



Magazine

# The Global Elite’s Favorite Strongman

By JEFFREY GETTLEMANSEPT. 4, 2013





Nadav Kander for The New York Times

Paul Kagame, the president of Rwanda, agreed to meet me at 11 a.m. on a recent Saturday. Kagame's office is on top of a hill near the center of Kigali, Rwanda's capital, and I took a taxi there, driven by a man in a suit and tie. Whenever I'm in Kigali, I am always impressed by how spotless it is, how the city hums with efficiency, which is all the more remarkable considering

that Rwanda remains one of the poorest nations in the world. Even on a Saturday morning, platoons of women in white gloves rhythmically swept the streets, softly singing to themselves. I passed the Union Trade Center mall in the middle of town, where traffic circulates smoothly around a giant fountain. There was no garbage in the streets and none of the black plastic bags that get tangled up in the fences and trees of so many other African cities — Kagame's government has banned them. There were no homeless youth sleeping on the sidewalks or huffing glue to kill their hunger. In Rwanda, vagrants and petty criminals have been scooped up by the police and sent to a youth "rehabilitation center" on an island in the middle of Lake Kivu that some Rwandan officials jokingly call their Hawaii — because it is so lush and beautiful — though people in Kigali whisper about it as if it were Alcatraz. There aren't even large slums in Kigali, because the government simply doesn't allow them.

The night before, I strolled back to my hotel from a restaurant well past midnight — a stupid idea in just about any other African capital. But Rwanda is one of the safest places I've been, this side of Zurich, which is hard to reconcile with the fact that less than 20 years ago more civilians were murdered here in a three-month spree of madness than during just about any other three-month period in human history, including the Holocaust. During Rwanda's genocide, the majority Hutus turned on the minority Tutsis, slaughtering an estimated one million men, women and children, most dispatched by machetes or crude clubs. Rwandans say it is difficult for any outsider to appreciate how horrifying it was. Nowadays, it's hard to find even a jaywalker.

**No country in Africa**, if not the world, has so thoroughly turned itself around in so short a time, and Kagame has shrewdly directed the transformation. Measured against many of his colleagues, like the megalomaniac Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who ran a beautiful, prosperous nation straight into the ground, or the Democratic Republic of Congo's amiable but feckless Joseph Kabila, who is said to play video games while his country falls apart, Kagame seems like a godsend. Spartan, stoic, analytical and austere, he routinely stays up to 2 or 3 a.m. to thumb through back issues of *The Economist* or study progress reports from red-dirt villages across his country, constantly searching for better, more efficient ways to stretch the billion dollars his government gets each year from donor nations that hold him up as a shining example of what aid money can do in Africa. He is a regular at Davos, the world economic forum, and friendly with powerful people, including Bill Gates and Bono. The Clinton Global Initiative honored him with a Global Citizen award, and Bill Clinton said that Kagame "freed the heart and the mind of his people."

This praise comes in part because Kagame has made indisputable progress fighting the single greatest ill in Africa: poverty. Rwanda is still very poor — the average Rwandan lives on less than \$1.50 a day — but it is a lot less poor than it used to be. Kagame's government has reduced child mortality by 70 percent; expanded the economy by an average of 8 percent annually over the past five years; and set up a national health-insurance program — which Western experts had said was impossible in a destitute African country. Progressive in many ways, Kagame has pushed for more women in political office, and today Rwanda has a higher percentage of them in Parliament than any other country. His countless devotees, at home and abroad, say he has also delicately re-engineered Rwandan society to defuse ethnic rivalry, the issue that exploded there in 1994 and that stalks so many African countries, often dragging them into civil war.

But Kagame may be the most complicated leader in Africa. The question is not so much about his results but his methods. He has a reputation for being merciless and brutal, and as the accolades have stacked up, he has cracked down on his own people and covertly supported murderous rebel groups in neighboring Congo. At least, that is what a growing number of critics say, including high-ranking United Nations officials and Western diplomats, not to mention the countless Rwandan dissidents who have recently fled. They argue that Kagame's tidy, up-and-coming little country, sometimes described as the Singapore of Africa, is now one of the most straitjacketed in the world. Few people inside Rwanda feel comfortable speaking freely about the president, and many aspects of life are dictated by the government — Kagame's administration recently embarked on an "eradication campaign" of all grass-roofed huts, which the government meticulously counted (in 2009 there were 124,671). In some areas of the country, there are rules, enforced by village commissars, banning people from dressing in dirty clothes or sharing straws when drinking from a traditional pot of beer, even in their own homes, because the government considers it unhygienic. Many Rwandans told me that they feel as if their president is personally watching them. "It's like there's an invisible eye everywhere," said Alice Muhirwa, a member of an opposition political party. "Kagame's eye."

