

**Gretchen Bauer and Hannah E. Britton, eds.,  
Women in African Parliaments  
Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 2005.**

**Chapter Six  
Rwanda's Paradox:  
Gender Equality or Emerging Authoritarianism?**

**Timothy Longman**

As a result of parliamentary elections held in September and October 2003, Rwanda displaced Sweden as the country with the world's highest percentage of women parliamentarians. The 48.8 percent of seats won by women in the 2003 election for the lower house of parliament marked the culmination of a trend of increased representation for women in Rwanda that began with the emergence of a democracy movement in the early 1990s. Since before the 1994 genocide, women have used their strong presence in Rwandan civil society as a basis for entering politics, while the specific situation for women in post-genocide Rwanda has drawn many more women into the political arena. The most significant explanation for the growth in women's representation, however, has been a strong commitment on the part of the post-genocide government to the inclusion of women and the expansion of women's rights.

While women have assumed numerous important governmental, legislative, and judicial positions in Rwanda since 1994, the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Rwandan government raises serious questions about the meaning of women's participation in a non-democratic political system. While much of the literature on women's political participation in Rwanda, as in much of the world, waxes poetic on the greater commitment of women to peace and reconciliation (Powley 2003, Quick ND, UNIFEM 2004) women politicians in Rwanda are

in fact participating in the adoption and implementation of policies that are compromising individual liberties and increasing national and international insecurity.

### **A Brief Overview of Women's Political Participation in Rwanda**

Colonialism in Rwanda, as in many African states, undermined women's social, economic, and political power. In pre-colonial Rwanda, men dominated most aspects of public life, but women did enjoy several significant avenues of power. Women could hold powerful positions within the religious realm, serving as spirit mediums and priestesses in the Kubandwa cults (Berger 1981) or as traditional healers. Although men occupied most official political positions, women did have political influence. As Learthen Dorsey explains (1994, 345), the most important female political figure, the queen mother, *umugabekasi*, "was a powerful figure in her own right at the *umwami*'s court. While she lived at court, she generally had her own lands, herds of cattle, and clients." The king and the queen mother came from different clans, guaranteeing a degree of distribution of power in the kingdom of Rwanda. Queen mothers were often influential in court intrigue and played a major role in determining royal succession (Newbury 1988, 57-59).

Colonial rule effectively undermined even these limited avenues of power for women. The colonial administration centralized the political system, incorporating autonomous areas into the central kingdom and eliminating the complex system of overlapping chieftaincies that helped distribute power. The introduction of Christianity, supported by state policies that drove indigenous religions underground, undermined women's access to religious authority. Colonial laws and policies also undermined women's economic rights and opportunities. As Elizabeth Powley explains (2003, 10), "It is important to note that the dominant image of female political leadership to emerge from the colonial period is that of treacherous and illegitimate authority."

Rwanda gained independence in 1962 shortly after an ethnically based uprising by the majority Hutu group against the minority Tutsi, whom colonial authorities had used as their agents in indirect rule and given exclusive rights to economic, social, and political power. While the post-independence government articulated a revolutionary rhetoric, claiming to empower the common people who had previously been exploited, it was in many ways quite conservative, closely tied to the powerful Catholic Church. The regime took little interest in women's empowerment, and women were unrepresented in the government. The coup d'état that brought army chief Juvénal Habyarimana to power in 1973 had little impact on the position of women in Rwanda, as the new president also advanced a conservative social agenda that did nothing to improve women's specific economic, social, and political power.

The general situation for women in post-independence Rwanda, ranging from their access to political power to their position in the family, was, thus, quite poor. As progressive priest and human rights activist André Sibomana explained shortly after the 1994 genocide:

Rwandan women have an unenviable status. They are completely subjected to the authority of their husband and of their community. They do the bulk of the domestic work and work on the land. They often seem to carry life on their shoulders and in their bodies like an unbearable burden (1999, 31).

Villia Jefromovas points out that difficulties for women are rooted not simply in culture but in law as well:

Legally, married women in Rwanda had severely circumscribed rights. They could vote, but their husbands' consent was required for them to engage in commerce, register a business, buy land, act as a witness, or undertake court

action...In principle, unmarried women had full legal status under Rwandan law; however, socially they were wards of their fathers and brothers (2002, 98-99).

