

Tensions emerge between Rwanda and Western backers

By Linda Slattery and Ann Talbot
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Tensions began to emerge between President Paul Kagame and his Western backers in the course of the recent elections. Media reports criticised the exclusion of opposition parties from the poll and physical attacks on Kagame's opponents.

Kagame has received extraordinarily high levels of aid from the West since he came to power in 1994 and has previously been virtually immune from criticism in the press. The shift in attitude can best be traced to the welcome that Kagame has extended to China's growing investment in Africa. A warning is being delivered to Kagame's regime that the tolerance he has enjoyed to date will not continue if he aligns himself with interests hostile to those of the United States and other Western powers.

Writing in the *Financial Times* on August 19, Kagame acknowledged the changing attitude that emerged in the course of the election and defended his brand of politics, claiming that it was essential if Rwanda was to be stable:

"Some in the media and the international community seem uninterested in fact-checking, and simply invented stories that play to damaging historic prejudices. It is a shame that some so casually disregard the views of the majority of Rwandans and prefer to elevate the dangerous opinions of fly-by-night individuals, which in turn threaten to reverse our hard-earned stability".

Rwanda has become the gateway through which the strategic mineral resources of the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo reach the international market. A United Nations Panel of Experts found that Rwanda was responsible for the illegal trafficking of gold, coltan and cassiterite from areas of the DRC controlled by Rwandan-backed militias. All these minerals are vital for mobile phones and other modern electronic devices.

In the year 2000 alone, the Rwandan army is thought to have made \$250 million out of this trade. Despite the evidence that the civilian population of the Congo has been abused, the US has made no criticism of Rwanda's role in the DRC. The Congo Conflict Minerals Act passed by Congress in 2009 with the ostensible aim of putting an end to the looting makes no mention of Rwanda.

Following Kagame's re-election, however, the National Security Council (NSC) failed to congratulate him on his

victory and issued a press statement expressing concern about "disturbing events" that had preceded the election. "We remain concerned, however, about a series of disturbing events prior to the election, including the suspension of two newspapers, the expulsion of a human rights researcher, the barring of two opposition parties from taking part in the election, and the arrest of journalists", it declared.

"Democracy is about more than holding elections", said Mike Hammer, spokesman for the NSC. "A democracy reflects the will of the people, where minority voices are heard and respected, where opposition candidates run on the issues without threat or intimidation, where freedom of expression and freedom of the press are protected".

Kagame's response came in the *Financial Times*. He rejected the US criticism of his election and insisted that he was pursuing a form of government suited to Rwandan cultural traditions.

"For decades, one-size-fits-all development and democratic prescriptions have been imposed on Africa, with unsatisfactory, sometimes tragic, results", he wrote. "Yet to break from the cycle of underdevelopment we must seek innovative, home-grown solutions. Rwanda is one of the countries that have chosen to apply unconventional mechanisms to solve daunting challenges. And it is working".

Hinting at Rwanda's importance for the export of minerals, Kagame said that those who accepted his methods would reap the economic benefits. He knows that he has the support of the major mining companies and can look to China as an alternative source of aid. In January 2009 Kagame signed a new trade deal with China, and a new Chinese embassy was opened in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda.

Speaking to the German business paper *Handelsblatt*, Kagame praised the role of China in bringing investment in infrastructure to Africa. He recognised the potential for playing off one potential investor or donor against another. "There are new players, developing countries like China, India, Brazil and Russia", he said. "That opens new possibilities for new relationships. Suddenly, the Americans and Europeans discover that they don't want to be left out".

At the China-Africa summit Kagame pointed out that trade between Rwanda and China had quadrupled over the previous

four years.

Kagame has been sharply critical of the new US Dodd-Frank Wall Street and Consumer Protection Act, which contains a clause obliging companies to demonstrate that their minerals have not come from the DRC. Major electronics companies such as IBM, Motorola, Hewlett Packard, Intel and Apple will be hit by this provision. Kagame may hope to bypass this legislation by turning to the Asian market and Asian electronic companies.

Kagame supposedly won 93 percent of the votes in the election on August 9. International observers reported no overt sign of violence or voter intimidation, but all the opposition candidates were former allies of Kagame. Three potential candidates were barred from standing. Leading oppositionist Andre Kagwa Rwisereka of the Democratic Green Party was found dead shortly before the election. The party is linked to Lt. Gen. Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa, who is in intensive care in South Africa after being shot. Nyamwasa fled to South Africa earlier this year after accusing Kagame of using an anti-corruption campaign to frame his political opponents.

Reporters have been subject to intimidation. Jean Leonard Rugabage was gunned down in Kigali after his paper *Umuvugizi* was closed by the government. Its editor Jean Bosco Gasasira had already fled to Uganda.

In June, American lawyer Peter Erlinder, who is representing defendants at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) on trial for their alleged part in the genocide, was arrested. He was accused of denying the 1994 genocide on the basis of remarks he made at the tribunal, although the defence lawyers are supposed to be protected by diplomatic immunity. Other lawyers at the ICTR responded to Erlinder's arrest by asking for postponements until their safety could be guaranteed.

These are the "disturbing events" that have caused concern in Washington. But they are hardly new.

In 1995 the journalist Manesse Mugabo disappeared in Kigali, followed in 1996 by the first post-genocide Minister of the Interior Seth Sendashshonga and businessman Augustin Bugirimfura, who was shot dead in Nairobi. In 1998 journalist Emmanuel Munyemanzi disappeared from Kigali, and Theoneste Lizinde, MP and government intelligence chief before the genocide, was assassinated in Nairobi. In the year 2000, first post-genocide President Pasteur Bizimungu's adviser, Asiel Kabera, was shot dead in Kigali. In 2003 top judge Augustin Cyiza and magistrate Eliezar Runyaruka disappeared from Kigali, as did opposition MP Leonard Hitiman.

The US has been prepared to turn a blind eye to Kagame's record of repression until now because it has been useful to American interests. The *Financial Times* Africa editor William Wallis acknowledged the impact that the presence of China has had on Western influence in Rwanda. But he also blamed the West for the lack of democracy in Rwanda.

"With one hand the US", Wallis wrote, "the [European Union] and other donors encourage and finance elections. With the other, they routinely accept the outcome regardless of how dubious the manner in which it is achieved".

The process of formally democratic elections merely added a semblance of legitimacy to "a contemporary form of one-party rule, in which incumbents use patronage, oppression and control of electoral machinery to maintain power".

Rwanda will receive an estimated \$208 million in aid from the US this year. This includes the cost of military aid—the Rwanda army is US trained. Britain contributes £46 million, or \$73 million, in humanitarian aid. Unusually for a country that does not have a history as a British colony, Rwanda joined the British Commonwealth this year. Membership will allow Rwanda to play a more prominent role in East Africa, where most of the large states are former British colonies and give its political and business elite access to the English-language education that is vital for the global market.

Kagame has been advised by ex-President Bill Clinton, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and has developed close relations with Bill Gates. UN chief Ban Ki-Moon even appointed Kagame to co-chair a committee of "superheroes to defeat poverty" to help push for progress in achieving the UN's Millennium Development goals. Activists from the British Conservative Party regularly visit Rwanda to take part in aid projects. The country has been held up as a role model for other African countries to follow.

Despite the massive influx of aid into Rwanda, more than half of its 9.7 million population live on about 43 cents a day. Malnutrition is endemic. Almost half its children are malnourished, according to the World Food Programme. Rwanda is one of the poorest countries in the world and ranks 167 out of 182 countries on the UN Human Development Index.

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