The United States has a long history, of course, of putting aside concerns

over human rights and democratic principles and supporting strongmen who can protect its strategic interests, like keeping the oil flowing or Communist sympathizers or Muslim extremists in check. But what makes the Kagame situation different from the one in Egypt, say, where the army has mowed down crowds, or in Saudi Arabia, where misogynistic princes rule, is that there is no obvious strategic American interest in Rwanda. It is a tiny country, in the middle of Africa, with few natural resources and no Islamist terrorists. So why has the West — and the United States in particular — been so eager to embrace Kagame, despite his authoritarian tendencies? One diplomat who works in Rwanda told me that Kagame has become a rare symbol of progress on a continent that has an abundance of failed states and a record of paralyzing corruption. Kagame was burnishing the image of the entire billion-dollar aid industry. “You put your money in, and you get results out,” said the diplomat, who insisted he could not talk candidly if he was identified. Yes, Kagame was “utterly ruthless,” the diplomat said, but there was a mutual interest in supporting him, because Kagame was proving that aid to Africa was not a hopeless waste and that poor and broken countries could be fixed with the right leadership. “We needed a success story, and he was it.”

**My taxi let** me off at the gate of the president’s compound, guarded by two soldiers toting Israeli machine guns, another distinctive Kagame touch (I’ve never seen Israeli machine guns in the region before). Kagame’s aides led me through a metal detector and into a cavernous reception room with a peach-colored carpet, large TV monitors for video conferencing, heavy curtains and a coffee table.

As I sat on an elegant wooden chair and waited for Kagame, I steeled myself for a forceful, intimidating presence. I’d seen images of him hundreds of times. An official portrait hangs in just about every government office and major business in Rwanda. This is common across Africa, and in other parts of the world, but in Rwanda the portraits are huge — as big as posters — and of exceptional quality. Kagame stares down from the fluorescent-lighted walls of supermarkets and from within neatly swept ministerial offices, his head slightly tilted, his dark eyes burning with intensity. When I ask Rwandans about Kagame, they often describe him in hyperbolic terms — as either a savior or the Antichrist. Some people even kneel down in front of his portrait, close their eyes and pray to him. One elder in a western Rwandan village told me: “Eighty percent of the people support him, 20 percent don’t. But those 20 percent don’t speak, because they’re afraid.”

So I was surprised when Kagame slipped into the reception room so quietly

that he materialized next to me before I realized it, welcoming me with a shy smile. Taking his seat in a stiff-backed chair, he looked more nervous than I was, his eyes darting around behind black, owl-like glasses. He wore a blue blazer, a pinstriped shirt, slacks and polished black wingtips. I knew Kagame was tall, about 6-foot-2, but I was struck by how thin he was, almost sick-looking, with bony shoulders and delicate wrists.

Kagame, who is 55, grew up in a Ugandan refugee camp in a thatch-roofed hut (like the ones his government has banned), an especially deep humiliation for a Tutsi like him. Tutsi monarchs ruled Rwanda for centuries until the majority Hutus turned the tables in 1959, killing hundreds, possibly thousands, of Tutsis and causing many others, including Kagame's family, to flee for their lives. When Kagame was about 12 and marooned with his family in the Ugandan camp, he asked his father: "Why are we refugees? Why are we here? Why are we like this? What wrong did we do?"

That, Kagame said, was the birth of his political consciousness. "This is where the thing starts," he whispered, fixing his eyes on me. He told me this story at the beginning of the interview, which lasted about three hours. Kagame seemed in an open, expansive and congenial mood. He nodded eagerly at my questions, prefacing his answers with phrases like "if you don't mind" and "you are right." He speaks fluent English, with a thick Rwandan accent. A soldier by training, he joined a Ugandan rebel group shortly out of high school, rose up through the ranks and then did a short stint at the staff college at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., part of the Pentagon's efforts to make African armies more professional.

