

'Hotel Rwanda' Hero Found Guilty of Terrorism-Related Charges, May Face Life Imprisonment

Paul Rusesabagina, a U.S. resident who saved hundreds of lives during the country's 1994 genocide, described the trial as politically motivated

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Paul Rusesabagina, in pink, was a sharp critic of Rwandan President Paul Kagame.

Photo: simon wohlfahrt/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

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A Rwandan court convicted Paul Rusesabagina, a U.S. resident immortalized by Hollywood for [saving more than 1,200 people during the 1994 genocide](#), on a string of charges including terrorism, effectively ending the activist career of one of President Paul Kagame's sharpest critics.

The 67-year-old recipient of a U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, who described the trial as politically motivated to silence him, looked solemn as the presiding judge read the verdict in Kigali.

He now faces the prospect of a life sentence after being found guilty on at least a dozen charges including terrorism, financing and founding armed groups, murder, arson and conspiracy to involve children in armed groups. He has repeatedly described the allegations as fabrication. Mr. Rusesabagina's lawyers said in a statement that Rwandan authorities mistreated their client throughout his imprisonment and seven-month trial.

The verdict is the most high profile example of [Mr. Kagame's determination to quash political dissent](#), regardless of a public backlash from U.S. and other Western donors, upon which he has relied to rebuild the country from the ruins of the genocide. Mr. Rusesabagina, a former hotelier credited for saving hundreds of lives during the killings, inspired the 2004 Hollywood movie "Hotel Rwanda" before angering Kigali for using his Hollywood fame [to advocate for political change](#) in the tightly-controlled east African nation.

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His trial, which began in February, has been condemned by human-rights groups, members of U.S. Congress and the European Parliament, who say it is an attempt by Rwanda to quash dissent. In July, Amnesty International accused Rwandan authorities of infiltrating the cellphone of Mr. Rusesabagina's daughter, using the malware Pegasus from Israeli spyware company NSO, to spy on her efforts to free her father. A Rwandan government spokesman denied the allegations.

Mr. Rusesabagina emerged in handcuffs in Rwandan custody in August last year after disappearing while transiting through a Dubai airport. His lawyers say he was kidnapped and brought to Rwanda against his will. Rwanda's government says that he was a terrorist mastermind accused of financing a rebel group responsible for a string of deadly attacks inside Rwanda. Authorities deny that he was kidnapped.

For many, Mr. Rusesabagina, whose courageous character was portrayed by Don Cheadle on screen, was seen as a leader with the best chance to broaden the campaign against the shrinking political space in Rwanda. Rwandan authorities accuse him of funding the National Liberation Front, the alleged armed wing of his opposition group Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change. Authorities blame the National Liberation Front for a series of attacks in Rwanda in 2018-19 that left nine people dead and more than a dozen others injured. He denies the allegations, and during the trial judges ignored his lawyers' motions to take into consideration that he was allegedly kidnapped and tortured.

Mr. Rusesabagina's Hotel Rwanda Foundation said in a statement that he "knew he would be declared guilty the moment he was kidnapped...a show trial happened, and the Rwandan government still failed to produce any credible evidence."



Rwanda's government alleged that Paul Rusesabagina orchestrated financing a rebel group responsible for a string of deadly attacks inside Rwanda.

Photo: eugene uwimana/Shutterstock

The judges also found guilty 20 of Mr. Rusesabagina co-defendants, who were accused of staging a rebellion against the Rwandan government. Some of the co-accused pleaded guilty.

“We find Rusesabagina’s role in creating National Liberation Front, his provision of funds and purchasing for them secure phones to use all constitute crimes of terrorism,” said presiding Judge Beatrice Mukamurenzi. “We therefore find him culpable of crime of terrorism.”

The verdict comes a month after Kigali deported Mr. Rusesabagina’s Belgian lawyer Vincent Lurquin after accusing him of violating immigration laws. Mr. Rusesabagina, a Belgian citizen and U.S. green-card holder, boycotted proceedings since March, accusing the court of “unfairness and a lack of independence.”

His family and supporters have a global campaign for his release, insisting that the charges against him are politically motivated.

“Dad’s rights have been violated throughout his detention, this wasn’t a trial at all,” said Carine Kanimba, Mr. Rusesabagina’s daughter.

During the past two decades, Mr. Kagame has won plaudits for reducing poverty and turning Rwanda into [one of the fastest-growing economies](#) in the world.

But he has also been accused of clamping down on dissent, including [pursuing exiled opponents from neighboring nations](#) including Uganda and Burundi to South Africa, Belgium and the U.K.

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