition members, journalists, and other critics, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and ill-treatment, and infringed the rights to freedom of expression and association. [Suspicious deaths](#) and [disappearances](#), for which justice is rarely if ever delivered, have also created an environment in which many fear they will be targeted if they speak out. Most registered political parties have been broadly supportive of the ruling RPF.

The electoral commission barred Diane Rwigara, the leader of the People Salvation Movement (PSM), [from running](#) in the 2024 election, alleging that she had not submitted the correct documentation to support her candidacy. Rwigara was arrested after the 2017 election – from which she was also disqualified – together with her mother, Adeline. [They were both released](#) on bail in October 2018 and [later acquitted](#) on charges of inciting insurrection and, in the case of Diane Rwigara, forgery and counterfeiting documents. Human Rights Watch [found](#) that both sets of charges appeared to have been politically motivated.

Victoire Ingabire's Development and Liberty for All (Développement et Liberté pour tous, also known as Dalfa-Umurinzi) has been prevented from registering. Dalfa-Umurinzi, formerly known as the Forces démocratiques unifiées (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, jailed, and harassed repeatedly. Since 2017, five members of the party have [died](#) or [disappeared](#) in suspicious circumstances.

Ingabire, the party's president, was sentenced to 15 years for inciting insurrection, after she tried to run in the 2010 presidential elections. She served eight years before [her release](#) in September 2018, when Kagame pardoned more than 2,000 prisoners. In March 2024, a Kigali court rejected Ingabire's [request to allow her to run](#) in the 2024 presidential election.

Christopher Kayumba, the former editor of *The Chronicles* newspaper, was [arrested](#) in 2021 shortly after establishing a new political party, the Rwandese Platform for Democracy (RPD). He was acquitted of rape and "sexual misconduct" charges and released in February 2023. However, in November 2023, Kayumba was [convicted on appeal](#) and given a two-year suspended sentence. Kayumba previously [claimed](#) that government officials had threatened to "destroy" him criminally if he did not cease his political activities.

Rwandan elections law states that only "person[s] of integrity" can become candidates, barring anyone from running who has been convicted of "divisionism," "genocide or genocide ideology," or any other crime that carries more than a six-month sentence.

Among the 14 members of Ingabire's party behind bars are [8 who have been held in pretrial detention](#) since October or December 2021. Another [disappeared in prison](#). Human Rights Watch has monitored trials of opposition members and others during which the accused told the court that interrogators had tortured them to coerce confessions.

Rwandan civil society is weak, due to [many years of state intimidation and interference](#), leaving Rwandan human rights organizations largely unable to publicly document violations by state agents. Foreign researchers and journalists have been blocked from entering the country, including a Human Rights Watch senior researcher [who attempted to travel to Kigali](#) for meetings in May 2024.

A [draft bill](#), that has been reviewed by parliament, could place strict limits on the operations and activities of civil society. In its current form, the draft law gives the government the authority to deny registration of organizations and to restrict operations of groups that "commit acts that jeopardize the unity of Rwandans, peace and security, public order and public health, good morals and conduct, political activities or freedom and fundamental rights of others." The bill would give oversight and decision-making authority over an organization's finances and activities to a government body. The draft law comes after a ministerial order was passed in 2022, placing similar restrictions on the work of trade unions.

While some private radio stations occasionally broadcast programs on politically sensitive issues, official government views dominate the domestic media and almost all election coverage. Several journalists [have died](#) or [disappeared](#) in suspicious circumstance since 2017, while others have fled the country. Journalists using YouTube as a platform have also been [targeted for prosecution](#) for not registering with the Rwanda Media Commission or for [publishing information that contradicts](#) the government's version of certain events, such as the [suspicious death in custody](#) of Kizito Mihigo, a gospel singer and activist, or [disappearances](#) of government opponents.

On April 3, United Nations experts on arbitrary detention, freedom of expression, physical and mental health, human rights defenders, and torture [wrote to the Rwandan government](#) to raise the cases of two journalists, Dieudonné Niyonsenga and Théoneste Nsengimana, and a Dalfa-Umurinzi member, Théophile Ntirutwa, who are all behind bars.

The experts raised concerns that the prosecution and detention of the three appeared to be directly related to their work as journalists, human

rights defenders, and in the case of Ntirutwa, to his views as an outspoken critic of the government. On June 3, Nsengimana’s wife [reported she was unable to visit him](#) in detention. Human Rights Watch was not able to independently confirm the circumstances of or reason for the denial of visitation rights.

The constitution, [revised in 2015](#), limits presidential terms to five years, renewable only once, after a transitional seven-year term starting in 2017. It also reset the clock on presidential terms already served. It allowed Kagame to [run for a third seven-year term in 2017](#) and allows him to run for two five-year terms, in 2024 and 2029, opening the possibility of extending his rule until 2034.

“Rwanda’s president and senior officials, including in the judiciary, should urgently and publicly condemn abuse and release all those detained for exercising their basic freedoms,” de Montjoye said. “There is still time for Rwanda to change course and allow political opponents to freely criticize the government’s policies and offer new ideas.”

#### **Non-exhaustive list of cases documented by Human Rights Watch:**

##### **Suspicious deaths, disappearances of opposition members**

|                                      |      |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| <a href="#">Venant Abayisenga</a>    | 2020 |
| <a href="#">Syldio Dusabumuremyi</a> | 2019 |
| <a href="#">Eugène Ndereyimana</a>   | 2019 |
| <a href="#">Anselme Mutuyimana</a>   | 2019 |
| <a href="#">Boniface Twagirimana</a> | 2018 |

##### **Opposition members behind bars**

|                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Théophile Ntirutwa</a>                                                                                                                                               | Arrested in 2020, convicted in 2022 |
| <a href="#">Sylvain Sibomana, Alexis Rucubanganya, Hamad Hagenimana, Jean-Claude Ndayishimiye, Marcel Nahimana, Emmanuel Masengesho, Alphonse Mutabazi, and Claudine Uwimana</a> | Arrested in 2021, on trial          |
| <a href="#">Fabien Twagirayezu, Gratien Nsabiaremye, Evode Mbarushimana, Papias Ndayishimiye, Norbert Ufitamahoro</a>                                                            | Arrested in 2017, convicted in 2020 |

##### **Suspicious deaths, disappearances of journalists and critics**

|                                      |      |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| <a href="#">John Williams Ntwali</a> | 2023 |
| <a href="#">Innocent Bahati</a>      | 2021 |
| <a href="#">Kizito Mihigo</a>        | 2020 |

[Constantin Tuyishimire](#)

2019

**Critics, commentators, and journalists behind bars**[Théoneste Nsengimana](#)Arrested in  
2021, on trial[Yvonne Idamange](#)Arrested in  
2021, convicted  
in 2021[Aimable Karasira](#)Arrested in  
2021, on trial[Dieudonné Niyonsenga \(known as Cyuma Hassan\)](#)Arrested in  
2020, convicted  
in 2021**Associated documents**

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Rwanda

**Authorities crack down on opposition, media, and civil society ahead of general elections**[Rwanda : Respecter les droits humains pendant les élections](#)

(Appeal or News Release, French)

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