But Kagame left the program early to help command a Tutsi rebel force that invaded Rwanda in 1990. He would soon become the head of the Rwandan Patriotic Army, which was bent on overthrowing Rwanda's Hutu-led government. In April 1994, after a plane carrying Rwanda's Hutu president was shot down, Hutu extremists exhorted their followers, primarily over the radio, to wipe out the Tutsis. Killing squads swept across the hillsides — until Kagame's rebel army stormed the capital, putting an end to the genocide and seizing power. Kagame became defense minister, vice president and then president, and under the Rwandan constitution, which limits the president to two seven-year terms, he should be out of office in 2017. But the talk in Kigali at the moment is that he may encourage Parliament to adjust the constitution so he can run again. When I asked one of Kagame's aides about this, she said Kagame has addressed this before, saying that the security and well-being of the Rwandan people cannot be reduced to a simple question of third term or no third term. It

appears that he has no plans to give up power.

Though Rwanda has made tremendous strides, the country is still a demographic time bomb. It's already one of the most densely populated in Africa — its 11 million people squeezed into a space smaller than Maryland — and despite a recent free vasectomy program, Rwanda still has an alarmingly high birthrate. Most Rwandans are peasants, their lives inexorably yoked to the land, and just about every inch of that land, from the papyrus swamps to the cloud-shrouded mountaintops, is spoken for. When I asked Kagame how he planned to address this, he said one of his top priorities was encouraging women to stop having so many children. “We educated the woman both in school and generally in society to say: ‘No,’ ” he told me, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. “Go for something else. You deserve better.” Changing such deep-seated attitudes takes a long time, he said, “but it works.”

Even Kagame's most strident critics acknowledge that much has improved under his stewardship. Rwandan life expectancy, for instance, has increased to 56 years, from 36 in 1994. Malaria used to be a huge killer, but Kagame's government has embarked on a wide-scale spraying campaign and has distributed millions of nets to protect people when they are sleeping — malarial mosquitoes tend to feed at night — and malaria-related deaths plummeted 85 percent between 2005 and 2011.

Kagame has built hundreds of new schools and laid miles of high-speed fiber-optic lines, wisely investing in infrastructure projects, including environmentally sound ones like a coming geothermal energy plant. Rwanda now has one of the fastest-growing economies on the continent, despite the fact that it doesn't have significant mineral deposits and is landlocked, deep in the green heart of Africa, hundreds of miles from the sea. Granted, Rwanda will never be a Singapore-like industrial hub — it simply costs too much to bring in raw materials, and as Kagame explained, many Rwandan workers lack marketable skills. But Kagame hopes to make more money from coffee, tea and gorillas — Rwanda is home to some of the last remaining mountain gorillas, and each year throngs of Western tourists pay thousands of dollars to see them.

“Rwanda has surpassed everybody's expectations and continues to amaze,” says Jendayi Frazer, a former assistant secretary of state for African Affairs,



who helped steer tens of millions of dollars in American aid to Rwanda.



Kigali, the Rwandan capital, has become one of the cleanest and safest places in Africa. David Southwood for The New York Times

**That aid flows** to Rwanda because Kagame is a celebrated manager. He's a hands-on chief executive who is less interested in ideology than in making things work. He loves new technology — he's an avid tweeter — and is very good at breaking sprawling, ambitious projects into manageable chunks. Rwanda jumped to 52nd last year, from 158th in 2005, on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business annual rating, precisely because Kagame set up a special unit within his government, which broke down the World Bank's ratings system, category by category, and figured out exactly what was needed to improve on each criterion.

Corruption, Kagame told me, is "like a weevil." It eats its way into the flesh of a country and "just kills a nation." He said this after an aide gingerly placed a couple of bottles of mineral water in front of us. Someone had shut off the air-conditioner, and it was getting warm in the reception room. I



cracked the plastic seal and guzzled about half my bottle. Kagame didn't even touch his.

One innovative way Kagame tightly monitors the various levels of his government is by demanding that officials sign *imihigo*, or goals. The *imihigo* function like corporate performance contracts, multipage documents delineating specific targets, from the number of street signs to be posted in a given year to the tons of pineapples harvested. Kagame's staff printed out a couple of *imihigo* for me, each one signed by Kagame himself. I was struck by the obsessive attention to detail, down to the number of adults in a specific rural district who were going to be taught to read (1,500) to the number of cows inseminated (3,000).