Since the 1980s, women's involvement in civil society has served as a base for expanded social and political empowerment that has helped to increase women's representation in parliament and other government institutions. Initially post-independence Rwanda had a very weak civil society. The Habyarimana regime established a single political party in 1975, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND) that sought to subsume all political and social activity under its umbrella, including women's organizations. Women were involved in organizations sponsored by the party-state, such as the formerly independent consumer's cooperative, TRAFIPRO, but these provided few opportunities for women's empowerment, while the official women's group of the party promoted a conservative image of women's role in society that restricted women to the private realm and encouraged obedience of women to their husbands.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Rwandans formed numerous organizations outside party-state control. Most of these organizations were not overtly political but responded to very practical social needs, yet they created a social space independent of the party-state and helped to create a thriving civil society. Women, driven by economic necessity, were a primary force behind the development of Rwandan civil society. Because of an economic downturn that resulted from overpopulation, the collapse of coffee prices, and government incompetence and corruption, much of civil society organizing focused on economic issues. Churches and other organizations sponsored development cooperatives and other economic projects both at the local and national levels, and women, who were largely neglected by government-sponsored development programs, became a major constituent of these groups (Longman 1999). During

this period, women founded a number of important groups focused specifically on women's interests and rights, such as Duterembere, a women's credit association, Haguruka, a women's legal aid society, and Reseau des Femmes, a network of women's development groups throughout Rwanda.

Beginning in 1989, Rwanda's civil society became active in a movement to demand democratization and political reform in the country. Women took prominent positions in more overtly political civil society organizations, such as new human rights groups. For example, after mass arrests following an attack on Rwanda in October 1990, Monique Mujawamariya organized the Rwandan Association for Human Rights and Civil Liberties and became its executive secretary.<sup>1</sup> Women were among the activists who pressured the government to reform, and when the MRND gave up its political monopoly in 1991, women became leaders in several of the new opposition political parties. Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a moderate Hutu official in the Ministry of Commerce and activist in the Democratic and Republican Movement (MDR), was named Minister of Education in the first multi-party government in March 1992, and in July 1993, she was named prime minister, making her the third female prime minister in Africa, after Elisabeth Domitien in the Central African Republic in the 1970s and Sylvie Kinigi named a week earlier in neighboring Burundi.

### **Women in the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath**

The 1994 genocide was organized by a group of powerful government officials, military officers, and business people from the Hutu majority group who sought to use violence to reverse the political reforms of the preceding years and reassert their political power. The violence they launched targeted moderate Hutu, including opposition political party leaders and civil society

activists, as well as all members of the Tutsi minority group, who were considered accomplices of the invading Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).<sup>2</sup> The anti-Tutsi violence surrounding independence, which brought a Hutu majority government to power, and continuing violence against Tutsi in the early 1960s and again in 1973 had targeted primarily men, while sparing women. In sharp contrast, in the 1994 genocide women were specifically targeted, and sexual violence was widespread. The violence in 1994 was much more widespread than anything known in Rwanda before, in part because of the strong ideology used to encourage it and the elimination of limits that had previously protected women, children, and the elderly. In fact, the ideology that promoted the genocide portrayed Tutsi women as seductresses who would use their sexuality to trick and entrap Hutu men, and it called Hutu who married or associated with Tutsi women traitors. Such imagery ultimately promoted sexual violence against women, which was used extensively as a weapon in the genocide (Nowrojee 1996).<sup>3</sup>

Christopher Taylor (1999) argues that the widespread sexual violence during the genocide represented in part a backlash against the social and political advances that women had made in the previous decade. Hence, he argues, the genocide had a clearly gendered aspect. Certainly the genocidal forces aggressively targeted women politicians and activists. Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana was among the first people sought out by the Presidential Guard, while they also sought out other prominent women such as Mujawamariya, who managed to escape. The violence wiped out the leadership of many women's organizations, as well as human rights and development groups.

