

Political Prisoner: Rwanda's Former Presidential Candidate Victoire Ingabire's Speech Crimes

By [Ann Garrison](#)

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The Obama administration and its European allies lavish praise, weapons and money on Paul Kagame's military and ethnic dictatorship in Rwanda. Meanwhile, Victoire Ingabire, a woman of peace, languishes in Kagame's prisons. If she were president, "there would be a major change in how Rwandans and Congolese live as neighbors, because that would be the end of Rwanda invading Congo."

Nearly 60% of Rwanda's Members of Parliament are women, and the country is commonly praised for empowering women. In October 2011, Rwandan President Paul Kagame's delirious state newspaper even suggested that he deserved that year's Nobel Peace Prize more than the [three African women who won](#), because of his "good practices" to "guarantee a future devoid of gender imbalance." Trouble with this theory is that Madame Victoire Ingabire, the one woman who dared to challenge Paul Kagame by attempting to run against him in 2010, has been in prison ever since. On Friday, December 13th, while Kagame was in South Africa to pay his last respects to Nelson Mandela, his Supreme Court upheld Victoire's conviction and extended her sentence from eight to fifteen years.

Rwanda's Supreme Court justices, 42% of whom are women, agreed with the lower court's ruling that Victoire conspired to form an armed group to overthrow the government of Rwanda, but Human Rights Watch and many others called the charges politically motivated and the European Parliament called for justice and said that the lower court had not met international judicial standards. I myself spoke to Victoire for Pacifica's KPFA Radio-Berkeley many times in 2010 and I've never known anyone so opposed to armed conflict or committed to the rule of law. Her conviction for this would be a howler if she weren't facing another twelve years in prison and her family weren't facing their fourth Christmas without her.

Victoire speaks fluent Dutch, French, Kinyarwanda, and English, but pronounces "dialogue" and "debate" with a distinct and adamant French accent. After the 2010 release of the UN Mapping Report documenting President Kagame's army's war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even genocide against Hutu refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she told KPFA that the mandate of the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda should be expanded to include crimes in Congo. Instead, she herself went to prison five days later.

Other prisoners who testified to joining her in a conspiracy to form an armed group were granted release for time served on the same day her own conviction was upheld.

President Obama?

No one would seem to be more respectful of the West's nominally revered democratic institutions and civil liberties than this Rwandan political prisoner, Victoire Ingabire, so why have President Obama and the U.S. State Department remained so silent about her case?

Neither President Obama nor British Prime Minister David Cameron hesitated to make it known that they had warned President Kagame not to send reinforcements across Rwanda's western border to his M23 militia in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), when M23 finally faced defeat by the Congolese army and UN Force Intervention Brigade.

So why have they not, like the European Parliament, called on Rwanda, their longstanding ally and "military partner" to respect judicial standards in Ingabire's case?

Many reasons, no doubt, including former President Bill Clinton's determination to protect his longtime friend Paul Kagame and their mutual determination to preserve the received history of the Rwandan Genocide and ensuing Congo wars and conflict. Another may be Victoire's opposition to their longstanding plan to make Rwanda, or at least its modern capital city Kigali, the "[Singapore of Africa](#)," a banking, technology, and minerals processing hub and multinational corporate gateway to the resource riches of the DRC. In 2010, during her thwarted attempt to run for president, Victoire said:

"The rural population in Rwanda has been neglected for the last 16 years and, instead of the Singapore model of development, which gives the lion's share to a tiny, urban privileged elite, I would invest in agriculture, I would invest in rural roads and health networks. I would review the land management and I would give priority to the subsistence food crops, rather than cash crops which benefit mostly traders from urban areas. For example, if people cultivate only maize – if you ask them to cultivate only maize for export – what will they eat? This is why I will give priority to enough food to my people."

Like Tanzanian President Jacaya Kikwete, Victoire stands for negotiation with armed Rwandan refugees in Congo, who have been the Kagame regime's excuse for invading and plundering that country for years.

