



Freedom in the World 2018

Rwanda Profile

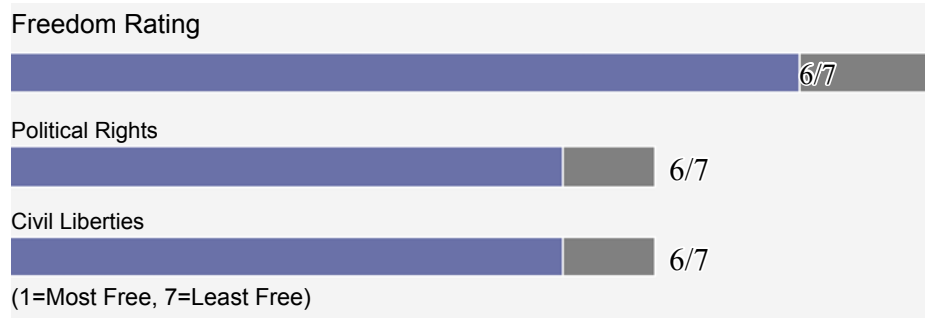
FREEDOM STATUS:
NOT FREE



Freedom in the World

Scores

Quick Facts



Aggregate Score: 23/100 (0=Least Free, 100=Most Free)

Overview:

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

Key Developments in 2017:



- Kagame was credited with nearly 99 percent of the vote in the August presidential election, securing a third term amid allegations of fraud and intimidation.
- In September, outspoken opposition leader Diane Rwigara and members of her family were arrested and held on dubious charges of forgery and inciting insurrection.
- Other members of banned opposition groups reportedly faced arbitrary arrests, beatings, politicized prosecutions, and enforced disappearances during the year.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

**POLITICAL RIGHTS: 8 /
40**

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 2 / 12

A1. 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 the terms from seven to five years. The changes also explicitly stated, however, that the current president—Paul Kagame—was eligible for one additional seven-year term, after which he may run for two of the new five-year terms, which would extend Kagame's rule until 2034.

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

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) blocked the candidacies of other would-be challengers, including independent and Kagame critic Diane Rwigara, who was barred from running in July on the grounds that some of the required signatures she had collected were invalid. She claimed that her followers were harassed and jailed as they attempted to gather signatures. The government also orchestrated a campaign of media smears and intimidation

against Rwigara, and in September she was arrested along with her mother and sister.



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

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

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The 26-seat Senate, the upper house, consists of 12 members elected by regional councils, 8 appointed by the president, 4 chosen by a forum of political parties, and 2 elected representatives of universities, all serving eight-year terms. The 80-seat Chamber of Deputies, the lower house, includes 53 directly elected members, 24 women chosen by local councils, 2 members from the National Youth Council, and 1 member from the Federation of Associations of the Disabled, all serving five-year terms.

The RPF dominated the most recent elections for the Chamber of Deputies in 2013, capturing 41 of the 53 elected seats. Two allied parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, won 7 and 5 seats, respectively. As with other elections in recent years, the government's repression of genuine opposition parties and strict control of the media helped to ensure victory for the RPF.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

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

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

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 1 / 16



B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0 / 4

The government-controlled Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) is responsible for registering political parties. In practice it can deny registration at its discretion without proper justification. The government has a long history of repressing its political opponents. For example, the leader of the unregistered opposition party United Democratic Forces–Inkingi (FDU-Inkingi), Victoire Ingabire, has been behind bars since 2010, the year she challenged Kagame in a presidential election. She is serving a 15-year prison sentence for allegedly engaging in terrorist activities, a charge that was widely seen as politically motivated.

In 2017, the authorities targeted Rwigara, who sought to run against Kagame in that year's election. Days after she announced her candidacy in May, photos that supposedly depicted her nude, and which she said were fabricated, were published on social media. After the election, in late August, police harassed and interrogated Rwigara and members of her family, preventing them from leaving their home. Finally, in September, Rwigara was arrested along with her mother and sister for alleged offenses that included forgery of signatures to support her candidacy, tax evasion, and inciting insurrection.

As part of a broader wave of postelection repression that month, members of the FDU-Inkingi and another unregistered opposition group, the Democratic Pact of the Imanzi People (PDP Imanzi), were reportedly subjected to arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and physical abuse.



B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

The RPF has ruled Rwanda without interruption since 1994, banning and repressing any opposition group that could mount a serious challenge to its leadership. All registered parties currently belong to the National Consultative Forum for Political Organizations, which is meant to promote political consensus. No genuine opposition parties hold seats in Parliament or any other position of authority.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4

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

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Although the constitution calls on the president to ensure “representation of historically marginalized communities” in the Senate through his appointees, 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 indigenous Twa, to organize independently and advocate for their interests.



