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Rwanda: The eternal sunshine of the spotless election

BY FILIP REYNTJENS ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/AUTHOR/FILIP-REYNTJENS/](https://africanarguments.org/author/filip-reyntjens/)) / AUGUST 8, 2024 / 0

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Kagame's latest electoral victory is testimony to the impressive work of the electoral commission in moulding the numbers to fit predetermined results.



Paul Kagame on Liberation Day, 4 July, Amahoro Stadium, Kigali. Courtesy: Paul Kagame social media.

At the 15 July presidential election, sitting president Paul Kagame secured a 99.18 per cent victory. The participation rate was a whopping 99.86 per cent. Although voting is not compulsory, non-participation is considered 'anti-patriotic', and local authorities make sure everyone casts their vote. These figures are reminiscent of pre-1990 single party-era polls, dubbed 'risk-free elections' by Alain Rouquié in 1978 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/43952197?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents). A 2015 constitutional amendment allowed Kagame, who was elected for a second and last term in 2010, to run for an additional seven-year term in 2017, and two five-year terms after that, thus potentially keeping him in office until 2034, forty years after his initial seizure of power in 1994[1]. Two other candidates were allowed to 'compete' – the same ones (<https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2697/>) from 2017. They obtained 0.50 and 0.32 per cent.

Earlier international observer missions, from the European Union in 2003 and the Commonwealth in 2010 (<https://www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/book/288>) found intimidation, ballot stuffing, and untransparent counting and consolidation procedures. In 2017, there was no formal international observation, but the US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs observed

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‘notable shortcomings (<https://www.congress.gov/115/meeting/house/106435/witnesses/HHRG-115-FA16-Wstate-YamamotoD-20170927.pdf>)’, including ‘voting irregularities’ and ‘concerns over the integrity of the vote-counting process’ As no reliable data from independent observer missions are available this time, not much can be said about voters’ freedom of choice, and vote counting and consolidation.

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Some facts are, however, discernible. First, anecdotal evidence shows that people were forced to be present at Kagame’s election rallies. One source that cannot be identified described how people were woken up and taken long distances on foot to campaign sites. This likely also occurred during the polls, which would explain the near universal turnout. Second, voters expressed their choice by putting their thumbprint next to the candidates’ names. As illiterate persons sign documents with their thumbprint, this is seen as akin to signing with their name, meaning that voters may have doubted the secrecy of the vote. Although only around 20 percent of adults are illiterate, literate people are also aware of this practice. Third, Kagame obtained between 98.59 and 99.65 per cent in all the five provincial constituencies, a suspiciously similar result.

The sloppy work of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) in the publication of the results of the parliamentary elections suggests manipulation, appearing particularly in the difference between the partial results published on 17 July and the provisional results published on 18 July. They are as follows:

Party	votes 17 July	Votes 18 July	Difference
RPF	5,471,104	6,126,432	+655,329
PL	957,602	770,896	-186,706
PSD	827,182	767,143	-60,039
DGPR	462,29	405,893	-56,397
PDI	507,474	410,513	-96,961
PS-Imberakuri	459,526	401,524	-58,002
Independent	44,881	19,051	-25,830

This tally is obviously impossible. While additional vote counting naturally leads to an increase in votes obtained, this was only the case for the RPF. All other parties lost a large number of votes between the partial and final results, thus confirming the fact that the NEC does not count but attributes votes. This manipulation had potentially dramatic consequences for the DGPR, the PDI and PS-Imberakuri. On 17 July these parties obtained 5.30, 5.81 and 5.26 per cent respectively, a figure that on 18 July had dropped to 4.56, 4.61 and 4.51 per cent, thus bringing them below the legal five per cent threshold needed to obtain seats in parliament. However in order to maintain a veneer of plurality, the NEC decided to “round off” the results to five percent, thus offering two seats to each of these parties. In a

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strange explanation (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/18552/news/elections/will-pdi-green-party-ps-imberakuri-get-seats-in-parliament>), the NEC's Executive Secretary stated that although these parties 'got 4.5 percent or 4.6 percent, that does not mean that they fell short of the required five percent'. While this could be seen as a generous treatment of other parties, it was clearly illegal, and a token of the regime's disregard for electoral law.