Because Rwanda is so small, it's much easier to implement ambitious plans here than in many other African countries that still have huge swaths of territory cut off from the capital. Several historians told me that Rwanda is unusual in Africa because it has always been tightly controlled. Before Europeans colonized Africa in the 19th century, there were few strong, centralized states. Two exceptions were Rwanda and Ethiopia, where unusually fertile, densely populated highlands gave rise to kingdoms and disciplined militaries that went on to dominate weaker peoples. Even today, Rwanda and Ethiopia are often compared with each other, two postconflict societies with impressive technocratic leadership but also a tradition of authoritarianism and ruthlessness. The same social phenomenon that allowed the Rwandan genocide to unfold with such terrifying swiftness in 1994 also explains how Kagame has turned around his nation so fast today — Rwandans tend to do what their leaders say, whether it's hacking up their neighbors or stringing up mosquito nets.

**One of Kagame's bodyguards**, a short man in a bulging vest, popped into the room a couple of times while we were talking, just to check on things. The sun was beating outside, but the heavy curtains blocked out the light and confused the sense of time. Kagame kept the charm offensive going strong, chatting about improvements in agriculture and how Rwandan farmers were using more fertilizer these days. But when I brought up the growing number of Rwandan dissidents who call him a tyrant, he tensed up.

Kayumba Nyamwasa is the dissident, many Rwandans told me, whom

Kagame fears the most. The two men used to be very close when they were both living in Uganda 30 years ago, and Nyamwasa was an early member of the Tutsi rebels and later chief of staff of the Rwandan Army. When I went to visit him in South Africa this spring, he was quite open about his hatred for Kagame.

“Kagame has become stupidly arrogant,” Nyamwasa told me, listing what he considered Kagame’s biggest mistakes, including meddling in Congo and alienating anyone who disagreed with him. In 2010, after questioning some of Kagame’s decisions and hearing whispers that he was about to be arrested, Nyamwasa swam across a river to escape from Rwanda and eventually made his way to Johannesburg, where he thought he would be safe. One afternoon a few months later, Nyamwasa said, he was pulling into his driveway when he saw a man sprint toward his car, brandishing a pistol. The gunman shot Nyamwasa in the stomach and then tried to finish him off, but the gun jammed. “Kagame was trying to kill me,” Nyamwasa told me. “I have no doubt about it.” Johannesburg is plagued by violent street crime, but Nyamwasa’s assailant didn’t try to steal anything. Six people are now on trial in Johannesburg in connection with the shooting; three of them are Rwandan.

Several dissidents said that Rwanda fields a lethal intelligence service with assassins who can operate anywhere. Rene Claudel Mugenzi, a Rwandan human rights activist living in England, told me that in March 2011, Kagame was on a BBC radio show when Mugenzi called in and asked a provocative question — whether an Arab Spring-like revolution could erupt in Rwanda. A few weeks later, two Scotland Yard bobbies rapped on Mugenzi’s door to deliver a letter. “Reliable intelligence states that the Rwandan government poses an imminent threat to your life,” it read. Mugenzi was stunned. “I never thought they would try to kill me in the U.K.,” he said. (The Rwandan government has denied that it plotted to kill Mugenzi.)

It was hard to square these allegations of Kagame running an international hit squad with the thin, geeky man sitting attentively across from me. When a mosquito buzzed near us, Kagame pushed up his thick glasses and awkwardly swiped at it with his long, spindly fingers. He missed, a couple of times. In response to my questions about the political opposition, he made vague allusions to outspoken dissidents like Nyamwasa, saying they were “thieves” who thrived on the perception “that in Africa nothing good happens, every leader is a dictator, is an oppressor.” At the word “oppressor,” Kagame looked right at me and nervously giggled.

**Nyamwasa warned me** that I should not be fooled by Kagame's cerebral air, that, in fact, he is quite violent. "During war, a lot of things go wrong," Nyamwasa explained. "But Kagame always reacts with violence. He's spiteful. His own troops were scared of him and actually hated him."

David Himbara, another former Kagame confidant who also fled to Johannesburg in 2010, told me a story about Kagame's rage. In 2009, Himbara said, Kagame ordered two subordinates — a finance director and an army captain — into his presidential office, slammed the door and started shouting at them about where they had purchased office curtains. Kagame then picked up the phone, and two guards came in with sticks, Himbara said. Kagame ordered the men to lie face down, and he thrashed them. After five minutes, Kagame seemed to tire, and the bodyguards took over beating the men, as if they had done this before. Himbara said he was sick to his stomach witnessing the scene.