The 1994 genocide ultimately left Rwanda devastated, with as many as 800,000 people dead from the genocide and war, millions displaced, the country's infrastructure shattered, and a new government placed in power by the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front. In the aftermath of

the genocide, Rwandan women were left in a particularly difficult position. Thousands of women were widowed by the violence, many left to raise children on their own. Property and inheritance laws developed during the colonial era placed the thousands of new women heads of family in a legally vulnerable position with tenuous claims to their husband's homes and land. Many women, both Tutsi survivors and Hutu women returning from refugee camps, found their homes either destroyed or occupied. Women also faced serious social stigma because of rape during the genocide and in many cases the birth of children from those rapes. The extensive sexual violence in the genocide also left many women infected with HIV/AIDS (Nowrojee 1996; Newbury and Baldwin 2000a).

While the genocide and war devastated women's groups, with many leaders and members dead or in exile, the intense problems facing women in the post-conflict period inspired women's organizations to assume an important social role. As Newbury and Baldwin explain:

[I]n the aftermath of the conflicts, women's organizations, both new and old, took a leading role in efforts to help women reconstruct their lives through emergency material assistance, counseling, vocational training, and assistance with income-earning activities. Many organizations provided a space where women could reestablish social ties, seek solace, and find support (2000b, 4).

Existing groups such as Duterembere, Haguruka, and Reseau des Femmes found their work substantially expanded, while a range of new organizations emerged to deal with the specific problems of women in the post-genocide period. Newbury and Baldwin (2000b, 5-6) identify the primary activities of women's groups after the genocide as providing shelter, supporting income-generating activities, providing health care and psychotherapy as well as the political tasks of providing organizational and civic training and defending women's rights. An

organization of widowed Tutsi genocide survivors, Avega, assumed a prominent role not only in providing assistance to genocide widows but also pressuring the government to provide widows with services and assistance. A group of dynamic returned Tutsi exiles from Congo established Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe as an umbrella group for women's organizations to provide a unified lobbying voice. Pro-Femmes brings together 40 member groups, including Réseau des Femmes, which is itself an umbrella group of development cooperatives, hence giving it contact with a large number of Rwandan women.<sup>4</sup>

These women's groups have enjoyed growing public influence, which they have been able to translate into a degree of political power. Pro-Femmes has taken the lead in lobbying the government on a series of women's issues, and they have gained concessions from both the executive and legislature. Working closely with the Forum for Women Parliamentarians, they pushed successfully for the adoption of a law banning discrimination against women as well as for an important reform of inheritance laws that granted women the right to inherit their husband's property. They also pushed successfully for a law mandating harsher sentences for those found guilty of rape.<sup>5</sup>

The extensive involvement of women in Rwandan civil society has been a major reason for the expansion of women's representation in the Rwandan National Assembly for at least two reasons. First, experience in civil society has become an important basis for entering politics. Several people interviewed by the author complained, in jest yet expressing a true problem, that the best women in civil society keep getting drawn into government, named to commissions or ministries or the national assembly. Judith Kanakuze is an excellent example of how women have moved from civil society to public office. After the genocide, Kanakuze became head of Duterembere, then moved over to become head of Réseau des Femmes, the umbrella women's

development organization. In 2001, she was named to be one of twelve commissioners on the Constitutional Commission, charged with drafting a new constitution for Rwanda.<sup>6</sup> When elections were held in 2003, she was named a member of the national assembly. Bernadette Mukarutabana is another example, who ran as an RPF candidate in 2003 after having worked for several human rights organizations.<sup>7</sup> Many other women now involved in politics started in women's organizations or in other civil society organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The second reason that women's involvement in civil society has helped to promote women's representation is that women's groups have actively promoted the legitimacy and importance of women holding office. Women's groups have promoted government policies setting aside reserved positions for women. They have also sought to encourage the population to support the candidacy of women through educational programs. Pro-Femmes, for example, held extensive public education programs prior to March 2001 local elections, October 2001 elections of gacaca judges, and the October 2003 national assembly elections. Women already in the National Assembly also actively campaigned for the election of more women.<sup>9</sup> The results were impressive, as even where quotas were not in place, women won a large portion of positions. For example, approximately 27 percent of those elected gacaca judges were women.

