- **Symbol of stability and development**
- **Stellar management of Covid-19 pandemic**

On 18th August 2022 marked exactly five years since President Paul Kagame was sworn to office for a third seven year term that came after a popular movement demanded for the amendment of the Constitution to allow him run again. The Constitution was tinkered with in such a way that term limits were not removed but exception made for the incumbent to be in office possibly up to 2034.

An analysis shows that President Kagame has in the last five years largely lived up to the expectations of those who urged him to remain in office. He has remained a steady guarantor of national peace, stability, continued economic growth, and more significantly a source of hope for a better future.

**Highlights**

The demand that Mr. Kagame continue in office was informed by his record in stabilizing the country, a degree of unity and delivering public goods and services. Investors saw in his continued management a guarantee of their continued success.

The biggest highlight of the last five years was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which slowed economic growth and delayed implementation of many programs. What is obvious is the way Mr. Kagame managed the pandemic which was stellar, not politicized and followed science as he promised during a brief speech at the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020. The population largely cooperated with the measures health experts introduced.

True to his foresight, Mr. Kagame anticipated that the pandemic would reach Rwanda when other officials thought it would remain in China. At a government retreat weeks before, he grilled the then health minister, unimpressed he soon replaced her and prepared early for the shock. The health care system was quickly equipped and when vaccines become available, Rwanda was one of the most ready countries to roll out and thereafter delivered one of the quickest and competent vaccinations programs in Africa. For long term goals, Mr. Kagame’s government has worked with partners to make sure Africa builds capability to manufacture vaccines and other important medicines on the continent.

## CHOGM was a fine hour

The successful hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) this year, twice delayed because of the pandemic was a fine hour for Mr. Kagame. Rwanda has structured itself as centre for conferences and tourism and built services and infrastructure around that. CHOGM was the biggest and most prominent of the many gatherings that have happened. It was a prestigious moment for the leader.

The completion of the Kigali Arena in record time improved hosting capability with Basketball Africa League being launched in Kigali, other sports and entertainment events followed, a boon for the growing affluent middle class. Other sports infrastructure completed include the stadia at Bugesera, Nyagatare, Ngoma and rapid improvements are ongoing at Amahoro and Huye stadiums.

The big service infrastructure so far is increased access to electricity from 35% to 73% of households, with the target of achieving 100% access looking realistic in a few years. There is also considerable increase in access to safe water, street lighting, paved roads and model villages.

Another significant achievement is that the education policy seems to be finally being properly organized. During this term a dramatic building of classrooms and toilets in public schools was carried out, an engaging education policy paper review is underway. Education reforms have culminated in increase of teachers' salaries and benefits beginning with this financial year.

## Tense regional relations

During the last five years Rwanda has enjoyed both good and bad relations with neighbors particularly relations with DR Congo, Uganda and Burundi remaining thorny.

Mr. Kagame, at first, enjoyed good working relations with DR Congo's Felix Tshisekedi which have since collapsed following the resumption of M23 rebellion in North Kivu. The presence in Eastern Congo of armed groups including various factions of FDLR remains a salient issue for Rwanda.

The relations with Uganda, the most important of all, were for the most part of the five years very tense with borders closed for three years over accusations of

supporting dissidents bent on destabilizing Rwanda. Since relations have improved and the border is open though the flow of goods remains limited. Burundi relations remain work in progress after some engagements by  top officials from both sides.

**Dynamic foreign policy**

The deployment of troops in Mozambique and Central Africa Republic when the situations looked bleak, not only proved that Mr. Kagame leads well trained and agile security forces, but also improved Rwanda's diplomatic standing, strategic maneuver, future economic dividends and of course the prestige and influence of the president.

Practicing non-ideological but pragmatic relations with countries both big and middle powers; Rwanda enjoys good ties with middle east powers like Turkey, Qatar, Israel, UAE even when amongst themselves they have disputes.

