

Calls grow for Rwanda's president to rule beyond 2017, fuelling concern among his critics
By Associated Press
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(Margaret Cappar/file/ Associated Press) - FILE- In this Aug.6, 2010, file photo, Rwandan president Paul Kagame speaks to his supporters assembled at the Nyamarambo stadium in the capital of Kigali. Rwanda's next presidential election is still four years away but a movement is growing there for term limits to be removed it so that Kagame can still be in charge of the country after 2017, when his current term expires. Rwanda's constitution provides for two, seven-year presidential terms.

KAMPALA, Uganda — Adoring crowds swarm around Rwanda's president when he travels across the country, many begging him to run again when his current term expires.

In the state-controlled press, more and more admirers are heaping praise on President Paul Kagame and urging a change in the country's constitution so that it would allow him more time in office.

Rwanda's next presidential election is still four years away, but a movement is growing there for term limits to be removed so that Kagame can still be in charge of the country after 2017, when his current term expires. Rwanda's constitution allows two presidential terms of seven years each.

Although Kagame once said he wished to retire in 2017, some say his position on the matter has become vague as more and more of his supporters say he's the best president they ever had and debate the likely consequences of his exit.

Even as Kagame repeatedly warns against premature talk of political succession —and asks the country to focus on economic development instead —others believe the praise chorus of which he is the sole beneficiary is being carefully orchestrated by the president himself.

“Kagame’s stand has changed from ‘I won’t be standing’ to ‘Let’s not discuss that,’” said Eleneus Akanga, a Rwandan human rights lawyer who lives in London. “He now realizes that there is this opportunity for him to stay on.” He predicted there may be a referendum on the matter of removing term limits before 2017, which would grant a measure of legitimacy to attempts by Kagame to rule beyond his current term.

Kagame has held power in the Central African country since 2000, although he has effectively been in charge since the end of the 1994 genocide. He was Rwanda’s deputy president and defense minister from 1994 to 2000, posts that made him the country’s most powerful leader as the former rebel commander who ended a genocide in which more than 500,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were butchered. But since 2010, when Kagame won his current term, he has faced some opposition within his party as well as a series of defections by senior officials who say their lives have been threatened.

Yolande Makolo, a spokeswoman for the president, did not respond to requests for comment on Kagame preparing to stay on for a third term. But recently Kagame said discussion of political succession diverts attention from more pressing matters. This new lack of an emphatic no to the question of whether the president would consider a third term has led some to believe it’s possible the constitution will be changed to pave way for his continued stay in office.

Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, a political scientist who is researching Rwandan society as an honorary fellow of the University of Manchester, said he has interviewed many Rwandans who are genuinely worried the country would fare worse without Kagame at the helm.

“They see a change in leadership as carrying a risk,” he said. “The argument from them is, ‘Look, the institutions Kagame is trying to build are still fragile.’ I think the people who hold that opinion hold it genuinely.”

The Kagame administration is widely praised for turning around Rwanda’s ailing economy over the years and for its tough stand against official corruption.

But many accuse Kagame of restricting the political space available for the opposition and of harassing independent-minded critics. Many journalists and former civilian and military officials have fled to exile, alleging persecution. In the most prominent case, Gen. Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa, a Rwandan army chief who once was a close Kagame ally, defected to South Africa in 2010 and later accused Rwanda’s government of ordering a failed attempt to assassinate him. Rwanda denied the allegations, saying the general was a wanted criminal who had run away from charges back home.

Kagame’s stand on retirement has since become “less categorical” and that his “position has changed a bit,” said Carina Tertsakian, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch who is a Rwanda specialist.

“The number of people in his close circle has been shrinking for various reasons,” Tertsakian said of Kagame, adding that some people in the president’s party are “disillusioned with the very authoritarian style of government.”

She said growing talk about ensuring Kagame stays in power longer “does make you wonder whether they may be paving the way and making the people used to the idea.”

Many African leaders have had term limits removed over the years, including in neighboring Uganda. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who has held power since 1986, had term limits removed in 2005 so he could run for office the next year. He said at the time that his decision to stay longer in power had been motivated in part by growing calls among rural Ugandans for him to postpone his retirement. In Uganda then, as in Rwanda now, a long-serving president faced crowds who begged him to hang onto power.