Just about every former colleague of Kagame's I spoke to shared some sort of beating story. Noble Marara, a former driver for Kagame, told me that Kagame whipped him twice, once for driving the wrong truck and another time after someone else backed into a pole. "He really needs help," said Marara, now in exile in England. "If I was to diagnose him, I'd say he has a personality disorder."

Himbara had a different explanation. He thinks that despite Kagame's self-propelled rise to power, he's still deeply insecure. "He barely finished high school," said Himbara, who holds a Ph.D. from Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario, and served as one of Kagame's senior policy advisers. "It was always hard working with him, because we constantly had to figure out how to make him seem like the originator of ideas." He went on, "After I once wrote a speech for him to give, he said to me: 'You think because you have a Ph.D. from Canada you are smarter than me? You are a peasant! You go and read the stupid speech!' And then I would have to say: 'No, sir, you are the president, and in my hands it is a stupid peasant product. But in your hands it is something special.' That's how we had to flatter and appease him," Himbara said. "It was crazy."

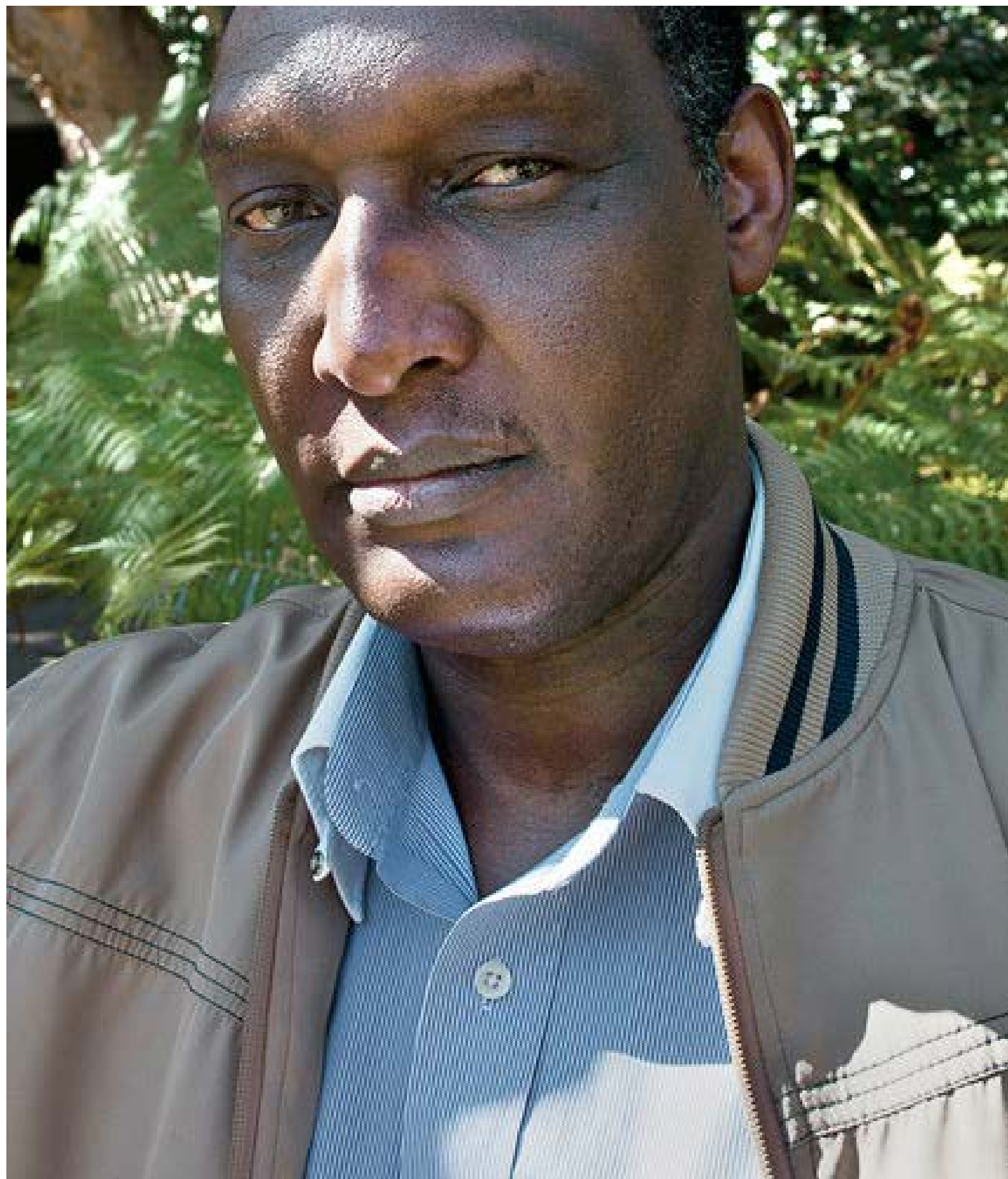
When I asked Kagame about the beatings, he leaned toward me in his seat. We were about three feet apart, then two. I could see the individual gray hairs in his goatee. He didn't interrupt as I detailed my evidence, with names and dates. He didn't deny physically abusing his staff, as I thought he might, though he gave me a watered-down version of the 2009 event that Himbara described, saying that he hadn't swatted anyone with a stick but shoved one of the men so hard that he fell to the floor.

