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**Kigali -Rwanda**

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*“Pour un Etat de Droit, la Democratie et l’Egalité de chances” ; “For the rule of law, democracy and equal opportunity”*

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**Kigali, the 24 august 2010**

**Rwanda: General Paul Kagame is painting a grim picture of democracy**

I was surprised to read in your August 19, 2010 the apology of the so-called Rwandan democracy by General Paul Kagame in his “Rwanda’s democracy is still the model for Africa”. This irony is exactly what Franz Neumann said some time ago: "If the concepts 'enemy' and 'fear' constitute the 'energetic principles' of politics, a democratic political system is impossible, whether the fear is produced from within or without. If freedom is absence of restraints, the restraints to be removed are many, but the psychological restraint of fear ranks first."

We are all aware of the tragic recent history of Rwanda, the war and the genocide. The reconstruction of the society is not a secret of a one man's rule. In Rwanda, the alternance in power has been bumpy and bloody, therefore an all inclusive dialogue between all stakeholders is a must to set equal access regardless of their origins and ethnic backgrounds. Democracy is a universal value with quality content, tools and necessities of ordinary life that the state must protect. It is not just an expression shaped according to the ruler, his interests and his understanding of the recent history. General Paul Kagame does not really need to invent or advocate his kind of democracy. There is no need to invent a “counter-genocide concept” of democracy. There is Democracy, Free State or not. This is a process but all the time the need to level the playing field, the opening of the political space, the protection of freedoms should remain the guiding hallmarks. We should all enjoy equal rights and accept the diversity of ideas. You can't just promote your own type of democracy and shy away any meaningful free and fair competition. It is just a pretext to keep power.

Another serious issue is the confusion between a leader and the country or the population. For example, when the author of the article says “Rwanda is one of the countries that have chosen to apply unconventional mechanisms to solve daunting challenges”, it is clear that the demarcation line between the incumbent and the country has shrunk to exhaustion. Rwanda existed centuries and centuries before him, and it will exist after him.

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His apology or argument are not from the democracy theories in known modern dictatorships where in many cases the military leaders or other “strong men”, “the saviors of the nation” impose their own values of democracy. For international consumption, they organize expensive polls with the highest colourful turnouts and are lauded as living-gods loved and adored by all the population, at least 90%, criticized only by blind or short-sighted people. We have all heard about Saddam Hussein (Iraq), Joseph Stalin (USSR), Nicolae Ceausescu (Romania) or Marshal Presidents Idi Amin Dada (Uganda) and Jean Beder Bokassa (Central Africa Republic). We all know the turnout in their elections or the results. Yes, they speak volume.

What is strange enough is to belittle the whole African continent up to this unthinkable extent that “Rwanda's democracy is still the model for Africa”!

In general, the essential process that characterizes representative democracies is the ability to hold competitive elections that are free and fair both substantively and procedurally. Unfortunately, this value was crucially lacking during the 2010 Rwandan election. The whole world questioned a series of disturbing events that characterized the period leading up to the election. These include the assassination of a key opposition leader, the murder of a journalist, the suspension of two independent newspapers, the expulsion of a human rights researcher, the barring of three real opposition parties from taking part in the election, and the arrest of journalists and political opponents.

One may boast for massive attendance at campaign rallies, huge turnouts, Rwanda’s economic success, and country’s apparent stability, but the reality on the ground is that Paul Kagame is a more ambiguous figure. How does it feel to enjoy such a Stalinist popularity and keep the opposition leaders in jail?

Whatever today’s level of Rwanda’s economic recovery, reconciliation and stability, it would be hard to sustain them in coming years with current political environment. If Paul Kagame really cares about a better future for all Rwandans, he should without delay release all political prisoners, restore censured independent newspapers, register all political parties and allow without any further delay a free and fair competition. Otherwise his so much acclaimed landslide victory will keep Rwanda on the brink of chaos.

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