"Victoire Ingabire does not believe in invading the neighbors," said Rwanda Genocide survivor and Friends of the Congo activist Claude Gatebuke. "So Victoire's case is very significant, not only for Rwanda, but also for Congo. If Victoire Ingabire were allowed to run for president in Rwanda, and she won, there would be a major change in how Rwandans and Congolese live as neighbors, because that would be the end of Rwanda invading Congo."

Imagine that. After almost 20 years, and millions of Congolese and Rwandan refugees dead.

Speech crime

The lower court also upheld Victoire Ingabire's conviction for several speech crimes.

1) "Spreading false rumors" intended to incite the public to rise up against the state. Enough said, I hope, for anyone who believes in free speech. Or anyone who understands that Rwanda is an authoritarian spy state that has engaged in a war of aggression in neighboring Congo for nearly 20 years.

2) "Minimizing" the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.

In 2010, Victoire went to the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, and said that Hutu as well as

Tutsi victims should be remembered there. The history of the Rwandan Genocide, codified in Rwanda's Constitution, is that it was only Hutu extremists' "Genocide Against the Tutsi."

Before she went to prison, Victoire told KPFA listeners, "My party and I have never denied the genocide, by the UN understanding, because the [Resolution 955 from UN](#) says that in Rwanda was genocide against the people of Rwanda . . . there was genocide against Tutsis and moderate Hutus. We don't have to forget that. Yes, there was genocide and all people involved should be brought to the court. But, before, during, and after the genocide, other Rwandese people were killed. Hutus and Tutsis were killed. Is this denying genocide? I don't feel so."

It's difficult to rationally argue with this, because the 1991 Rwandan census, as documented by Ed Herman and David Peterson in [The Politics of Genocide](#), reported a Rwandan population of 7,590,235, including 645,170 Tutsis, more than 300,000 fewer than the million Tutsis commonly reported to have died in the genocide. And because Ibuka, Rwanda's Tutsi genocide survivors group, has claimed that some 300,000 of these 645,170 Tutsis survived. President Kagame would therefore seem to have a lot of bones on display in his genocide memorial sites that he can't properly account for as the result of his Constitutionally codified "Genocide Against the Tutsi."

Ever since I began to try to untangle this story, with my own focus on U.S. responsibility for backing the Kagame regime, Rwandan Hutu people have told me that they simply want to be able to bury and openly mourn their dead, that this is what they must do to heal and reconcile. Others have told me that they want all the bones buried, not displayed in memorial museums, because it's not normal in Rwanda to display the bones or body parts of the dead for tourists or anyone else.

To many Rwandans, that is what Victoire Ingabire represents. Acknowledging, remembering, mourning, and burying all the dead.

Quite a few Rwandans appeared out of cyberspace to respond to my 2010 report, [Rwanda's packed prisons and genocide ideology law](#). Some were absolutely furious, others deeply relieved, just because another writer in the U.S., which has been the dominant power in the region since the Rwanda Genocide and Congo Wars, was trying to make sense of this. At that point I realized how bitterly ethnically polarized Rwanda remains, despite the government's claim that ethnicity no longer exists there. One reader who appreciated the report left this unforgettable statement in the comments section:

"I am from Kiyombe in Byumba. RPF [Rwandan Patriotic Front] came in 1991 and called all the people from our village for a security meeting. After people had gathered at the soccer pitch of Kiyombe, Mr. Hitler Kagame ordered his military to bomb the gathering. I escaped and went through the tea plantation and found my way to Uganda. Ever since I have never returned to Rwanda but I am still considered a genocide denier or genocidaire. Why? Simply because I am a Hutu and I don't even have rights to go back to Rwanda and bury my family and relatives in dignity. Do you know how old I was then? Just 16. I survived but it is me and me alone."

After reading that, I turned to maps and found Kiyombe and Byumba, near the Ugandan border which the RPF, led by General Paul Kagame, had crossed in 1990. And, which this young man then crossed all alone a year later, running in the other direction as a refugee. I also found the tea plantation that he said he had escaped through, and the tea processing

plant nearby.

Ann Garrison is an independent journalist who contributes to the Black Star News, Counterpunch, Global Research, and the San Francisco Bay View Newspaper, and produces radio for KPFA-Berkeley and WBAI-New York City. She can be reached on her website, anngarrison.com, or at ann@afrobeatradio.com.

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