"It's my nature," Kagame said. "I can be very tough, I can make mistakes like that." But when I pressed him on other violent outbursts, he responded irritably, "Do we really need to go into every name, every incident?" He said that hitting people is not "sustainable," which struck me as a strange word to use, as if the only issue with beating your underlings was whether such behavior was effective over the long term.

He grew even testier when I asked him about an expensive trip to New York in 2011. At the time, I heard that he spent more than \$15,000 a night for the presidential suite at the Mandarin Oriental. It seemed out of character for a head of state who prides himself on frugal living, occupying a relatively modest house in central Kigali, not a crystal-chandelier palace like many other African presidents. I began to ask if he thought the Rwandan people would approve of such extravagance when Kagame glared at me and snapped, "Just a moment!"

It was a little scary how quickly he flipped from friendly to imperious. He clearly wasn't used to confrontational questions, especially from a reporter. Kagame's critics say he has snuffed out much of Rwanda's independent media. One Rwandan journalist, Agnes Uwimana Nkusi, was recently given a prison term of four years for insulting the president and endangering national security after she edited a series of articles critical of Kagame. Another, Jean-Leonard Rugambage, was shot in the head on the day he published a story about Kagame's government being suspected of trying to kill Nyamwasa.





Kayumba Nyamwasa, once close to Paul Kagame, has fled to South Africa and is now one of Kagame's chief critics.  
David Southwood for The New York Times



But Kagame quickly calmed himself. He leaned back in his chair and resumed his professorial tone, even injecting a little humor. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to stay in a container,” he said, referring back to the Mandarin Oriental and laughing his self-conscious laugh. “I’ve stayed in trenches and tents. So I don’t need any lesson from anyone coming to tell me how to be modest. No.”

We moved on. One topic I was most curious about was his efforts to neutralize ethnic tension by passing laws that criminalize acts of “sectarianism” and “genocide ideology,” which is defined as “actions which aim at propounding wickedness or inciting hatred,” including “laughing at one’s misfortune.” These laws have been roundly criticized for silencing any discussion of ethnicity, and Kagame’s government is currently revising them. Kagame told me that Rwandans were free to identify with their ethnic groups, as long as they didn’t preach hate.

But when I tried to talk to people in Kigali about the ethnicity question, I didn’t get very far. Most — including a young taxi driver eager to opine on everything from the cost of living to reggae rap — refused to even tell me if they were Hutu or Tutsi, simply saying they were Rwandan. I didn’t want to seem like an instigator, but at the same time, I had heard from Rwandan dissidents outside the country that many Hutus felt oppressed. So one day I drove to the Nyamasheke district, on Rwanda’s far western side, hoping that the distance from the capital might allow people to speak more openly. As I covered the 100 or so miles over a series of hills, I saw men ferrying stacks of freshly sawed wood and women lugging jerrycans of sloshing water and barefoot boys dribbling soccer balls made out of rags. People were everywhere. The busy hills were carved into endless little plots, neat squares of brown and green, bursting with coffee beans, corn, sugarcane and bananas, all worked sunup to sundown by threadbare farmers.