### **Women and the RPF**

In addition to the strong presence of women in Rwandan civil society, the substantial support within the Rwandan Patriotic Front for women's representation helps to explain the growth of women's presence in parliament. The leaders of the RPF have demonstrated considerable commitment to the expansion of female representation, not only appointing women to top government posts but also establishing policies that promote the representation of women at all

levels government. Several women are in influential positions within the top of the RPF hierarchy, and the RPF has consistently articulated its support for women's rights, including the right for women to hold public office.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front was founded in Uganda in the 1980s by Rwandan Tutsi refugees. Under the second period of President Milton Obote's rule in the 1980s, Rwandans in Uganda – both refugees and economic migrants – faced considerable persecution. In 1982, several thousand refugees tried to flee back into Rwanda after being attacked by the Ugandan military, but they were turned away at the border by Rwandan government troops, acting on orders from President Habyarimana, who claimed that Rwanda did not have sufficient land to welcome them home. In the face of persecution in Uganda, a number of Rwandans became involved in the National Resistance Army, the rebel group that brought Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986. When Museveni became president, he adopted policies favorable to the Rwandans, granting them citizenship, and several Rwandan Tutsis held important military posts, including Paul Kagame, who served as head of intelligence. Nevertheless, the position of Rwandans in Uganda remained tenuous, since many Ugandans did not accept their right to Ugandan citizenship and were angry over the prominence and success of some Rwandans in Uganda. Their insecure position in Uganda, nostalgia for their homeland, and a sense of empowerment that came from their participation in a movement that successfully took power in Uganda inspired some Rwandans from the National Resistance Movement (NRM) to form their own movement to take power in Rwanda (Prunier 1997).

The Ugandan origins of the RPF have deeply influenced its policies since taking power, including its policies on women's rights and inclusion. The organization and military tactics of the RPF and its armed wing, the Rwandan Patriotic Army, closely followed the model of

Museveni's National Resistance Movement and National Resistance Army, proving as militarily successful in Rwanda as they had in Uganda, sweeping the RPF to victory in July 1994. Like Museveni's NRM, the Rwandan Patriotic Front denied being a political party after taking power and instead insisted on being called a "movement," even as it dominated Rwandan political life. Also like the NRM, the RPF not only gave many women positions within its own ranks but established quota systems for women in government positions. A decentralization program instituted by the national government in 2001 reorganized local administration, creating local government committees chosen through a tiered system of voting. At each level of local administration – the cell, sector, and district – a committee of seven was selected, including one position for a women's representative, chosen through a special ballot for women, and another position for a youth representative, chosen through a special ballot for youth. As part of the decentralization program, the RPF created women's councils at all levels of government (Powley 2003).

The new constitution adopted in June 2003 institutionalized the practice of reserved positions for women and youth. After a process that included a consultative period, drafting by a constitutional committee, and revisions by the Transitional National Assembly, Rwanda adopted a new constitution in June 2003 in a special national referendum. The constitution reserved 30 percent of its seats for women. Article 76 states that:

The Chamber of Deputies is composed of eighty (80) members consisting of:  
... twenty-four (24) members of the female sex with two per Province and the City of Kigali elected by the Councils of Districts, of Cities, and of the City of Kigali, to which are added the Executive Committees of the women's organizations at the level of the Province, City of Kigali, Districts, and Sectors.

Two seats were reserved for members elected by the national youth council, and one was reserved for a member elected by the Federation of Associations of the Handicapped.

The rise in women's participation cannot be attributed to quotas alone, however, since the number of women in non-reserved elected seats has also increased dramatically. For example, the percentage of women elected to cell-level councils in 1999, before quotas were in effect, was 13.7 percent. The quota system in 2001 local-level elections guaranteed 14.3 percent of seats would go to women, but nearly double that percentage won seats in the 2001 elections, with women gaining 27 percent of seats. Similarly, the constitutional quota for the lower house of the National Assembly guaranteed women 30 percent of seats, but in the end women won 48.8 percent of the seats in the 2003 parliamentary elections (Powley 2003, 2). Furthermore, women have gained strong representation in elections where no quotas were involved, as in the election of *gacaca* judges, where women won 35 percent of seats as judges (Unifem 2004).

