



April 27, 2010

Dear President O'Neal,

As a Christian, Africa-focused human rights and peace organization representing a broad range of individuals, including Rwandans, write to express our dismay at your university's decision to welcome and honor Rwandan President Paul Kagame at your 2010 spring commencement ceremony.

Since President Kagame came to power, the United States political and business communities have uncritically supported his regime and his efforts to rebuild a post-genocide Rwanda. While President Kagame has shown leadership in the advancement of women and promotion of economic stability in the region, many have long expressed concerns about his heavy-handed techniques for silencing political opposition and for blocking genuine efforts for national and regional reconciliation.

We are particularly alarmed by the Rwandan government's human rights violations of its citizens in the run-up to elections this August. Primary opposition leader Victoire Ingabire was arrested on April 23 and released on bail the next day. Like many others vocalizing that criticism of President Kagame's policies, Ms. Ingabire has been falsely accused of association with a terrorist group, genocide ideology, genocide denial, and divisionism, and has long been a target of harassment and intimidation. Although her arrest only lasted for one day, the rigid parole restrictions make her release irrelevant. She is required to report to the police every two weeks and not leave the city of Kigali. Her passport, cell phone, satellite phone and other equipment were confiscated – this is not freedom at all. Furthermore, this month the Rwandan Media High Council suspended two independent local-language weeklies, Umuseso and Umuvugizi, thus “robbing Rwanda voters of crucial alternative voices during the presidential election campaign,” as explained by Tom Rhodes of the Committee to Protect Journalists. Human Rights Watch researcher Carina Tertsakian was denied a work visa, effectively expelling the organization from the country and thus eliminating a key source of information and analysis on the electoral process and political freedoms.

While the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was a tragedy beyond human expression, it is important to recognize that political repression based on latent guilt only fuels the cycle of ethnic violence, instead of promoting healing and reconciliation. American citizens would not tolerate such undemocratic behavior in our own electoral process, yet our tax dollars continue to support heavy-handed Rwandan leadership, and our political leaders remain silent. Additionally, President Kagame's 1996 invasion of and ongoing role in the destabilization of neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo, a conflict that has resulted in loss of more than 5.4 million lives, continues without the scrutiny of international community. We encourage you to retract your invitation and speak out for democratic values and rule of law in Rwanda and the Great Lakes in general.

Please join us in asking that the rights of all opposition party members, particularly Ms. Ingabire, be restored without delay. We urge President Paul Kagame to 1) order an immediate return of all Ms. Ingabire's belongings (computers, communication tools and personal document) 2) remove all restrictions imposed upon her and other political parties so that they can campaign, 3) fully recognize and register any political party that wishes to do so and allow them access to the press and the media, 5) release all political prisoners and halt intimidation tactics and violence against President Kagame's political opponents. As Rwanda emerges from a tragic and traumatic past, it is our fervent hope and desire that all Rwandans have access to health, education, security, economic well being, and freedom of speech. We therefore urge you to stand in solidarity with the people of Rwanda and urge President Kagame to promote democracy and respect the human rights of all. Thank you for the opportunity to voice our concern.

In solidarity,

Africa Faith and Justice Network
125 Michigan Ave
Washington, DC 20017

