

The World Bank in Kagame's Rwanda

- 14th Aug 2017



© ITU/J.Ohle



Author :

Chris Simms

Chris Simms is an Assistant Professor in the School of Health Administration, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada

On August 4, 2017, Paul Kagame was re-elected President of Rwanda for a third term, winning 98% of the popular vote and extending his 17-year rule to at least 2024. Many observers are wary of these results and cite extraordinary

levels of fear and intimidation to help explain the margins. Given Rwanda's continued status as a beacon of development success, how should the international community respond?

Commentary last month by the [Economist](#) (entitled "Intimidation nation") and the Wall Street [Journal](#) (entitled "Rwanda's success story adds a dark new chapter") raised questions similar to those raised a year earlier in a [Lancet](#) Comment which acknowledged Rwanda's economic progress, yet described reports of a country of repression, violence, and torture. It noted in particular the claim that 60 journalists had been "threatened, arrested, kidnapped, beaten, assaulted, abused, imprisoned, expelled, or killed for questioning or criticising Paul Kagame and his government". The [Financial Times](#) provides the grisly details of events cited by *The Lancet*, stating that "political opponents are regularly imprisoned. Some have been killed, including those who have fled into exile".

In counterpoint, the World Bank president Kim Yong Jim in a [2-day visit](#) to Rwanda in March 2017 (during the pre-election campaign) said "I am here to say to President Paul Kagame and the Rwandan people that the World Bank Group is ready to help in any way that they can and that we believe in the future of Rwanda and we believe that it will continue to be a [model for the entire world](#)". Jim's declaration came at a time when [Diane Rwigara](#), an accountant and human rights activist, had undertaken a campaign to bring the Kagame government to task for abuses of civil rights and intimidation of the Rwandan people.

These differing perspectives are partly explained by the Bank's disinclination to concern itself with human rights abuses in borrowing countries. It cites its "political prohibition" from involving itself in a local politics. A report by a United Nations [rapporteur](#) assessing this policy and its consequences found that "political prohibition" is "misplaced legalism". It stated that "the World Bank is currently a human rights-free zone. In its operational policies, in particular, it treats human rights more like an infectious disease than universal values and obligations."

The Bank's recently published [policy framework](#) ignores this criticism and (according to [observers](#)) it further weakens its stance on human rights by relegating them to a non-binding "vision" statement. The framework further bolsters a value system that places primacy on results, not on the means by which they are achieved; it may open new pathways that undermine good governance or democratic institutions.

The framework also provides part of the context that enabled Jim to declare his enthusiasm that Rwanda was "a model for the entire world". This is not a shared view and the [Economist](#) states just the opposite - "many Africans see Paul Kagame's Rwanda as a model. They are wrong". Kagame's "model", it says, sends the message that "authoritarianism is more likely than democracy to bring stability and growth". The overemphasis on results rather than how they are achieved may lead to mis-steps or

unwise decisions: the fact that Jim made a 2-day visit to Rwanda in the run-up to a national election and then offered effusive support for Kagame seems inappropriate and surely ironic, given the Bank's "political prohibition". Needless to say, it was [exploited](#) by the state-controlled media.

Although [Kagame](#) once said that if he was unable to groom a successor by 2017, "it means that I have not created capacity for a post-me Rwanda. I see this as a personal failure", he in fact has methodically warded off (or eliminated) nascent threats to his power. The most recent example being Diane Rwigara, who decided at the last minute to run for President in May 2017; within days of her announcement she was demeaned on the internet and prevented from registering despite meeting the requirement set out by the electoral commission.

The international community ought to take Kagame at his word—that his presence in this month's election is an indicator of a basic failure on his part and, since it was considered a success by many donors, that it is a sign of their failure as well. It represents confusion about their stated institutional values and how far they have drifted from their mission and vision.

The naiveté of the global community to accept the astonishing margin of victory of 98% and 90% turnout is probably inversely proportional to its continuing guilt over its failure to respond to the 1994 genocide. However, the World Bank with its "political prohibition" in particular ought to take stock of what it is and where it's going—even addressing ancient questions of whether it's more interested in growth than poverty, and in disbursement than health outcomes.