



# Parti pour la Démocratie au Rwanda-Ihumure

## Paix, Justice et Développement



### The PDR-Ihumure response on the extension of the presidential term in Rwanda.

March 4, 2015

With the recovery of sovereignty of our African countries mainly in the 1960s, many African political leaders were pre-occupied by the challenge of consolidating their political powers in order to overstay in power. Many of them have succeeded while others have not. In worse scenarios some have lost their lives in this attempt. It is more than half a century but this African malaise continues to define not only our destiny but also the scale of our imagination. Three countries of the African Great Lakes Region (Rwanda, Burundi and DRC) are on the verge of their presidential elections, and for Rwanda, a country in full swing of political crisis, the case looks even more theatrical than its neighbours as the debate has officially been opened to decide on the change of the constitution to allow the incumbent president to take on his third term or rule for life. The question remains however, whether this practice is backed by the citizens or not. The government officials and president Kagame's cronies would say yes, but this answer is far from a compelling one in a country where freedom of expression does not exist. Let us remind those who support this attempt in order to keep Kagame and themselves in government's positions, that this act remains unpatriotic and undemocratic. In its strongest terms, the PDR-Ihumure opposes and condemns this attempt.

Over the past few months, individuals and organisations alike have echoed their views and expressed their opinions about the matter, and those who are in favour of the continuation of Kagame put forward arguments such as; there are countries without term limits, Kagame is the only one capable of taking Rwanda forward, we are in difficult times, etc. On this note, we are particularly thinking of Sabena Mutabazi's article which appeared in "The New Times" on February 19, 2015 (<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2015-02-19/186130/>). As PDR-Ihumure, our prime view is that whoever engages Rwandans in this discussion aims at derailing them from the right course of fighting for change and the introduction of democracy in Rwanda. Why do we have to discuss the change of our constitution for one individual to continue to rule? Don't we have other major issues and projects of paramount importance (such as social cohesion, peace, poverty ...) to address? Mr Mutabazi proposes "a one size fits most approach" as opposed to "the one-size-fits-all approach"

and funny enough, he is comparing a system of governing the people against choosing a hat in a retail store. It is a pity that he chooses such an inappropriate analogy to introduce his idea forgetting that displaying a tag is a marketing technique used to attract customers to buy a product, which does not stop them from trying products on before they buy. And again, in this case, one-size-fits-all approach is possible depending on the fabric or material the hat was made of. Making such a comparison is therefore illogical as he disregards an important fact that for as many as more than twenty years, Rwandans have been forced to wear one size, a very small size that really fits very few. Isn't it perhaps time to change the size? This is the flexibility we would support, as it strengthens democratic principles and values of the citizens. Being flexible in another sense would be strengthening oppression and dictatorship.

Mr Mutabazi supports his argument with cases of ancient Greece and Rome, without even clarifying which ancient period he is referring to. History taught us that ancient Greece ranges between the 9<sup>th</sup> century before Christ and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century after Christ and that the roman ancient ended in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after Christ. If these are the times he is referring to, it means that we must still think and act as if we were in 14<sup>th</sup> century and back. Why not referring to the current practices in those two nations? What is the point of taking us back for such a long time? We should rather be progressist!

Mr Mutabazi argues that a leader could conceivably be re-elected to the same seat over and over as long as their popularity holds up, and surely he is making a joke here. From January 1993 until January 2001, the presidency of Bill Clinton was marked by the highest economic growth and prosperity of his country than ever before. The same phenomenon happened in the UK during the tenure of Tony Blair. Did they make it a pretext to overstay in power? The question arises then to Mr Mutabazi as to how he measures popularity in a country such as Rwanda, where, as he knows (even if he may not believe it), people are not free to talk or to criticize the government and its officials? In America, two terms for a President are constitutionally defined as two mandates of four years each that cannot be modified by any individuals. Two terms in USA mean eight years as for the Rwandan Constitution one term is seven years, almost twice one American President's term. It has been 15 years since Kagame is officially the President, and amazingly enough in 2017, he would have spent 17 years in the office, plus the 6 years he was ruling behind the scene when Bizimungu was President.

Furthermore, Mr Mutabazi cites countries such as Canada, France, UK, Sweden, Belgium and Italy as examples of countries without term limits to validate his point. Must we really compare ourselves against these advanced nations? If the answer is yes, is this their only best practice to inspire us? What about their ways of accessing power, democratic governance, free and fair elections, etc. Mr Mutabazi's argument was even made more biased when he cites misleading information about some of these countries; Tony Blair won three consecutive elections for his party, but he only served two terms. A proper homework should have been done before putting pen to paper. What Mr Mutabazi could have borne in mind once more, was not to mix up kingdoms and republican systems of governance. In a Kingdom, a monarch is like a symbol, even though the democratic process continues where political parties compete using tools as defined in their constitutions. In France, things work totally different as a President can only serve 10 years maximum if re-elected.