I spent the night with a schoolteacher named Alfred, whom I had met along the road. Alfred lives in a small house with wet floors and a potholder that says “Jesus Loves Me” hanging from the wall. He doesn’t have electricity or plumbing — he draws his water from a pipe about a quarter mile away. He teaches 10 hours straight; many Rwandan schools have become so overcrowded that the government has to run double sessions, rotating children out in the morning and bringing in new ones in the afternoon.

But over a dinner of boiled bananas and a can of sardines cracked open in my honor, Alfred said that his family’s life had improved under Kagame.

“My kids eat more than I did,” he said. “Everything’s up — security, education, health.” I thought maybe Alfred was just praising Kagame because he was a Tutsi as well. But he just laughed when I asked about his ethnicity. “Today we don’t say that,” he said. “But in the past, I was a Hutu.”

The next morning, I met another Hutu man, this one much more critical, who told me that if I used his name, “they will come for me.” This man vented that Tutsis were favored by the government for everything from college scholarships to high-ranking jobs under the guise of an affirmative-action program designed to help “genocide survivors” who, by definition, are Tutsis. The whole system was rigged to keep Tutsis up and Hutus down, he said, and “during the elections, party agents would tear up your ballot if you didn’t vote for Kagame.” During the last election, in 2010, Kagame won 93 percent of the vote after his government effectively banned any major opposition parties from running.

Some Rwandans say that Kagame tries to play down ethnicity simply to cover for the fact that his minority ethnic group, the Tutsis, who account for about 15 percent of the population, control just about everything. If no one can talk about ethnicity, then it’s hard to talk about Tutsi domination. When I asked Kagame about this, he first tried to convince me that Tutsis actually don’t dominate politics or business. When I presented specifics: the health minister, defense minister, foreign minister and finance minister are all Tutsis, along with some of the richest men in the country, he acknowledged that Tutsis might enjoy a few advantages here and there, but this was “by default and not by design.” Many Tutsis like him had lived outside Rwanda, where there were more advantages. When I was openly skeptical, he finally said, “This Hutu and Tutsi thing, if you get lost in it,” he said, getting exasperated, “you get lost in the pettiness of the past of our history, and you end up in a mess.”

**What’s frustrating to many** of Kagame’s critics is that the country’s repression is hardly a secret. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have produced many reports detailing the ways Kagame’s government has clamped down on Rwandan society. After the presidential election in 2010, Western officials grumbled about a “lack of political space” — meaning Rwanda had essentially become a one-party state — but

the spigot of aid to Kagame wasn't turned off. Support from the United States has remained about the same — around \$200 million a year in direct bilateral aid. Accused of many murderous acts over the years, including allowing his troops in the 1990s to hunt down Hutu civilians in Rwanda and even massacre Hutu families who had fled deep into Congo's jungles, Kagame has capitalized on his powerful connections and his record of achievement to deflect criticism. He also exploits Western guilt, pointedly reminding governments that they abandoned Rwanda on its judgment day; some of his biggest fans, like Bill Clinton, have become teary with regret. The message is clear: No one on the outside occupies the moral high ground when it comes to Rwanda, and nobody should tell Kagame what is right or wrong.

"Rwanda isn't an easy one," said one Western official who has worked closely with the Rwandan government on development projects. "Is Kagame repressive? Yes, definitely. Have we talked to him about this, about opening up? All the time." But the official added: "I don't know how fragile things are. I don't have access to the intelligence he has." He said that it was possible that Hutu militants inside Rwanda or in Congo were still trying to overthrow Kagame. "So we give him the benefit of the doubt."

Kagame is not the only African leader who is both impressive and repressive, though he may be the *most* impressive and among the *most* repressive. Yoweri Museveni in Uganda has stabilized his country and paved a lot of roads in his 27 years in office, while harassing journalists and opposition members. Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, who ruled for 21 years and died last summer, built Ethiopia's booming economy but also squashed all dissent. Isaias Afewerki, Eritrea's president, was a charming and progressive leader at one point in his career, but he has since shunned Western aid, locked up dissidents in underground shipping containers and turned his country into the North Korea of Africa. Significantly, all these men were rebel leaders who fought their way up from the trenches to the presidential suite. Perhaps there is something in the rebel experience — the fierce discipline or uncompromising vision — that helps explain why former rebels are so good at organization and administration but horrible at democracy. "These guys never, ever open up," says John Prendergast, a founder of the Enough Project, a nonprofit anti-genocide group. "They just fear it."