The 2003 constitution requires women to occupy at least 30 percent of the seats in each chamber of Parliament. They currently hold 10 of the 26 Senate seats and 49 of the 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, but women have little practical ability to engage in politics outside the RPF structure.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 5 / 12

C1. 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, with the security and intelligence services playing a powerful role. Parliament generally lacks independence, merely endorsing presidential initiatives.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

The government takes some measures to limit corruption, including regular firings and prosecutions of low-level

officials suspected of malfeasance. In February 2017, for example, the police dismissed 200 officers who had been implicated in corruption. However, graft remains a problem, and few independent organizations or media outlets are able to investigate or report on corruption issues due to fear of government reprisals.



C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 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.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 15 / 60 (-1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 4 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The government imposes legal restrictions and informal controls on freedom of the press, and most media outlets practice self-censorship. The few journalists in the country who engage in independent reporting are subject to criminal charges and intimidation. In 2016 and 2017, press activist

Robert Mugabe, whose reporting has been critical of the government, was harassed and interrogated by the police, who reportedly accused him of treason and undermining the government. In September 2017, a group of journalists were harassed by security forces at Diane Rwigara's home.



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

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

Religious freedom is generally respected. Relations between religious leaders and the government are sometimes tense, in part because of the involvement of clergy in the 1994 genocide. Jehovah's Witnesses face arrest for refusing to participate in security duties or oath-taking involving the national flag.

D3. 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. Scholars and students are subject to suspension for "divisionism" and engage in self-censorship to avoid such penalties.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 0 / 4



The space for free private discussion is limited in part by indications that the government monitors personal communications. Social media are widely believed to be monitored, and the law allows for government hacking of telecommunications networks. The authorities reportedly use informants to infiltrate civil society, further discouraging citizens from expressing dissent.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, this right is limited in practice. Fear of arrest serves as a deterrent to protests, and gatherings are sometimes disrupted even when organizers obtain official authorization.

E2. 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 are onerous, and activities that the government defines as divisive are prohibited. Many organizations receive funds from the RGB, which challenges their independence. Several organizations have been banned in recent years, leading others to self-censor.

The government has been accused of employing infiltration tactics against human rights organizations.



E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

The constitution provides for the rights to form trade unions, engage in collective bargaining, and strike, but free collective bargaining and strikes are limited by binding arbitration rules and rare in practice. Public 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: 2 / 16 (-1)

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

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

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4 (-1)

The police and military regularly engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, targeting opposition figures and dissidents as well as homeless people, street vendors, and suspected petty criminals. This activity reportedly intensified ahead of the 2017 elections.

In October, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report detailing a system of secret unlawful detention at military facilities for suspected members of armed rebel groups or exiled opposition factions. Such detainees are allegedly denied basic due process rights, and many who are later brought to trial are convicted based on coerced confessions.



Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to further evidence of the authorities' use of arbitrary arrests and detentions as well as convictions based on coerced confessions.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Both ordinary criminal suspects and political detainees are routinely subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in custody. An HRW report released in July 2017 documented more than three dozen extrajudicial executions of suspected criminals by security personnel over the previous year.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Equal treatment for all citizens under the law is guaranteed, and there are legal protections against discrimination. However, the Tutsi minority group is often accused of receiving preferential treatment for high-ranking jobs and university scholarships under the pretext of an affirmative action program for “genocide survivors.” Members of the Hutu majority often face unofficial discrimination when seeking

public employment or scholarships. The indigenous Twa minority continues to suffer from de facto disadvantages in education, employment, and health care.



While women enjoy broad legal equality and have a significant presence in the economy as workers and business owners, gender-based discrimination persists in practice. Same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized in Rwanda, though social stigma still exists for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. No laws specifically provide protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 7 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

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

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

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



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

G3. 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. The penalties for spousal rape are much lighter than for other forms of rape. Domestic violence remains widespread and seldom reported despite government programs to combat it.

Abortion is a criminal offense that can draw significant prison terms. Legal abortions require a court order certifying that the pregnancy is the result of rape, incest, or forced marriage; cases justified by medical necessity require agreement by at least two doctors to avoid criminal liability. At year's end the government was considering legal amendments that would ease the requirement for a court order.

G4. 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. Rwandan children are trafficked internally for domestic service under abusive conditions, or for commercial sex work. 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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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