

Dr. Habineza's Green Party demonstrates that a genuine opposition will find ample political space in Rwanda

Rwanda is often painted as lacking political space. This narrative promoted by democracy-pushing neocolonial NGOs claims that Rwandans live in a state, or climate, of fear, and that President Kagame keeps himself in power by suppressing dissent and silencing the opposition. For them, there is no opposition, no free press, and no freedom of expression in Rwanda.

However, as Dr. Lonzen Rugira has opined on several occasions, ["those who say there is no room for dissent in Rwanda simply don't follow Kinyarwanda talk shows – mainly on the radio."](#) Indeed, all over the world, local news outlets and social media provide a clear and easily accessible indicator of the depth of the political space in a country and the salience of citizens' voices.

The event of the 2nd half of October 2020 is a case study worth canvassing for insights about the opposition and the openness of the political space in Rwanda. The swearing-in of six new senators on Thursday, 22 October 2020 was widely commented on. Those new senators were drawn from (i) the opposition Green Party, whose representative is also a member of the disabled community; (ii) the Centrist Democratic Party (PDC) Women League chairperson, who previously served as a member of the lower house in Parliament; (iii) a women rights activist who belongs to the historically marginalized community; (iv) a university professor who has been serving as the president of Ibuka, the umbrella organisation for Genocide survivors; (v) an outspoken lawyer and formerly exiled

opposition figure who returned to Rwanda as an independent politician and occupied different positions before resigning from the Cabinet following public backlash for his violent physical abuse of a female security guard on duty; and (vi) a respected linguist, historian, former UNESCO consultant, retired professor and author who has been a member of the Rwandan diaspora for many years, and who before joining the Rwandan Senate was the Honorary President of the Rwandan community in France.

The fresh senators came to bolster an already inclusive Senate, whose president is also from the opposition Socialist Democratic Party and the Lower Chamber whose Speaker is from the Liberal Party.

In his speech at the swearing-in ceremony, President Kagame underscored the diversity of the new senators and the inclusiveness of the Senate. "These new senators were selected from us, Rwandans, and represent Rwandans from all walks of life. We want all Rwandans, irrespective of their origins and beliefs, to have a voice," Kagame said.

The swearing-in event was sandwiched between three other noteworthy events. The 2nd half of October was dominated by petitions to the Government and Parliament, urging Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA) to reverse the tariffs that it had announced on 14 October 2020 for which RURA was strongly criticized as being more concerned with the business imperative of entrepreneurs rather than consumer protection.

When those tariffs were announced, many Rwandans headed to social media and local news outlets to express displeasure; a week later on Monday 19th October 2020, Habineza Frank, MP from the opposition Green Party added his voice to the petitioners' pleas, pressing RURA to change those transport fare rates "or we will demand that its leadership resign", he threatened.

The following day, [the Prime Minister's Office announced that the government had taken note of the concerns expressed by citizens](#). Accordingly, new tariffs were swiftly announced a day after being 21st October 2020. In response to that, Dr. Frank Habineza thanked the government "[for listening to the concerns of the people.](#)"

Western promoters of democracy would not consider Green Party's Frank Habineza a real "*opposition*" because he refuses to denounce President Kagame, which they take as the only benchmark for recognition as a genuine opposition figure. However, the example of inclusion and the ability to persuade the government to change its mind on transport tariffs affirm that consensual democracy as a legitimate alternative to the confrontational and polarizing winner-takes-it-all politics that is preferred by the western NGO activists in their pursuit for relevance as mediators and midwives of the confrontational democracy.

Western babysitters

Rwanda's consensual approach does not grant this babysitting role to western NGO activists, which explains their hostility. Feeling jilted, democracy-promoting NGOs, human rights organizations and western media have felt compelled to throw their weight behind promoters of the Hutu Power political dispensation of yesteryears in a bid to overthrow the politics of "Never Again." As long as both groups get access to state power by any means possible, the consequences to the ordinary Rwandan don't seem to matter.