Many of the diplomats and analysts I talked to weren't entirely bothered by Kagame's authoritarian streak. Some even told me — and maybe this has something to do with the low expectations for Africa — that this is exactly what the continent needs: more Kagames, more highly skilled strongmen

who can turn around messy, conflict-prone societies and get medicine in the hospitals and police officers on the street and plastic bags out of the trees. Liberties aren't so important in these places, the argument goes, because who can enjoy freedom of speech or freedom of the press when everyone is killing one another? A premium is put on preserving stability and minimizing physical suffering, saving lives from malaria, from hunger, from preventable, poverty-driven diseases that are endemic across Africa.

But donor nations like the United States have drawn a line at Kagame's involvement in Congo, because of the scale of bloodshed there. Last year, United Nations investigators revealed that Kagame's troops crossed into Congo to fight side by side with a notorious rebel group, the M23, which has murdered civilians and gang-raped women, wreaking destruction on a swath of the eastern part of that country. Congo may be one of the world's biggest tragedies, a country blessed with just about every natural resource imaginable — diamonds, copper, gold, oil, water, fertile land — but plagued by a series of interlocking wars that have killed millions of people. A U.N. report from 2002 accused Kagame's army of plundering minerals from Congo and exporting them through Rwanda, at a staggering profit, supposedly with the help of one of the most infamous arms traders, Viktor Bout.

Kagame has always denied any wrongdoing in Congo and strenuously rejected the claim that his government ordered troops into that nation last year, but the United States promptly cut \$200,000 in military aid to Rwanda, a token amount, for sure, but a damning signal nonetheless. Several other Western nations then cut or suspended their aid. It was the first time Kagame had ever lost a major public-relations battle, which is one reason I suspect he agreed to meet me, after years of turning down my requests for an interview; perhaps he felt it was time to engage in some image restoration.

When I brought up Congo, he nodded thoughtfully, knowing where the conversation was headed. He walked me through the complicated recent history between the two countries, starting in the early 1990s, when the Congolese government teamed up with Rwanda's Hutu-led government to try to beat back Kagame's rebel force. After Kagame routed the genocidal Hutu army, many of the militia leaders and army officers who orchestrated

the genocide fled into Congo and continued to attack Rwanda from refugee camps just inside the Congo border. Believing that Congo's government (at the time called Zaire) was harboring the Hutu militants, Kagame invaded Congo in 1996, and the violence has continued to this day. In late August, tensions were mounting between the two countries again after mortar shells were fired from Congo into Rwanda.

One issue historically has been that the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Army has been secretly supporting various Congolese forces to carve out a Tutsi-controlled buffer zone along the border, which for decades has been a porous membrane for the flow of people, animals and goods between Rwanda and Congo. Kagame told me that many Rwandan Tutsis fear that their Tutsi brethren inside Congo could be massacred if Rwanda does not protect them. He acknowledged that some Rwandan churches have been sending money to Congolese rebels, as part of a Tutsi self-protection campaign. But Kagame's critics say that is just a flimsy rationale for interfering in a country with glittering spoils that are easy to grab.

The president also admitted — and this was the first time I was aware of him saying it — that some Rwandan soldiers were indeed fighting inside Congo, but he insisted they were deserters. “At one time, we even had some of our soldiers escape, and they just go,” Kagame said. It was an almost-clever way to explain why Rwandan troops had been spotted inside Congo, but it didn't make much sense. In a place as locked down as Rwanda, how could government soldiers “just go” anywhere without someone at the top ordering it or willingly looking the other way? After I questioned Kagame about this, he adamantly defended himself. “Are you really serious?” he asked. “Why has the United States, with all its might, failed to shut off the border with Mexico for the drugs and everything else that crosses? Is it because the United States is not trying? This thing has its own complexity.”

The sun was now starting to slant through the gaps in the curtains, and Kagame's face began to show the strain of sleeping only four or five hours a night. His answers were getting shorter, his pauses longer. As my time with him wound down, Kagame turned almost melancholy. He rose slowly from his chair, smoothed out his slacks and got ready to say goodbye. “I have all these names associated with me,” he said, “some of which I accept, others which are not fair.” Before I left, he told me, almost in a whisper: “God created me in a very strange way.” ■

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A version of this article appears in print on September 8, 2013, on Page MM38 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Conscience of a Strongman. Today's Paper | [Subscribe](#)

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