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CIA/ALA AB 91-026

Africa Review (U)

22 November 1991

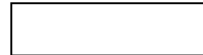
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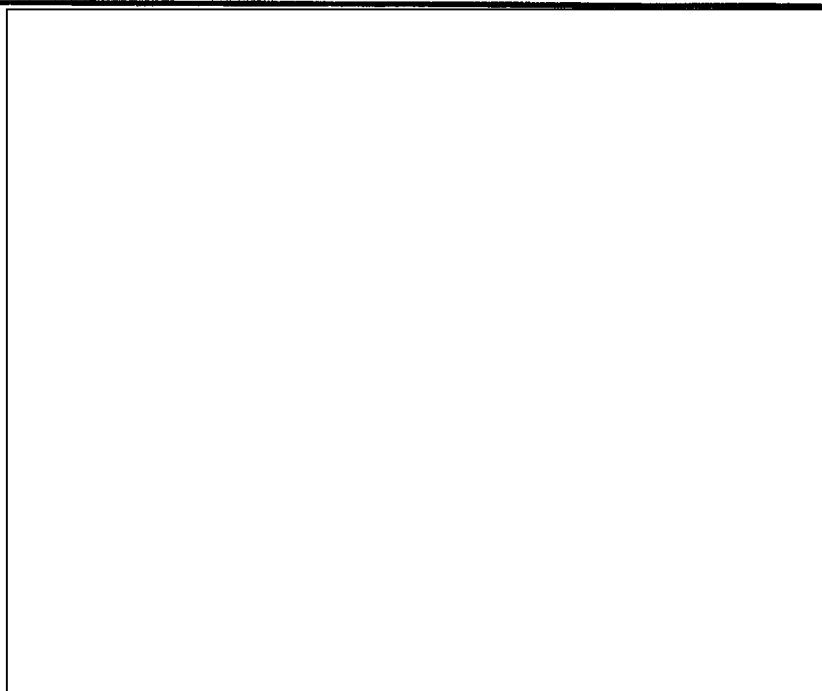


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Rwanda: President, Opposition Square Off

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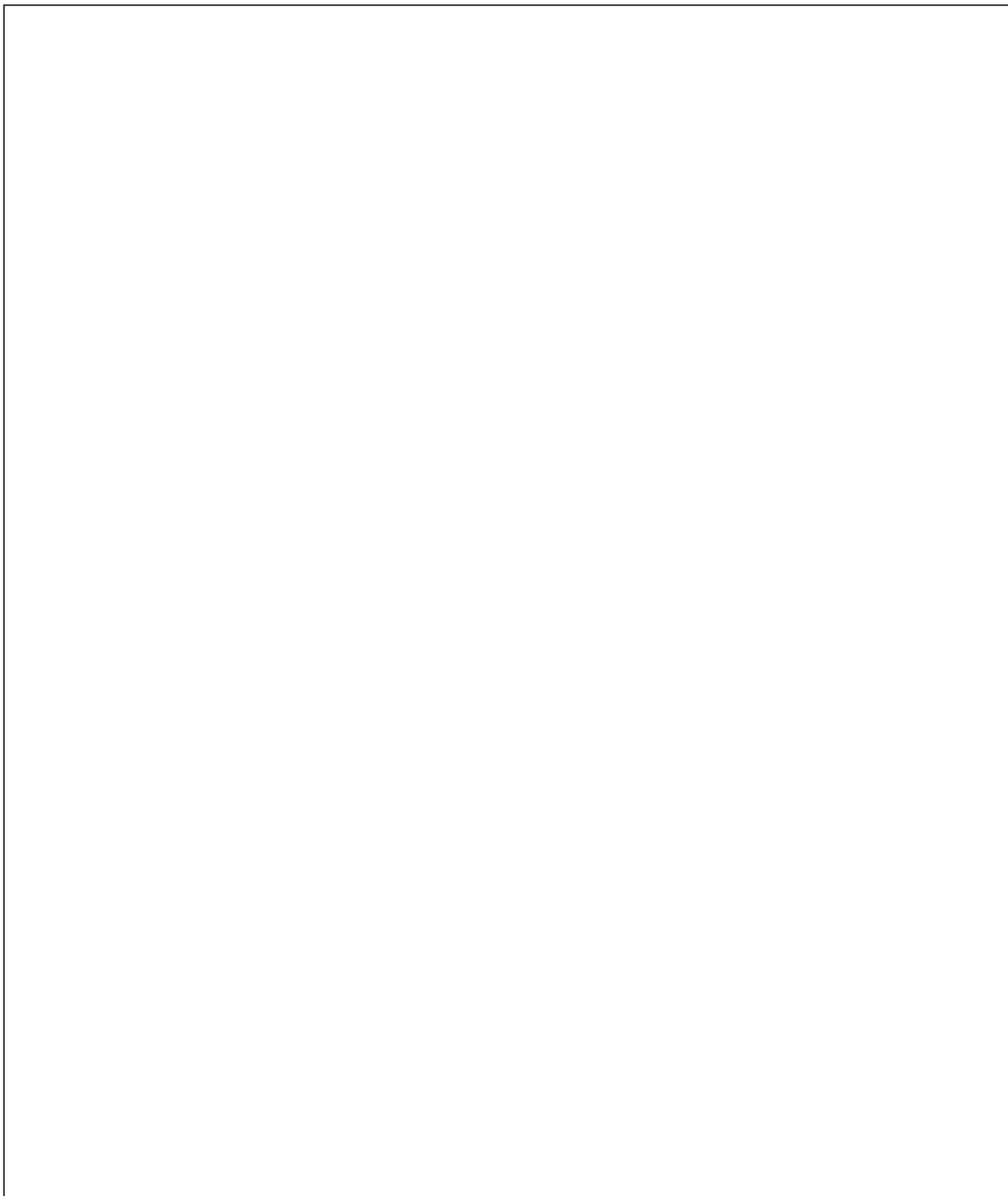
President Habyarimana is striving to retain control of political reforms leading to multiparty rule and to avoid further concessions to opposition parties that are determined to gain a greater share of power during the transition process.