This difference has been articulated by the Green Party's President, Dr Frank Habineza, who has observed that Rwanda's political space makes a distinction between opposition (*abatavuga rumwe na Guverinoma*) and those seeking to overthrow the government (*abarwanya Leta*).

Two conclusions are worth drawing. One, it is not by accident

that the extent of its inclusivity is designed to deny political space for criminals. Neither is the absence of political space for babysitters accidental: the majority of platforms for participation and dissent that exist from the grassroots to the national level are traditional (unconventional from the western perspective) in nature and are primarily designed to be responsive to Rwandans.

Together with the classic platforms, the arenas for political space include Parliament's public legislative and oversight processes, the annual "National Umushyikirano Council", the National Leadership Retreat Umwiherero, Ministries and Districts' performance contracts Evaluation (Imihigo), Rwanda Day events, the President and Government officials' Outreach visits to the populations in Districts, the National Forum of Political Parties, Districts' Joint Action Development Forum (JADF) which includes local and international NGOs, faith-based organizations, and private sector players operating in the district, #MeetThePresident events, "*Inteko y'abaturage*", "*umugoroba w'imiryango*" and of course not forgetting social media, Kinyarwanda radio talk shows, and the ruling party RPF national meetings where officials get grilled on issues of accountability.

Ironically, all these platforms are initiatives of a government that is highly committed to the agenda to connect all Rwandans to the digital world, but which is regularly accused of closing the political space and silencing dissent. How can a government that fears criticism and promotes one-track brainwashed thinking multiply all these platforms for criticism and dissent? Clearly, the question is why Rwandans use the platforms in the manner that they do. One, the consensus approach has earned general acceptability in Rwanda. When Rwandans engage in public discourse, the model is often a strong point of reference. Second, also related to the first, is the point that is underscored by Dr Habineza above. Rwanda is undergoing a shifting understanding of

opposition, criticism, and dissent, much of it informed by a grasp of where their country is coming from, where it is, and where it is headed.

Most importantly, if the opposition sees its role as consisting in ensuring that state institutions act on inclusive and equitable policies that make things better for all, there is ample political space and they will find that ordinary people will identify with their aspirations for political power. However, individuals and groups in the Congolese jungles, South Africa, and in the Western world, who aspire for political power through means that have been discredited by the Rwandan people will naturally assume that Rwanda's political space is closed, and they will be unable to utilize the existing platforms to air their grievances in terms that are compatible with consensual democracy and the principles of Ndi Umunyarwanda –indivisible citizenship.

Critics of the consensual model say that it is designed to preserve the ruling party. However, the consensus model arose from the Urugwiro consultations of the late 1990s as a repudiation of the adversarial politics that served as the undercurrents for the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Like any political system, the ruling party will enjoy the advantage of the incumbency. Nonetheless, as long as the ordinary voters subscribe to the model, it is incumbent upon the opposition to muster the political dexterity to unseat the RPF within the acceptable political culture.

President Kagame has been asked on numerous occasions about the state of the political opposition in Rwanda, particularly their inability to launch a formidable challenge against him. Time and again, he has answered that it is neither his responsibility to create or reinforce the opposition, nor is he responsible for giving it the recognition and credit that it should earn from Rwandans, and that his role is to ensure that the right framework and mechanisms are put in place to regulate political activities in the interest of society.

It is simple. From the perspective of the ordinary Rwandan voter, genuine opposition political parties will find that there is adequate political space for those political parties that will acquiesce to operate within the confines of the consensus political approach. After years of seeking to impose a foreign model on Rwandans, Dr. Habineza and the Green Party discovered the futility of that endeavour and have since set out to anchor their politics within the confines of the people's approach. Consequently, they are contributing to making a strong case that consensual democracy does not negate political space for a genuine opposition seeking to contribute to the wellbeing of Rwandans. They also demonstrate that democracy doesn't require any babysitters, whether from within or outside the country.