

Political Impasse in Rwanda

Senator Feingold's Statement on the Fragility of Democracy in Africa

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Global Research, March 06, 2010

[Digital Journal](#) 5 March 2010

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

On March 5th, three days after Senator Russ Feingold, Chair of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Africa, called for the opening of political space in Rwanda, grenades exploded again in Kigali, with 16 people hurt, some critically.

[The Feingold Statement on the Fragility of Democracy in Africa](#) was read into the Congressional Record and released to the public on Monday, March 2nd, 2010, as [tension continued to increase in the run up to this year's Rwandan presidential election](#), with polls scheduled for August 9th, and opposition parties still struggling to convene, register, campaign, and avoid arrest.

Two days later, on Wednesday, March 5th, [President Paul Kagame insisted that the country was safe](#) after grenades exploded, killing two and injuring 18, at three heavily trafficked sites in Rwanda's capitol city, Kigali, on February 19th.

However, the next evening, on March 6th, [grenades exploded in Kigali again](#). The African Great Lakes regional outlet [256.com also reported gunfire](#).

Earlier in the week Kagame's former Army Chief of Staff, and, until last week, Ambassador to India, Lieutenant-[General Kayumba Nyamwasa, was reported to have fled to South Africa, via Uganda and Kenya](#), after questioning by Rwandan authorities, to join Kagame's former right hand man and Director of External Intelligence, who escaped from Rwanda in 2007 after serving a prison sentence. Kagame was reported to be seeking to extradite both, but Kayumba has since been reported to be proceeding to Europe.

News 256.com also reported that [their Rwandan correspondent Godwin Agaba had gone into hiding](#) after Kagame ordered his arrest for alleged links to his fleeing general.

Rwanda's Ambassador to the Netherlands, said to have helped Victoire Ingabiré Umuhoza return to Rwanda, reportedly [fled to Ireland last week](#).

Amidst all this, Rwandan opposition leaders and dissident exiles cheered the news of Senator Feingold's call, addressed to President Barack Obama, for the United States to stand with Rwandans for political and civil rights. The UK and the United States are widely known to be the foreign powers with greatest influence in the region.

"Good news indeed," said Donatien Nshima, a Rwandan exile and FDU-Inkingi Party activist in Brussels, who added that he was creating a Twitter account immediately to share some of Senator Feingold's words: *"We fail to be true friends to the Rwandan people if we do not stand with them in the fight against renewed abuse of civil and political rights."*

Feingold's statement on Rwanda was a substantial part of [his larger statement regarding African democracy and elections in 2010 and 2011](#):

Mr. President, Burundi's neighbor to the north, Rwanda, is also slated to hold important elections this summer. Rwanda is another country that has come a long way. Since the genocide in 1994, the government and people of Rwanda have made impressive accomplishments in rebuilding the country and improving basic services. It is notable that Rwanda was the top reformer worldwide in the 2010 World Bank's "Doing Business Report." President Kagame has shown commendable and creative leadership in this respect. On the democratic front, however, Rwanda still has a long way to go.

Understandably there are real challenges to fostering democracy some 15 years after the genocide, but it is troubling that there is not more space within Rwanda for criticism and opposition voices. The State Department's 2008 Human Rights Report for Rwanda stated, "There continued to be limits on freedom of speech and of association, and restrictions on the press increased." With elections looming, there are now some reports that opposition party members in Rwanda are facing increasing threats and harassment. The international community should not shy away from pushing for greater democratic space in Rwanda, which is critical for the country's lasting stability. We fail to be true friends to the Rwandan people if we do not stand with them in the fight against renewed abuse of civil and political rights. In the next few months in the run-up to the elections, it is a key time for international donors to raise these issues with Kigali.

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