Rwanda Decides 2024

On 24th February the dominant Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF- Inkotanyi) kicked off primaries to select candidates to represent it in the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for July 2024. The party is expected to announce the primary winners at a congress in March. Several other parties are also expected to announce their candidates and or alliances by end of March.

The opposition Democratic Green Party has already announced its leader as the presidential candidate. Frank Habineza was a candidate in 2017 but scored abysmally though the party managed to secure enough votes to get to parliament the following year.

Opposition remains weak

Former prisoners Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza and Bernard Ntaganda have petitioned the high court to erase their criminal record so that they are able to run for president. These old oppositionists attempted to run for the 2010 presidential elections had stints in prison with charges emanating from their political work and speeches that were deemed divisive. In the unlikely event of court allowing them to run for office, the political scene could change dramatically. The lead up to 2010 elections was characterized by incidences of violence that attracted global media attention.

The most prominent opponents of the ruling system are not likely to run. These include the formerly imprisoned Paul Rusesabagina, former army chief Kayumba Nyamwasa, ex-diplomat Eugene Gasana, former priest Nahimana who leads a self-declared government in-exile. These are seen as more interested in violently challenging the status quo through creating rebel groups and allying with hostile states than offering democratic competition. Mr. Rusesabagina's humiliating capture and big defeat of his rebel army undermined a major competitor despite his name prominence in international media.

Other previously credible parties like Social Democratic Party (PSD), Liberal Party (PL) which provided candidates during the uncompetitive 2010 elections have largely resigned themselves to being understudies with their leaders comfortable with easy access to top government jobs than providing alternative policy platforms. PSD and PL occupy the speakerships of Senate and Lower Chamber respectively while doing completely nothing on the public political discourse. It

awaits to be seen if they will present their own candidates for president.

A challenging region

During the lead up to amending the Constitution to allow the third term, one of the salient issues in favour of extending Mr. Kagame's rule was that Rwanda was in a region too volatile to implement such a momentous decision like changing a tested and steady leader. This was evidenced by the M23 rebellion in Eastern Congo in 2012/13 and the immense hostility against Rwanda with some Western countries cutting aid, the alliance of then Tanzanian, South African and DRC leaders that could have directly threatened the security of Rwanda.

The lead up to 2024 sees Rwanda facing similar accusations of supporting a new M23 rebellion, albeit the threat being reduced. One of the biggest achievements of the 3rd term is that Mr. Kagame has strengthened the country's international standing, diversified diplomatic and economic relations that the leverage to impose aid cuts as some Western countries did in 2012 has greatly diminished. The conflict in Eastern Congo remains at the back of many minds hoping for a strong hand to maintain stability.

Dynamic Kagame

In an interview with *Juene Afrique* magazine published in September, President Paul Kagame confirmed what many expected; that he will be a presidential candidate in the elections; the internal RPF processes are merely a formality to give a veneer of credibility to his unchallenged dominance.

With a cool 24 years in power, President Kagame faces both a similar but also different environment. For the first time people born after he became president in 2000 will be eligible to vote. This is indicative of his longevity in office both also the endurance of his power and its consolidation of it. A big percentage of voters will be people without a direct memory of the liberation war and genocide against the Tutsi. These are people with a different mindset and expectations.

Unlike most African leaders who have reigned for long, there is no sign of stagnation around his rule. Mr. Kagame remains dynamic with his government always innovating and keeping up with the latest market trends and technology. One commentator has said Mr. Kagame is dynamic because he surrounds himself with dynamism.

President Kagame and his party have tried to keep up with the youthful population by promoting young educated officials to top positions. At last year's elective congress, the ruling RPF- Inkotanyi elected a big number of youth to its 25 person National Executive Committee. Similarly, government is full of youthful top officials including in cabinet. While this is significant for representation, it is important to point out that none of these young officials has political gravitas of their own. No one represents an independent constituency and can take a position independent of the appointing authority. They are at best good bureaucrats. Has Mr. Kagame achieved change, continuity and stability he promised many years ago? With an expected re-election, the next few years will tell if succession question will come up sooner than later.

Inflation down, economy growing

The economic era brought about by the effects of Covid-19 pandemic has only abetted. Despite not receiving its due in public discourse the cost of living especially the runaway food prices was for most of the term the country's biggest challenge. Projections by the Central Bank were that inflation will start easing by end of 2023, with stability achieved in the first half of 2024. This has come to pass. The harvest in the later part of 2023 was solid, however the impact of heavy rains expected in March- April is awaited. The stabilization of prices removes a major factor that could have dampened the usually triumphant cheerful mood during mass rallies.

With a dominant RPF, weak-partly exiled opposition and reluctant internal parties, there is no sign of competitive general elections so far.

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