There were other suspicious results. 24 women MPs are indirectly elected in the five provincial constituencies. In each case, the elected women obtained overwhelming majorities, leaving a large gap with votes obtained by unsuccessful candidates. For instance, in the Northern province the elected candidates got 79.35, 79.33, 74.04 and 73.33 percent, while the fifth (unsuccessful) contender scored 5.01 per cent.[2] This phenomenon, observed countrywide, is of course no coincidence. Those elected clearly benefited from the RPF's support, and voters were told for whom to vote. The presence of 'special categories' (two young and one handicapped in addition to women), who have no visible party affiliation, serves to obscure the RPF's strong dominance in parliament. This was confirmed in the past, when "special categories" MPs appeared during later elections on RPF lists, but not on those of other parties.



Paul Kagame supporters on the street following the announcement of results. Photo courtesy: Paul Kagame social media.

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Kagame said in 1994 that he “had no desire for a political career after the war”, and in 2010 that it would be a failure if he found no one to replace him at the end of his second term. Like in the past, in early 2023 he was initially nonchalant, waiting for the “people’s will” to express itself. He again stated ‘his desire to step down and hand over power to a new leader’, even announcing that “a succession plan is currently under active discussion within the ruling party”, and calling his retirement an “inevitability (<https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/05/i-look-forward-to-becoming-a-journalist-after-retirement-kagame/>)”. By September he had changed his mind, and used an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, published in English translation in the party’s daily *The New Times* (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/10916/news/politics/kagame-the-problem-is-not-between-me-and-tshisekedi>), to announce that he would stand again: ‘I am pleased with the confidence that Rwandans have shown in me. I will always serve them whenever I can. Yes, I am indeed a candidate’. Just before the election, he recalled (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/18440/news/elections/kagame-optimistic-about-capable-successor>) that ‘it was not his choice to become president in the first place but the people requested and pressed him to assume office’. The reality is that no one in the RPF would dare show presidential ambitions. In the absence of an anointed successor, this makes Kagame’s replacement difficult and hazardous.

Although the NEC announced (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/18411/news/elections/over-1000-observers-accredited-for-rwandas-elections>) that over 1,000 election observers were accredited and the East African Community (EAC) deployed an observer mission (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/18406/news/elections/eac-deploys-55-observers-for-rwanda-election>), no reports were available by the time of writing. The (governmental) National Commission for Human Rights only addressed some technical issues (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/18573/news/elections/rights-body-says-rwandas-2024-general-elections-were-inclusive-safe-and-secure>), while the EAC commended (<https://www.eac.int/press-releases/3136-east-african-community-hails-rwandan-general-election-as-peaceful-and-credible>) the ‘calm and peaceful environment’ in which the polls took place. It remained silent on whether the elections were free and fair.

International observers were less impressed. The Index on Censorship (<https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/07/rwanda-polls-the-kagame-landslide-that-would-embarrass-other-dictators/>) ironically referred to ‘The Kagame ‘landslide’ that would ‘embarrass other dictators’.

Notes

[1] See: <https://filipreyntjens.jimdofree.com/app/download/12709196096/Conversation-Rwanda+constitution+2015.pdf?t=1709911564>
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[2] In the other provinces, these figures were 4.89, 11.68, 7.86 and 26.7 for the best placed unsuccessful candidate. Data can be found on <https://nec.gov.rw/amatora/en/home/> (<https://nec.gov.rw/amatora/en/home/>).