During this term, Mr. Kagame hosted French President Emmanuel Macron, Prime Minister Nirendra Modi of India, President Xi Jinping of China, the Emir of Qatar and met Tayip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin at various times. Many African leaders including Samia Suruhu of Tanzania visited.

Mr. Kagame oversaw African Union reforms, a well thought through package of actionable steps however implementation after the first phase and results remain tricky largely owing to the personnel in-charge in Addis Ababa and their lack of gravitas.

Mr. Kagame was African Union chairperson in 2018 presiding over one of the most successful and consequential leaderships on the continental body in recent years. Defining unity as his starting point, Mr. Kagame worked for a more assertive and visible Africa. The signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement during a summit hosted at the glittering Kigali Convention Centre in March 2018 was a major highlight.

However Mr. Kagame's AU chairmanship was not successful on all subjects, for example an attempt he led to mediate after President Joseph Kabila fudged presidential elections in DRC and handed over power to Felix Tshisekedi in an underhand deal collapsed after the Trump administration recognised the declared winner and major African countries like South Africa followed suit all keen to protect their business and strategic interests.

## Controversial but hugely popular

The lead up to the 2017 polls was interesting as Mr. Kagame has repeatedly said he would not be seeking to remain in office past his second term. At one time he made it clear before the ruling party RPF- Inkotanyi gathering that it would be a failure on his part if he failed to organize a succession. It soon became change, continuity and stability mantra that led to inevitable change of constitution though without controversy. While Mr. Kagame faced no outright challenge within the dominant Rwandan Patriotic Front, it was not all smooth as some senior cadres had started laying groundwork to be in pole position in case he didn't run.

However this was soon brought to a halt with the firing of then Justice Minister and Attorney General Tharciss Karugarama. This followed the minister's interview with UK Guardian Newspaper in which he insisted that the Constitution would be followed as it was. Mr. Karugarama's firing was an indicator to all cadres what the line was.

## Popular demand

What is undisputed is that there was popular demand from many citizens whether organized or spontaneous to demand for amendment of the Constitution. As reported by parliament, more than three million voters signed petitions demanding legislators take action and this followed swiftly.

Significantly those opposed to amending the Constitution had no organized platform apart from a few radio and TV talk-shows. The referendum was announced and held within a week with the document citizens voting on unpublished, no campaigns for or against were held.

However facing off with minor opponents, Mr. Kagame campaigned throughout July 2017 greeted by hundreds of thousands at triumphant rallies across the country. The emotions with which the masses welcomed him some having to wait for hours and walk tens of kilometers indicated that they were solidly invested in his leadership. On voting day it was a clear landslide.

## Kagame inevitable in 2024

Throughout the last five years, the content of the political opposition has not changed much, the internal official opposition remains weak with just four seats out

of 80 in Chamber of Deputies. Longtime oppositionist and ex-convict, Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza was given conditional presidential pardon and hasn’t managed to generate momentum despite founding another party. The story of Paul Rusesabagina and his improbable arrival in Kigali, court case and international media attention and lobbying by some Western politicians remains significant. Mr. Rusesabagina of the Hotel Rwanda movie fame was charged related to his association with a rebel group MRCD-FLN based in Congo and Burundi which severally attacked civilians around Nyungwe forest, clear terrorist acts since they avoided attacking military targets.

The exiled opposition willingness to take to armed rebellion seemed to be about to bare results when some officials in Uganda government allegedly provided support. An attack by an FDLR faction RUD-Urunana left several dead but was quickly beaten back by security forces. Cutting off the support and collaboration from elements in Uganda and Burundi was a significant diplomatic step and undermined the opposition factions standing significantly.

With this weak, less organized opposition and no emerging charismatic challenger, Mr. Kagame seems on course to be elected for a fourth term in August 2024, unless he surprises the world and not seek nomination again. What remains to watch is if a new opposition could emerge internally and what the increasingly restless young educated people will decide to do and how much accommodation exists for them in the system.