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Rwanda: Current Issues

Overview

Under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, Rwanda has become known for its rapid development and security gains since the devastating 1994 genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed.

Despite international praise for Rwanda's progress, however, some observers are concerned at restrictions on political and civil rights. The minority Tutsi community was targeted in the 1994 genocide, along with politically moderate members of the majority Hutu population. The largely Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which took power in 1994 after ending the genocide, has sought to improve health systems, reform the economy, and advance gender equality. Life expectancy and health indicators have shown marked progress, although challenges persist. Rwandan development programs have received substantial support from the United States and other donors.

"By investing in its people, Rwanda is building a strong foundation for peace and prosperity in the years to come." *Secretary of State John Kerry, July 2, 2014.*

President Kagame has been in office since 2000 and is widely thought to wield ultimate state decision-making authority. Observers debate whether Kagame will seek to remain in office after 2017, when his current term ends and he faces constitutional term limits. An ethnic Tutsi who grew up in exile in Uganda, Kagame commanded the RPF's military wing during Rwanda's civil war in the early 1990s and served as Vice President and Defense Minister in post-genocide transitional regimes. After becoming president through an internal RPF election, Kagame was popularly elected in 2003 with over 95% of the vote, and was reelected in 2010 with 93%. While the 2010 vote itself was peaceful and well-administered, the Obama Administration, along with some non-governmental organizations, expressed concerns about the political environment.

The World Bank, in its overview of Rwanda's development priorities, refers to the country's "hard-won political and social stability." Critics, however, question whether repression of speech and political activity may threaten stability by depriving government opponents of peaceful avenues for activism. The State Department's 2013 human rights report states that Rwanda's "most important human rights problems" include "the government's targeting of political opponents and human rights advocates for harassment, arrest, and abuse." Government officials reject allegations of abusing human rights, while often arguing that some restrictions are needed to prevent large-scale ethnic violence and asserting that the country is gradually liberalizing.

Capital: Kigali
Comparative Size: slightly smaller than Maryland
Population: 12.3 million
Median Age: 18.7
GDP Per Capita: \$798
Religions: Roman Catholic 49.5%, Protestant 39.4%, other Christian 4.5%, Muslim 1.8%, other/unspecified 4.8%

Key Exports: coffee, tea, hides, tin ore

Key Imports: foodstuffs, machinery and equipment, steel, petroleum products, cement and construction material

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Basemap by Hannah Fischer, data from Esri (2013). Fact information from CIA World Factbook (2014) and IMF.



Politics

The RPF dominates state institutions, and Kagame appears to face no serious internal challenger. Most legal parties are part of an RPF-led coalition or act as RPF allies. Public criticism of the RPF's overarching policies or legitimacy is not tolerated. Independent opposition groups, media outlets, and civil society organizations appear to be few in number and reportedly operate with difficulty. Detractors assert that laws criminalizing "genocide ideology" and "divisionism," along with state security provisions, have been used to suppress criticism and to justify prosecutions of journalists and opposition figures.

"The limited space for open debate is particularly concerning in advance of the pivotal presidential elections scheduled for 2017... Strengthening democratic governance—ensuring full respect for civic engagement and civil liberties—continues to be a high priority for U.S. assistance in Rwanda." *State Department Congressional Budget Justification, FY2015.*

Some RPF defectors and other regime opponents have attempted to organize outside the country. Press reports allege that Rwanda has carried out assassination attempts on exiled political opponents. The government has denied any state involvement in recent unsolved attacks on dissidents overseas, but President Kagame maintains that using any means to address state security threats is legitimate. In early 2014, a senior RPF defector who was active in diaspora opposition circles was found murdered in South Africa. President Kagame stated in a press interview that "Rwanda did not kill this person... but I add that, I actually wish Rwanda did it." The government has blamed sporadic grenade explosions within Rwanda on the

Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a militia based in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that is led by Hutu extremists who were involved in the Rwandan genocide. The FDLR and its leaders are under U.N. and U.S. sanctions. Suspected FDLR sympathizers have been arrested within Rwanda.

Role in Democratic Republic of Congo

Rwanda has security, political, and economic interests in DRC, its larger and chronically unstable neighbor.