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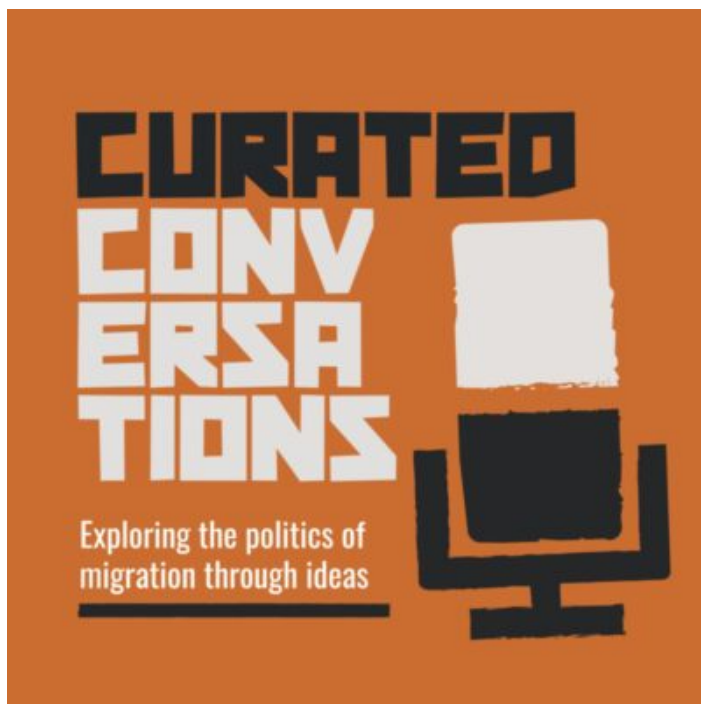
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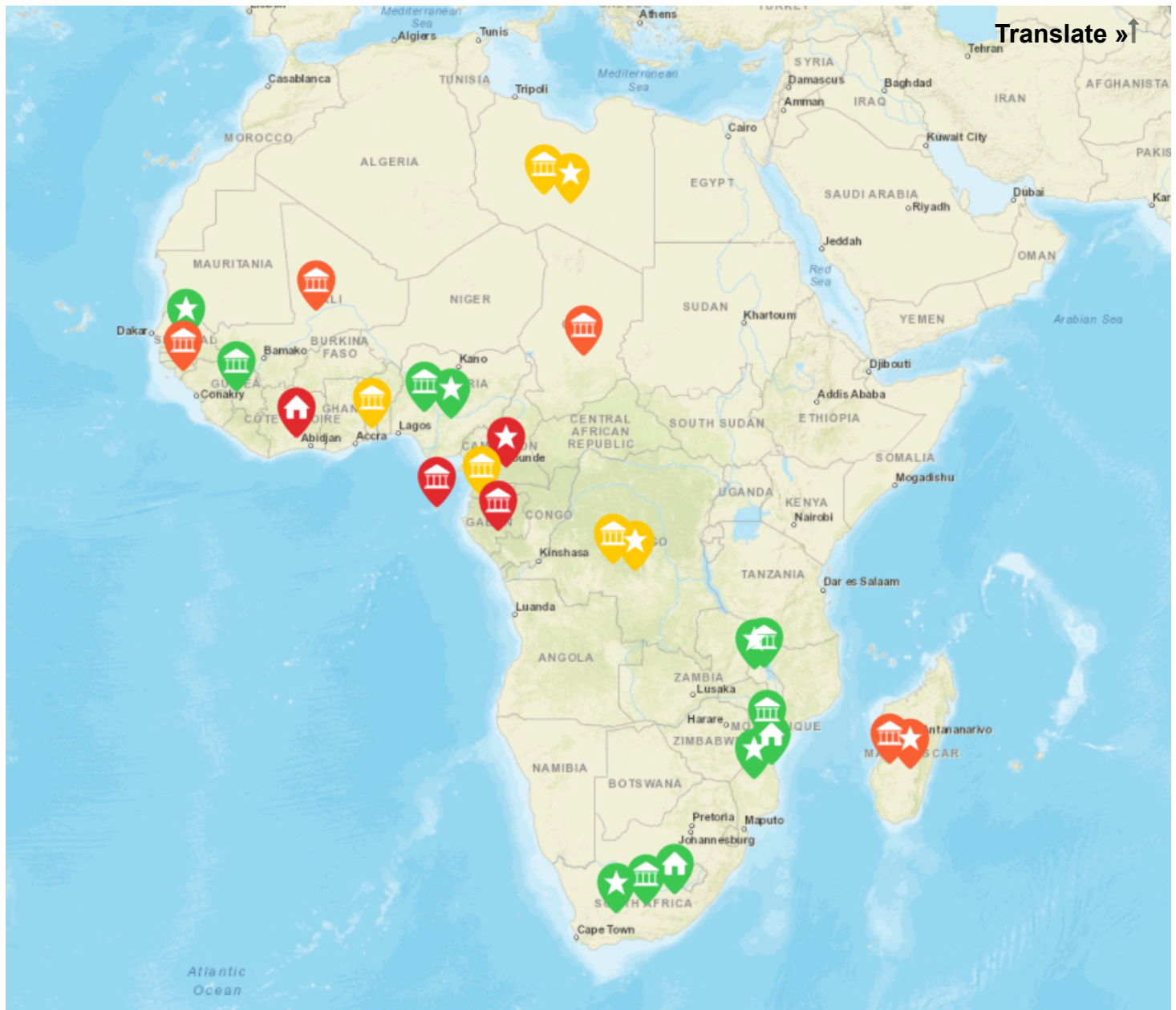


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