

RWANDAN POLITICS: Designed to avoid extremism

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Financial Times

Published: December 4 2006 16:36 | Last updated: December 4 2006 16:36

A glossy brochure designed to advertise Rwanda to potential investors lays out a list of the “defining pillars” of the nation’s investment climate – chief among them being predictability of political leadership. In a country where there is no effective internal political opposition and a strong, controlling president who is in the middle of a seven-year term, with the option of running for a second term when presidential polls are held in 2010, it is a fair statement.

But while Rwanda has taken obvious strides forward since the 1994 genocide, questions remain about just how democratic the country is. Like so many facets of Rwanda, the political systems are in theory designed to produce and foster unity and reconciliation while preventing the emergence of the conditions that led to the genocide where extremist politicians preaching hate messages were able to manipulate peasant farmers along ethnic lines.

Its politics are ostensibly run on a consensual basis, with six parties joining the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the government. Under Rwanda’s 2003 constitution, the party with the majority in the chamber of deputies cannot hold more than 50 per cent of cabinet posts. Rwanda has also been a leader in promoting the rise of women in politics, with its charter demanding that 24 of the 80 deputies must be female, as well as 30 per cent of the senate.

Yet for all the talk of inclusiveness, the RPF is still the dominant force, with some describing it as a single party autocracy in a country that has a history of autocratic control and a culture of obedience.

“Effectively it is a one-party state. People are still fearful of the RPF’s power, but it tends to be paranoia,” says Shyaka Kanuma, editor of Focus newspaper. However, he and others say the country is gradually opening up and has progressed since 2003 elections, the first since the genocide.

Then, Paul Kagame won 95 per cent of the presidential vote and his RPF party won a landslide in the parliamentary polls. The elections passed peacefully, but international observers were critical of the harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates. Dozens of supporters of Mr Kagame’s main challenger, Faustin Twagirimungu, a former Hutu prime minister, were reportedly rounded up, and the media demonised the opposition.

The main Hutu political party, the Democratic Republican Movement (MDR), which had been a member of the unity government formed after the genocide, was also disbanded ahead of the vote, accused of sowing division. The constitution, which was adopted ahead of the elections, prohibits political organisations from basing themselves on race, ethnic group, tribe or any other division that may “give rise to discrimination”. It is a system that has prevented aspiring Hutu politicians from developing a following along ethnic lines. Hutus are estimated to account for 85 per cent of the population and a party seen to represent Hutu interests would be able to challenge

the RPF's hold on power. The government insists the system is key to preventing extremists from using ethnic politics to pursue their agendas.

The dilemma facing observers and donors is gauging how much the fear of ethnic division is used to control potential opponents and how quickly the country should open up and develop into what the west deems a genuine democracy, given its violent history.

Prior to the mainly Tutsi RPF taking control and ending the genocide, the country had been ruled since independence by two Hutu presidents and systematic discrimination against Tutsis, estimated to account for 14 per cent of the population, was widespread. How the majority Hutu community perceives the current government is difficult to judge. It has provided security and is seen to be developing the country, say observers but, at the same time it could be viewed as representing the Tutsi elite, despite the fact many Hutus have government positions.

Mr Kagame, who has been the strong man of Rwandan politics since 1994, became the country's first Tutsi president in 2000 following the resignation of Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, who fell out with senior RPF members. Mr Bizimungu, who had sought to form a new political party ahead of the 2003 elections, is serving a 15-year prison sentence after he was found guilty of embezzling state funds and inciting ethnic violence. Human rights groups questioned the evidence that was presented in court.

Yet others say Rwanda is moving in the right direction, and that parliament is beginning to discover some teeth. Diplomats also praise a decentralisation programme that has significantly reduced the number of districts and provinces while giving greater power to local authorities.

Still, most agree the pace of reform could be faster. "The dilemma is clear. In a country where ethnicity looms large, true democracy could lead to a rekindling of animosities. So the RPF has chosen to closely regulate political parties, hampering democratic debate," says Jason Stearns, an analyst at the International Crisis Group. "The crucial question is how will the ruling party transition to genuine democracy, where ethnicity still matters a great deal and true democracy could spell the end of the RPF's rule."

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