Rwanda has deployed its military into eastern DRC on several occasions. Rwandan officials contend that DRC security forces have failed to rein in—and have at times collaborated with—armed groups, notably the FDLR, that pose a security threat to Rwanda. Rwandan officials also sometimes point to periodic DRC efforts to deny land, citizenship, and other rights to ethnic communities of Rwandan origin, and to local violence targeting these communities, implying that they may require protection. Some analysts further contend that powerful Rwandans have profited from resource smuggling in mineral-rich DRC. Rwandan officials dispute allegations of official involvement in smuggling.

Rwanda, along with Uganda, was a key player in DRC’s 1996-1997 civil war, and in the civil and regional war that afflicted DRC in 1998-2003. Previously, in 1996, Rwandan troops entered DRC in pursuit of Hutu fighters who had taken refuge there after participating in the Rwandan genocide. In recent years, Rwanda has been accused of supporting several DRC-based armed groups. At times, Rwandan and DRC troops have also cooperated in operations to counter militia groups in eastern DRC.

In 2012-2013, U.S. officials publicly criticized Rwanda for providing support to a DRC-based armed group known as the M23. In late 2013, DRC military operations, backed by U.N. peacekeeping troops, defeated the M23. However, in January 2014, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that M23 members had continued to receive “various forms of support from Rwandan territory.” Rwandan officials deny allegations of supporting the M23, blaming instability on DRC’s institutional dysfunctions and a lack of political will to confront security challenges.

The Economy

Donor aid, political stability, and pro-investor policies have contributed to economic growth averaging nearly 8% per year over the past decade. Key foreign exchange earners include a small but growing mining sector, tourism, and exports of coffee and tea. Still, about 90% of Rwandans remain engaged in agriculture, many for subsistence, and about 45% reportedly live below the poverty line. Rwanda has the highest population density in continental Africa, which threatens the sustainability of subsistence farming. The government is undertaking ambitious efforts to transform the economy into one that is services-oriented, to lower birth rates, and to develop domestic sources of energy, with the goal of making Rwanda a middle-income country by 2020. Regional economic integration backed by the East African Community (EAC), which Rwanda joined

in 2009, could boost foreign investment and trade, but political differences among EAC members have hindered progress toward such ends.

Donor aid is substantial, and Rwanda qualified for international debt relief in 2005. However, since 2012, some donors have reduced or redirected funding due to Rwanda’s role in the M23 crisis. In response, Rwanda has sought new domestic and private-sector sources of finance, including a national “solidarity” fund, which solicits donations, and a Eurobond launched in April 2013.

U.S. Policy and Aid

The United States and Rwanda have cultivated close ties since the late 1990s, although in recent years the Obama Administration and Congress have expressed concerns about Rwanda’s domestic and regional policies. U.S. aid is largely focused on socioeconomic development goals, with some aid supporting Rwandan participation in international peacekeeping operations. Rwandan peacekeepers are considered among the most effective in Africa. Since 2012, the Administration has openly criticized Rwanda’s role in DRC. Congress has also enacted related restrictions on certain types of U.S. assistance. This reflects a change from earlier years in which U.S. officials largely avoided public censure of Rwanda.

U.S. bilateral aid to Rwanda grew significantly over the past decade, from \$39 million appropriated in FY2003 to an estimated \$197 million in FY2014 (figures not adjusted for inflation). In part, this rise reflects overall trends in U.S. aid to Africa, which increased substantially during the same period, particularly in support of health programs. It also reflects widely held views among donors that Rwanda is a leader in implementing international development assistance. The Administration has requested \$171 million for bilateral aid to Rwanda in FY2015, of which health assistance would make up about 72%. U.S. bilateral support for Rwanda’s peacekeeping participation is provided separately from the above bilateral aid allocations.

Congress has restricted certain types of U.S. assistance to Rwanda. Under the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 113-76), Foreign Military Financing (FMF) is restricted, except for certain purposes, unless the Secretary of State certifies that Rwanda “is taking steps to cease political, military and/or financial support to armed groups in [DRC].” Consistent with a similar provision in the FY2012 appropriations act, the Administration suspended FMF for Rwanda in mid-2012. The Senate FY2015 foreign operations appropriations bill, S. 2499, contains a similar provision. Starting in late 2013, the Administration suspended additional types of security assistance and military cooperation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (P.L. 110-457, as amended), citing Rwanda’s support for the M23, which reportedly used child soldiers. These restrictions do not apply to most assistance related to Rwanda’s peacekeeping deployments.

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