

**News****Rwandans Mull over Possibility of a Third Term for Paul Kagame**

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Millions of Rwandans took to the ballot box last month and voted to pass a constitutional referendum that will allow Rwandan President Paul Kagame to stay in office until 2034. The months-long debate about presidential term limits has placed the spotlight on the controversial figure credited with stabilizing Rwanda in its post-genocide era.

Earlier this year, more than 3.7 million Rwandans petitioned the parliament to consider abandoning newly imposed two-term limits on the presidency, citing developmental and economic gains made under Kagame. However, some opponents, including the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, decried the move, describing Kagame as a heavy-handed leader who committed human rights abuses and silenced opposing media voices.

Kagame announced in a televised New Year's address at midnight that he would seek a third term in 2017.

"I did not apply for this. You go and ask Rwandans why they want me," Kagame told the Agence France Presse, a Paris-based news wire service, shortly after submitting his ballot on Dec. 18.

Kagame came to power in 1994 after his Tutsi rebel force, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, defeated Hutu extremists who killed more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus within a 100-day period. He served as vice president and minister of defense until the parliament officially elected him as president in 2000.

He won an election in 2003 under a new constitution and garnered enough votes for a reelection in 2010.

Under Kagame, Rwanda's child mortality rate dropped by 50 percent,



A constitutional referendum may open the door for Rwandan President Paul Kagame to stay in power until 2034. This photo was taken at the London Summit on Family Planning in London on July 11, 2012.

malaria deaths fell considerably, and annual economic growth exceeded 8 percent, even with a dearth of natural resources.

Though Gacaca court proceedings to try accused perpetrators of genocidal violence haven't met international standards, the grassroots justice model

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has prosecuted hundreds of thousands of Rwandans.

Globally, Kagame has maintained a positive relationship with his fellow East African Community members, including Kenya and Uganda, the United States, and, as of 2009, France.

Controversy over the impending con-

stitutional referendum changes, however, threatens that goodwill. During his visit to the Motherland in September, U.S. President Barack Obama cautioned Kagame against seeking a third term, noting political instability in neighboring Burundi and Congo-Brazzaville due to similar issues.

The European Union has also weighed in, expressing worry that opposition forces didn't have enough time to campaign against the referendum.

Some people, like Rwandan refugee Susan F., said that course of action by the Western powers won't suffice. While talking to AllEyesOnDC, Susan, who requested the use of a pseudonym, expressed her disappointment in the in what she described as the United States' lack of consistency in addressing African political matters.

"President Obama has looked at Africa ambivalently. The West only steps in to get rid of the dictators they don't want anymore," Susan said. "They're pleased with puppets. I would like to see the day when they give all African dictators equal treatment when they commit wrongs against their people.

When a report came out accusing Kagame of downing the plane of President Juvenal Habyarimana, it suddenly disappeared. Why is that? The west has some interest in keeping him in power. They support what he's doing," said Susan, who currently lives on the east coast.

But expert Sam Phatey shared a different sentiment, saying that a third Kagame term wouldn't serve the United States' best interests or that of other African countries.

"If President Kagame keeps himself in perpetual power, he won't stay in office until 2034. This is a recipe for military expeditions to overthrow his government," Phatey, a student in the U.S. Institute of Peace's conflict analysis program in Northwest, told AllEyesOnDC.

In 2012, Phatey conducted research about the economic causes of the Rwandan conflict. These days, he talks extensively about the implications of a third Kagame term with his colleagues.

"[A third Kagame term] will destabilize Rwanda. If Kagame says he needs to stay longer to maintain stability, that means he has failed as a leader to build strong institutions," Phatey, a 26-year-old Atlanta resident, said. "He's not the only one in Rwanda with great ideas and leadership skills needed to make Rwanda a progressive nation. Kagame thinks that staying in power would be Rwanda's bet interest but it could deprive the country of a lot when it comes to international cooperation."

Eugenie Mukeshimana, a Rwandan woman who has lived in the U.S. for 14 years, has a more nuanced view on presidential term limits, telling AllEyesOnDC that people in the East African country only want to do what they think benefits them the most, even if it means Kagame staying in office.

"What's complicated about Rwanda is that people don't feel like they have to listen to those outside of their country. Right now, they're fearful that the president succeeding Kagame could damage what we have worked so hard to build," Mukeshimana, a social worker living in Baltimore, Md., said. "As much as people think of democracy on their own terms, it doesn't fit everyone that way."

Even so, she admitted that a third Kagame term could open up Pandora's Box, allowing future leaders to consolidate their power.

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