Whatever criticisms can be made of the authoritarian practices of the leaders of the RPF (a problem discussed below), they have nevertheless publicly demonstrated a strong commitment to expanding rights and representation for women. A number of RPF officials, including President Paul Kagame and key ministry officials, such as Protais Musoni, the main force behind important policies such as decentralization, have repeatedly articulated strong support for women's role in government and society. Furthermore, the RPF has placed women in important and influential positions at all levels of government. For example, Rose Kabuye was a Lieutenant Colonel in the RPA and was known to be a close confidant of RPF leader Kagame during the first years of RPF rule. She became the mayor of Kigali in 1994 and later served as a member of the national assembly, where she chaired the Security and Defense Committee. In recent years, she has reportedly fallen out of favor with President Kagame, though she has continued to hold

important positions, such as serving on the Political and Judicial Commission, which oversaw reforms to Rwanda's judicial system. Another woman in the inner circle of RPF power, Soline Nyirahabimana, has seen her influence rise as Rose Kabuye's has declined. Nyirahabimana served as a member of the National Commission for Human Rights. She has become a major advisor to the president, first serving as a legal advisor and now serving as Minister of State for the Office of the President.<sup>10</sup>

Although technically a Government of National Unity from 1994 until 2003, the RPF clearly dominated the government, and the RPF influence helped to guarantee excellent representation for women in key positions. Women have served as ministers or ministers of state in the ministries of Justice; Lands, Resettlement, and Environment; Health; and various other ministries. The inclusion of women ministers in governments created by the RPF continues a trend begun during the democracy movement.

Governments named by Habyarimana in 1987, 1989, and 1990 contained no women, but the new opposition parties that formed after their legalization in 1991 pressured the government to address women's rights as a significant issue. The first multiparty government named April 16, 1992, created a ministry of Family and Women's Promotion, headed by a woman from the MRND and also included Agathe Uwilingiyimana as Minister of Primary and Secondary Education. The second multiparty government named on July 18, 1993, had not only Uwilingiyimana as prime minister but a woman as Minister of Justice as well as Minister of Family and Women's Promotion. A government proposed as part of the implementation of the Arusha Peace Accords in 1994 but never installed would have increased the number of women ministers to five, including the Ministers of Commerce, Industry and Artisanry and Work and Social Affairs (Guichaoua 1995, 752-759). Although the first post-genocide government named

by the RPF included only two women ministers, subsequent governments have increased the number of women ministers. The new government installed after elections in 2003 included four women out of 17 ministers and five out of 11 ministers of state, with cabinet rank.

Women have also been named to other key government posts in the Government of National Unity and the subsequent RPF government. Aloisea Inyumba served as governor of Rural Kigali Province and later served as president of the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation. In 2001, Aloysie Cyanzayire was named president of the Sixth Chamber of the Supreme Court, which was charged with overseeing the gacaca trials. After a 2004 restructuring of the courts, she became president of the entire Supreme Court. Another woman, Fatuma, has served as executive secretary of the important National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation. Three of the twelve constitutional commission members were women.

The large number of women in prominent national positions as well as women occupying local government posts has normalized the involvement of women in politics in Rwanda. During the pro-democracy movement of the early 1990s, empowerment of women was an important issue, but it also met with considerable resistance – in practice if not fully articulated. The RPF's commitment to placing women in political positions at all levels of government and administration has meant that most Rwandans have had contact with women officials. In the gacaca trials that I have observed, women dominated the proceedings in several communities. In this context, women's participation becomes the norm rather than an exception, and voters are thus more willing to take seriously women's candidacy for parliament.

## **Women in the Rwandan National Assembly**

Experience in both civil society and government have served as vehicles for women to enter parliament. The first woman to serve in the Chamber of Deputies took office in 1965, but under both the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes, the number of women parliamentarians remained fairly small. Habyarimana changed the name of the parliament to the National Council of Development, reflecting the regime's interest in economic development, and he did gradually increase the number of women in office. By 1988, the Council included 12 women among its 70 members, or 17.1 percent. The democracy movement that emerged in 1990 involved a number of women, some of whom had served in the government or civil service, many others of whom had been involved in civil society. Several of the opposition parties embraced women's rights as an important issue. Yet this commitment to women's rights would not necessarily have increased women's representation in parliament. Most of the opposition politicians had previously served in the government or administration, realms dominated by men. Each of the opposition parties was dominated by men who were interested in gaining power for themselves, which left few positions available for women. The list of proposed parliamentarians put forth after the Arusha Accords included the names of only three women out of 70 deputies, fewer than the number of women ministers in the proposed government (Guichaoua 1995).

