

Rwanda's economic growth could be derailed by its autocratic regime

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A quarter of a century ago Rwanda was a graveyard. Hundreds of thousands of lives had been lost and government institutions were in a shambles. This was the [aftermath of a genocide](#) that started in April 1994 and went on until July.



Security is tight in Rwanda's authoritarian state. Charles Shoemaker/EPA

An [estimated three quarters](#) of Rwanda's Tutsi minority perished in the genocide that was presided over by the Hutu-dominated government. At the same time, tens of thousands of Hutu were massacred by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

When the fighting ended in July 1994, the government and all its institutions laid in ruins. The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front led by Major General Paul Kagame took over the government, promising to establish democratic government rule.

Since then debates on Rwanda's post-genocide recovery have been polarising. On one hand, Rwanda is seen as a [success story](#): a showcase for post-conflict reconstruction thanks to its achievements in terms of stability, economic growth, pro-business environment, women in leadership, and effective public services delivery.

On the other hand, the country is seen as experiencing an [authoritarianism](#) which is grounded in growing inequality and a climate of fear, intimidation and impunity.

This paradox raises serious questions about the sustainability of Rwanda's economic growth in a society dominated by one of the most autocratic, repressive governments in the world.

Economic recovery and growth

After the genocide Rwanda's economy was severely depressed. But 25 years down the line the country has achieved strong economic growth and impressive improvements in standards of living.

According to a [World Bank study](#), Rwanda's real GDP grew by more than 120% over two decades.

This remarkable growth trajectory has boosted the Rwandan Patriotic Front's ambitions to transform the country from a poor, agrarian rural society into an IT-driven, market-centered, [middle-income African economy](#) by 2020.

We would argue that this vision for success is not only too ambitious but harmful as well. This is because it has benefited the ruling elite, foreign corporations and investors, with few benefits to the poor. A notable example is [how millions of rural Rwandans were negatively affected](#) by a government decision to replace small-scale and subsistence agriculture with commercial agribusiness and large scale ranching ventures.

Moreover, there are signs of strain within the economy. Key world players like the [International Monetary Fund](#), who have often praised Rwanda's economic progress, are now warning that despite its achievements

“ *“The Rwandan economy remains vulnerable to external shocks and fiscal risks.”* ”

Rwanda is very well aware that it is impossible to meet its Vision 2020 goal. As a result, authorities have now extended their development deadline to 2035. But even with more time to achieve the vision, [financial institutions like the World Bank](#) are estimating that at the current rate of growth Rwanda will barely cross the threshold for lower middle-income status by 2035.

Autocratic leader

The autocratic governance in Rwanda's pre-genocide era was one of the key factors that led to the [1990-1994 civil war](#) and the genocide that followed.

It would therefore have been prudent for the post-genocide government, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, to embrace democratic governance. Instead, the new regime established a government of national unity by incorporating other political parties and, within no time, Rwanda became a de facto one-party state with all the power concentrated in the hands of one man – Paul Kagame.

Today, Rwanda is identified as an [authoritarian regime](#). The 2018 Democracy Index – a [global governance report](#) assembled by The Economist – noted that Rwanda is a democracy in name only.

The authors of the index observed that the Rwandan Patriotic Front

“ *professes a commitment to political pluralism but has proved to be unprepared to loosen its grip on power and allow space for genuine, non-violent opposition.* ”

This is a fair assessment. Kagame has shown a reluctance to relinquish his grip on the presidency. In 2015, he successfully engineered a [constitutional amendment](#) that allowed him to run for a third term in office. And in the August 2018 presidential elections, he was reelected for a third seven-year term with a reported [99% of the vote](#).

It is well known in Rwanda that challenging Kagame is risky. As a result he faces minimal opposition. Those who have challenged him have paid the price. Most of the candidates who opposed him in the last three elections [spent time in jail](#).

No freedom

Autocratic governance is also reflected in the lack of freedom in Rwanda. In its 2018 report, [Freedom House](#), ranked Rwanda as “Not Free” stating that while the regime has maintained peace and economic growth, it has also suppressed political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, and suspected assassinations.

In March 2019, Anselme Mutuyimana of the United Democratic Forces of Rwanda became the latest in a long line of opposition politicians to be [found dead](#).

His body showed signs of strangulation and Human Rights Watch reported Mutuyimana’s death as the

“ *latest in a long line of murders, disappearances, politically motivated arrests, and unlawful detentions in Rwanda, especially of suspected government opponents.* ”

The Rwanda Investigation Bureau promised to investigate his death but justice is unlikely to be served. All the previous investigations into suspected assassinations [have been flawed](#).

On his part, Kagame has spoken publicly about the [assassination of his enemies](#). In March 2019, [he bragged about the assassination](#) of former Interior Minister Seth Sendashonga saying,

“ *“Seth Sendashonga died because he had crossed the line. I have little to say about that, but I am also not apologetic about it* ”

President Kagame uttered these words in the presence of the entire Rwandan leadership, and he knew well that neither the legislature nor the judiciary would dare initiate any proceedings to hold him accountable.

This kind of brazen authoritarian leadership has forced many Rwandans into exile and prompted refugees to remain in their host countries. Some of those refugees are active members of a growing number of armed groups who want to unseat President Kagame.

If Kagame doesn’t allow political reforms, there is a possibility that violence on a large-scale could repeat itself, putting in peril Rwanda’s economic achievements, and making Vision 2035 unattainable.

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