If these are Mutabazi's compelling examples, he should have shown whether these leaders also changed their constitutions to stay in power as it is intended in the case of Rwanda. He clearly chose incorrect examples, as you failed to show, in a more comprehensive way the similarities between Rwanda and those countries in this succession process. These nations followed their constitutions for their leaders to continue to rule. Why can't we follow our own constitution if we are to compare ourselves against them? Mr Mutabazi knows very well how Kagame ascended to power, and his tenure of office has been characterised by lack of political activity by opposition political parties (alarming situation recently confirmed by Russ Feingold), lack of freedom of speech (Rwanda ranks 162<sup>nd</sup> out of 180 countries in RSF 2014 report), interference in justice system, conflicts with neighbours, oppression, killings and assassinations of opponents, and now he is experiencing a declining credibility. On which grounds should we then continue to have such a person as a head of state?

As Mr Mutabazi perfectly notes, term-limits ensure a wider range of perspectives in government and prevent power from being concentrated in the hands of one person, and we truly believe that this is the ideal and the way to go. However, the concentration of power in the hands of one person in Rwanda is a done deal as cases of people who are jailed or lose their jobs for opposing the constitutional change are rather many. Our focus should be teaching our children about the rule of law, peaceful succession, the only values to send a strong message about African renaissance.

The change we seek is for the sake of democracy and a better reputation of the continent. Instead, according to Mr Mutabazi, we should evaluate our laws. Why evaluate our laws when we can evaluate the way they are upheld by the figures in power and condemn anybody who tries to use any motive or vindication to change them for his/her benefits? The country's achievements are a collective effort rather than the grasps of a single person. And this leaves many to believe that if your tenure of office was good enough, there should be at least one person you should have schooled to be your successor. There is no amount of accomplishments or experience that can justify the monopoly of a public office by individuals, who, in case of Rwanda:

- Drains public funds (Kagame's two jets)
- Impoverishes the rural areas where the majority of people live
- Promotes eye washing activities
- Concentrates all the powers
- Intimidates and kills opponents
- Does not promote reconciliation
- Manipulates data of economic growth (as confirmed by Kagame himself this in Gabiro on March 1, 2015).

In the view of Mr Mutabazi, not having Kagame as President is derailing Rwandans off the course of being self-reliant and truly independent. The big mistake here is to forget that Kagame has been given chances to prove himself able to reconcile the Rwandan people, and respect human rights. He has failed on both accounts. Therefore, Kagame is known as a non-democrat, but as a dictator, who will hardly secure support to achieve his goals and people have become impatient. Gacaca courts have been described as a huge failure, and a practice that opposed Rwandans rather than uniting them. However, Mutabazi and many other Rwandans in the Kagame's camp continue to intoxicate the international community about the fact that Rwandans are "reconciled". Their judgments have been clouded by the economic developments is that they are the sole beneficiaries, thereby disregarding the heights of Kagame's dictatorship over Rwandans.

Historical events always provide good learning circumstances. Mr Mutabazi ends his article with another historical but erroneous comparison of situations. When the Second World War started, FD Roosevelt was in the middle of his second term as the President of the USA, and his decisions, advice and financial supports to the allied powers were proven to be vital in those conditions. As the world was threatened by

NAZI's aggression and Roosevelt as the leader of the super-power, he was approved to prolong his tenure of office. In case of Rwanda, we are not sure which transition we are in as mentioned by Mr Mutabazi, we rather have a President who aggresses other countries, and who enforces himself to stay in power, and comparing him or his practices against those of a man such as FD Roosevelt, is not only sarcasm but also a mockery to democracy. A more reassuring event from USA politics that Mr Mutabazi ignores or chooses not to mention, would have been that of President A. Lincoln who declined a third term despite having been approached by the Congress and the people of the USA to continue. His argument was that taking a third term was unconstitutional.

Nevertheless, we are all Rwandans, and we all love our country, but pretending to be more patriotic than others is a disease and is selfish. However, remembering that patriotism is supporting your country all the time, and your government when it deserves it (Mark Twain) should be an undisputable principle. Time has come to strive to change the image of the continent and its people, and the stubbornness in the status quo results in portraying us as people locked in time.

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