The RPF, however, came into power with a strong commitment not only to women's rights but also to women's representation. After the RPF took power, the Transitional National Parliament installed in November 1994 included ten women, including three of the 13 RPF deputies (Guichaoua 1995, 762-767). The number of women in parliament steadily increased during the period of transition (1994-2003). By 1999, over a quarter of parliamentarians were women. Prior to the 2003 elections, women constituted 25.7 percent of parliament.

As a result of the substantial number of women who have held national office, served in local government, or served in parliament during the transition period, many well qualified women were available to run for parliament in the September-October elections held after the adoption of the 2003 constitution. The constitution guaranteed women 24 seats, or 30 percent of the 80 seats in the lower house. These reserved seats were elected through a woman-only ballot by provincial women's councils on October 2 and brought into parliament primarily women active at the regional level.

Fifty-three of the parliamentary seats were chosen through a party-list system of voting. According to the constitution, these party lists “are composed respecting the principle of national unity ... and respecting the principle of equal access for women and men to the electoral mandate and elective function ... .”<sup>11</sup> While not setting any quota for women in these seats, the constitution nevertheless did encourage the inclusion of women on party lists. A substantial number of women sought candidacy in the non-reserved seats, and a number did gain positions on the party lists. The RPF and a group of smaller affiliated parties won 73.8 percent of the vote and earned 40 seats, while the Social Democratic Party won 12.3 percent and seven seats and the Liberal Party won 10.6 percent of the vote and six seats (ElectionWorld 2003). Women won 15 of the non-reserved seats, for a total of 39 out of the 80 seats.

The constitution also sets a quota of 30 percent women for the Senate, the upper house of Rwanda's parliament. The senate is an appointed body, with members appointed by provincial councils, the political parties, the universities, and eight seats named by the President “to ensure the representation of historically marginalized communities. Six women were named to the senate (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2003) , and this number was ultimately boosted to 9 out of 26

seats. Hence, women constitute an amazing 48.8 percent of seats in the lower house and 45 percent of the entire parliament.

The women members of Rwanda's parliament came from similar backgrounds, regardless of the method of their election. Many had already served in government posts. For example, Dr. Odette Nyiramirimo, who was appointed senator by the party forum, had formerly served as Minister of State for Health. Immaculée Kayuma Gahima, the senator for Butare Province, had served as a minister. Agnes Mukazibera, chosen as a deputy on the RPF list, was former secretary general of the Ministry of Youth. Many others came from civil society. For example, women chosen on the RPF party list included Bernadette Kanzayire was formerly president of the Association des Volontiers de la Paix, a human rights group, and Bernadette Mukarutabana was the head of CLADHO, the umbrella organization for Rwandan human rights groups. Some women chosen for parliament combined experience in both government and civil society, like Judith Kanakuze, from Réseau des Femmes and the Constitutional Commission, chosen as a women's representative from Cyangugu.

The women in Rwanda's parliament formed a caucus in the mid-1990s known as the Forum of Women Parliamentarians. Women's groups such as Pro-Femme have worked closely with the Forum on legislation such as the revision of inheritance laws and the law banning discrimination against women. Leaders of Pro-Femme identified the presence of women in parliament as an important factor in getting their legislation passed. The women parliamentarians were open to serving as a contact for women's groups. Joining together in the Forum has also strengthened the power of women parliamentarians, as they are able to act in a bloc.

## **Representation in an Authoritarian State**

Many analysts and activists assume that increased women's representation will transform the nature of politics in Rwanda. In an interview with Women Waging Peace, Lieutenant Colonel Rose Kabuye claimed,

Women look out for their interests and those of their children; they have a vested interest in peace. ... We want our voices to be heard. When can we be the ones to sit at the head of the table? As women gain ground in local leadership positions, we will gradually begin to get more national opportunities. And if we're there, it will make a difference – a big difference (“Spotlight” 2004).

Many organizations, such as Women Waging Peace, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women for Women International, and UNIFEM, have suggested that the expansion of women's representation in Rwanda will naturally or necessarily lead to a more peaceful and democratic society.

