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Rwanda: Treatment of persons who opposed the constitutional referendum on the third term of president Kagame, particularly public servants and members of opposition parties (2015-January 2017)

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Information on the treatment of persons who opposed the constitutional referendum on the third term of president Kagame was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that in early December 2015, Rwandans voted in a referendum on a constitutional amendment that would allow President Paul Kagame to run for a third term in office (BBC 9 Dec. 2015; AFP 9 Dec. 2015).

On 21 December 2015, AFP reported that in the referendum, "98 percent of the population approved constitutional changes making [Rwandan President Paul Kagame's] candidacy legal;" the amendments allow Kagame to run for a third seven-year term as well as two subsequent five-year terms (ibid. 21 Dec. 2015). The referendum results therefore make the current President eligible to "rule until 2034" (ibid.). According to a 2016 Amnesty International (AI) report, "[m]ore than 3.7 million people petitioned Parliament to lift the two-term presidential term limit...although there were reports of pressure to sign the petition" (AI 24 Feb. 2016).

A 2016 report by Freedom House, entitled Overview Essay: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies, states that "in ... Rwanda, where President Paul Kagame has efficiently closed the space for political opposition or critical viewpoints, Senate approval and a successful national referendum cleared the way for Kagame to potentially remain in office until 2034" (Freedom House 2016).

According to remarks given by the US Department of State's Deputy Assistant Secretary, for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour at the New York City Bar Association in December 2015, "[o]pposition to Kagame...has been more muted as all credible dissenting voices have been effectively exiled, imprisoned or suppressed" (US 7 Dec. 2015). A September 2016 report by Human Rights Watch states that...
they have "documented several disappearances, politically motivated arrests, and unlawful detentions in Rwanda, especially of suspected government opponents or critics" (Human Rights Watch 29 Sept. 2016). The same source further states that an "opposition activist [Illuminée Iragena] has been missing for six months and is feared to have been forcibly disappeared" and that, in another case, Théophile Ntirutwa, the current Kigali representative of the FDU-Inkingi, was arrested, allegedly by military personnel, in Nyarutarama, in Kigali. He was detained in a location he did not recognize, beaten, and questioned about his membership of the FDU-Inkingi. He was released two days later. Ntirutwa had informed the authorities several times in recent years about threats and harassment. In November 2015 ... he had been threatened after he refused to sign a petition in favour of constitutional amendments and to contribute money to the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the ruling party. (ibid.)

The East African, a Kenya-based newspaper and online news site (The East African n.d), reported in February 2016 that Vitus Nshimiyimana claimed to have been "tortured, segregated, jail illegally and ... almost strangled to death by unknown assailants" for having "opposed the amendment of the Constitution to allow President Paul Kagame to run for a third term in office" (ibid. 21 Feb. 2016). The same source quotes the Chairperson of Transparency Rwanda as stating that the victim "had reported to the agency that he had been tortured because he petitioned parliament against changing the Constitution" (ibid.). Transparency Rwanda was reportedly investigating the allegations (ibid.). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Deutsche Welle (DW), "Germany's international broadcaster" (DW n.d.), quotes Frank Habineza, the leader of the Green Party, as stating that "[n]ow that we have clearly stood up against changing the constitution, some people see us as traitors" (DW 9 Sept. 2015). DW further reports that [Green] Party members can't find work and often land in prison. Habineza gives the example of a party member in the southwest. "We have information that he had spoken out against a third term for President Kagame and was then arrested. But then he was charged with something completely different. He is accused of working at home as a doctor and not just in the hospital." (ibid.)

In contrast, the Afrika Reporter article reported that President Kagame, however, did show some support for the Green Party as he wished them well and defended them on Twitter, when they first filed suit in the Supreme Court [to halt the Constitutional amendment,] tweeting it was their constitutional right to do so. (Afrika Reporter 16 Oct. 2015)

Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: The Citizen; Factiva; Transparency International; Transparency International Rwanda; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Department of State.

Tips on how to use this search engine.