

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

MONMOUTH
112 Village Center Drive
Freehold, NJ 07728-2510
(732) 780-3035

OCEAN
405 Route 539
Plumsted, NJ 08514-2303
(609) 286-2571; (732) 350-2300

MERCER
4573 South Broad Street
Hamilton, NJ 08620-2215
(609) 585-7878

2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3004
(202) 225-3765

<http://chrissmith.house.gov>



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Rwanda: Democracy Thwarted

*Excerpts of Remarks, Rep. Chris Smith
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations
September 27, 2017*

Rwanda is an important African ally. This East African nation has been a valuable contributor to peacekeeping in Africa and is the sixth largest troop and police contributor to United Nations missions. However, reports have increased about the status of human rights and rule of law inside Rwanda and its efforts to silence critics living abroad. This hearing will examine the future of democracy and rule of law in Rwanda in light of persistent criticism of its government's behavior at home and on the international stage.

Rwanda is a constitutional republic dominated by a strong presidency. In 2015, the country held a constitutional referendum in which an estimated 98 percent of registered voters participated. Approximately 98 percent of those who voted endorsed a set of amendments that included provisions that would allow the president to run for up to three additional terms in office, meaning Paul Kagame could be President for more than 20 more years. His election to a third term in August 2017 was achieved with 99 percent of the vote.

A popular politician in the United States or most other countries would be unlikely in most circumstances to win nearly 100 percent of the vote in a free, fair and competitive election. Consequently, it is difficult to believe that even someone as widely admired as President Kagame has been could be that popular. Such suspicion is stoked by reports of vote irregularities and actions by the Rwandan government to restrain opposition activism and enact stringent controls on opposition activism, including legal restrictions on civil liberties and stringent controls on the free flow of information.

An example of why there is skepticism about the nature of free elections in Rwanda is the case of businesswoman Diane Rwigara, who ran as a critic of Kagame. Days after she launched her campaign, nude photos allegedly of her were leaked onto the Internet in an attempt to discredit her. She said she would not be intimidated and continued her campaign. On July 7th, the National Electoral Commission disqualified her and two other candidates on technical grounds, alleging that they had not collected enough valid signatures. Amnesty International said that the election would be held in a "climate of fear and repression" and the commission's decision was criticized by the U.S. State Department and the European Union.

Following the election, Rwigara launched an activist group called the People Salvation Movement to challenge the regime on its human rights record, saying that the country's parliament is little more than a rubber-stamp. Within days, her home was raided, and she was arrested for forgery and tax evasion. Although she was released, Rwigara, was rearrested for forgery and offences against state security; her mother and her sister also were subsequently arrested for tax evasion.

This is not the only case of harsh punishment of those who criticize the Kagame government. David Himbara, one of our witnesses today, was a close adviser to President Kagame and has an inside view of how this government deals with those seen as failing the government or those who disagree. He testified on the inner workings of the Kagame government at our May 20, 2015, hearing on Rwanda. Another witness at that May 2015 hearing was Robert Higerero, who told a chilling account of being solicited to commit the murders of two formerly high-ranking military and security officials. That account was backed by authenticated recordings of Rwanda's security chief offering large sums of money for the murders. In fact, after Higerero testified about this offer, he had to move from Belgium to the United States because his life was in danger. Both of our Rwandan witnesses have new information that will be important for our government's policy toward Rwanda.

During a staff delegation to South Africa last year, two of my staff spoke with officials in the Government of South Africa, which was highly offended that the Rwandan government would be involved in the murder of a dissident on New Year's Eve 2013. My staff also spoke with Rwandan refugees in South Africa who reported being afraid of officials at the Rwandan embassy in South Africa, who they said had threatened them for seeking asylum.

Again, Rwanda is not your typical dictatorship in which all people suffer under an unpopular leader who does not provide for social services or security. Many Rwandans apparently genuinely feel the government is acting in their interest, especially in providing for inter-ethnic harmony. It is this anomaly we seek to better understand through today's hearing.

My office has compiled a report on our government's human rights issues with Rwanda, and we are due to discuss these matters with them further. We would be a poor ally if we did not caution the Rwandan government about human rights abuses the international community cites, including governments in Africa. We hope these abuses can be stopped, but until such time as they are, we cannot ignore them and must bring them up in our interactions with the Government of Rwanda whether or not they readily accept the view others have of their behavior. It is in their interest and ours that we do so.