Yet the significance of women's high level of representation in parliament and in other governmental institutions is uncertain given the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Rwandan state since 1994. Immediately after taking power, the RPF established a multiparty government that was widely representative. This first government of national unity included moderate politicians from the Hutu ethnic group in important positions, including both the president and prime minister and the ministers of justice, interior, and foreign affairs, while a Tutsi genocide survivor was named speaker of the national assembly. In mid-1995, however, five of the most prominent Hutu in the government, including Prime Minister Faustin Twagiramungu, resigned in protest over their lack of real power, complaining that RPF officers below them in their ministries actually made decisions for the government. Over time, power has been increasingly

concentrated in the hands of former Tutsi refugees and the RPF, while Paul Kagame has increased his own personal power substantially. In January 2000, the speaker of the national assembly was driven from office, and the next month, the prime minister resigned. On March 23, 2000, President Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu RPF member resigned. Each of these positions was filled by someone more closely allied with Paul Kagame, while Kagame himself became the new president (Reyntjens 2004, 180-181).

The consolidation of effective political power in the hands of Kagame and a small group of his associates has been accompanied by an increasing intolerance for independent expression and political dissent. Anyone who publicly criticizes the regime risks being labeled “divisionist,” a supporter of social division and genocide. When former President Bizimungu launched a new political party in 2001, promising to unite all Rwandans, in contrast to what he called the RPF’s exclusionary policies, he was accused of supporting genocide and placed under house arrest. Independent civil society organizations have been systematically bullied by the RPF, being either forced to conform to RPF directives or face dissolution (ICG 2002). The much promoted “transition to democracy” was in fact tightly controlled and resulted in greater consolidation of power by the RPF, even as it gave an illusion of power distribution. In the first local elections after a decentralization program in 2001, RPF officials carefully selected candidates of their choosing, threatening and intimidating others who were interested in seeking office (ICG 2001). The same policy was used for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2003. Former prime minister Faustin Twagiramungu returned to Rwanda to stand as a candidate for political office, but his political party, the MDR, was disbanded, while he was forbidden from campaigning (Human Rights Watch 2003). In the end, official results of the August 25 presidential elections gave sitting president Kagame 95.1 percent of the vote, an outcome that

believes the purported democratic nature of the vote. The European Union Observation Mission uncovered substantial harassment and intimidation and reported difficulty in observing (Mission d'Observation 2003). The researchers that I had myself hired to observe the election were not only forbidden from observing, despite having all the appropriate permissions, but subsequently harassed.

In this context of increasingly authoritarian government, parliament has itself become increasingly authoritarian. Following the resignation under pressure of the parliamentary speaker, the RPF pressured parliament to create a Forum of Political Parties, a group that would have the power of determining who was fit to serve in parliament. Members who criticized the government or took otherwise controversial positions risked being labeled divisionist and thus unfit to serve in parliament, which would force them to give up their seat. The institution of the Forum had a stultifying effect on parliament, effectively quashing dissent and restricting free debate. Despite extensive criticism, the Forum was written into the new constitution, making parliament operate effectively as a single-party institution.<sup>12</sup>

Parliament has allowed itself to be used to give a democratic sheen to distinctly undemocratic actions. In the lead up to the 2003 elections, a parliamentary commission created at the behest of RPF leadership studied the MDR, the opposition party that had the greatest following and presented the largest threat to RPF hopes for electoral victory. The parliamentary commission published a report that was then accepted by the Transitional National Assembly that accused the MDR of supporting the 1994 genocide and continuing to support division and conflict within Rwanda. As a result of this action, the MDR was disbanded, ostensibly in the name of preserving democracy, but in reality seriously undercutting the possibility of a meaningful transition.

The entrance of women into a parliament that serves more as an instrument of legitimizing and preserving RPF power, thus, is of questionable value. Elizabeth Powley, in a report praising the efforts by the RPF to include women in government, defends the regime against criticisms:

A final, more skeptical analysis of this policy decision [to include women and youth] charges that the government could be using the inclusion of women and youth as a means of diverting attention from the absence of more ethnically plural and representative government. Because the country is 85 percent Hutu, however, this argument is problematic. Decentralization and the inclusion of women and youth at every administrative level will necessitate the inclusion of the majority population. If decentralization were fully implemented, it would be difficult to maintain ethnic exclusivity in all the governing structures (2004, 8).

Powley is right to assert that ethnic diversity in government, including parliament, is almost inevitable. Yet she is wrong to call this “representative government.” Structures in both the Senate and the House of Deputies guarantee diversity in membership, but with a senate that is not popularly elected, a lower house that has a large percentage of its seats chosen through indirect election, and a Forum of Parliamentarians that monitors deputies and senators, the parliament is designed to mirror the diversity of society – except ethnic diversity – without being truly representative. With the RPF winning 40 of the 53 contested seats in the 2003 elections of questionable legitimacy (Mission d’Observation 2003) and dominating the selection of all other seats, the possibility for diversity of opinion within the parliament has been even more restrained. The only two parties outside the RPF coalition, the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party, present little critique of the government and have worked closely with the

RPF. The parliament, thus, does not serve as a forum for real debate but rather a tool for legitimizing government policies by giving them a popular veneer. This is a point that many Rwandans themselves have raised during research visits in June and October 2004 and January 2005. One person told me, “The RPF focuses on diversity so that they can appear democratic even though they control all power. They put women in the National Assembly because they know they [the women] will not challenge them.”<sup>13</sup>

The hope that the increase in women’s participation in parliament after the 2003 elections would create a more democratic parliament has been swiftly shattered, as the new post-transition parliament has continued to allow itself to be used as a tool of intimidation. Following the model of the MDR study of the year before, a parliamentary commission in 2004 targeted several important civil society organizations, including LIPRODHOR (League for the Protection of Human Rights in Rwanda), the only remaining independent human rights group in Rwanda. The report produced by the commission accused LIPRODHOR and the other organizations of supporting division and having *genocidaires* among its leadership. Most of the prominent leaders and employees of LIPRODHOR have subsequently fled the country to avoid arrest or a potentially worse fate, effectively disbanding the organization. Women’s large numbers in parliament provided no check on the use of parliament for political intimidation and repression.

Yet women’s participation in parliament is not entirely without meaning. Women parliamentarians have actively promoted legislation that serves the interests of women. The Forum of Women Parliamentarians was key in pushing through revisions to the inheritance laws, a law banning discrimination against women, and a strengthening of rape laws. The larger number of women in parliament today may make it even easier to adopt legislation to benefit women – but only when it is consistent with the agenda of the RPF leadership.

The case of women parliamentarians in Rwanda, thus, presents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the physical representation of women does provide an important voice for women's interests and has helped to revise Rwanda's laws to make them more favorable to women. On the other hand, the nature of representation is quite limited in a highly authoritarian state. Where debate is tightly constrained, merely having women present in parliament does not mean that women's interests are truly represented. Women's role in other political institutions may be more important. Ministers have a much greater role in deciding policies, while local government plays an important role in determining how policies are actually implemented within the population.

In all levels of government, however, the lack of political freedom constrains the ability of women to influence policy. The RPF regime certainly has a commitment to improving women's participation and opportunities, but the regime's conception of women's rights is highly constrained, because it does not tolerate the broader range of human rights. Freedom of speech, assembly, and press are just as relevant for women as they are for men, and the restrictions of these rights seriously undermines the meaning of women's representation. The growing constraints on civil society will have particularly serious consequences for women, since women have been so active in this realm. Women's groups are likely to find that they are only able to challenge the authorities in only limited ways and will ordinarily be able to work only on issues consistent with the regime's agenda. Until the Rwandan government shows greater tolerance for human rights in general, the impressive representation of women in Rwanda's parliament and other governmental institutions will have only a limited impact on the lives of Rwandan women.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview by the author with Monique Mujawamariya, Boston, November 1994.

<sup>2</sup> The best sources on the genocide are Des Forges (1999) and Prunier (1995).

<sup>3</sup> The author participated in the research for this publication while head of the Human Rights Watch office in Kigali in 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Based on interviews conducted by the author particularly in March and April 1996 and September and October 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Odette Kabaya and Suzanne Ruboneka of Pro-Femme/TweseHamwe, in Kigali, September 9, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Judith Kanakuze, March 2001-October 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Bernadette Mukarutabana in Kigali, January 18, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Based on multiple conversations with Judith Kanakuze, March 2001-October 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Based on numerous interviews and Women Waging Peace's Rwanda page, [www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/conflict\\_areas/rwanda.asp](http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/conflict_areas/rwanda.asp).

<sup>11</sup> Constitution, Article 77.

<sup>12</sup> Based on research conducted under the auspices of the United States Agency for International Development in September 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Kigali with civil society activist, January 12, 2005.