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Rwanda: President, Opposition Square Off

President Habyarimana is striving to retain control of political reforms leading to multiparty rule and to avoid further concessions to opposition parties that are determined to gain a greater share of power during the transition process. Habyarimana has sought to contain fledgling opposition groups by using his authority under the new constitution, approved in a popular referendum in June, to appoint a prime minister charged with creating a transition regime. Habyarimana hopes to share responsibility for Rwanda's pressing problems—such as the war with minority Tutsi rebels and economic austerity measures demanded by recent structural adjustment agreements—without conceding authority that would threaten his hold on power. The opposition hopes to secure key positions and a greater share of power during the transition, however, and is rejecting Habyarimana's overtures and demanding constitutional revisions to allow a national conference to form an independent interim regime.

Battle Over Prime Minister, Transition Terms

Habyarimana temporarily outflanked the opposition by appointing his choice for prime minister over opposition demands, but the formation of an interim coalition government is stymied by disagreement over the terms of power sharing arrangements. Of the seven opposition parties legalized since July, three of the strongest and best organized formed an alliance to strengthen their bargaining position in hopes of pressuring Habyarimana into appointing an opposition member as prime minister. In a public letter to the President outlining conditions for participation in an interim regime, the alliance also demanded the suspension of the national assembly, reduced presidential powers, and a national conference to plan elections and democratize government institutions. Supported by another opposition group, however, Habyarimana ignored the letter and named Justice Minister Sylvestre Nsanzimana—a popular bureaucrat from his own party—to the post of prime minister on 12 October, and tasked him with creating a transition government with opposition participation. In order not to alienate the public or other opposition groups by appearing to reject the popular reform process, the tripartite alliance agreed to join an

Nsanzimana-led government provided the coalition is given significant decisionmaking power.

Trying To Break Deadlock

Although Habyarimana has made some concessions, negotiations are dragging on as opposition leaders haggle with him over presidential guarantees of an independent interim regime.

10,000 demonstrators attended a protest march on 17 November that apparently was timed to coincide with Habyarimana's departure for the Francophone Summit in Paris, where the opposition hopes he will come under increased pressure to compromise on reform.

Outlook

Sparring between the opposition and Habyarimana is likely to continue in the near term, delaying decisions on a transition timetable as the two sides seek a compromise on power sharing. Neither side wants to be blamed for derailing reform but neither wants to damage its credibility by appearing to back down. Habyarimana will probably continue to cite his legitimate authority under the constitution, and his willingness to form a coalition government and relinquish some presidential power, as proof of his commitment to the transition. The opposition, however—wary of being manipulated unless it has a share of power, and emboldened by the large turnout at its rally—will probably continue to press for a national conference and perhaps demand a

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new prime minister. A protracted deadlock would not only bring the reform process to a standstill, but also strain opposition unity and fuel popular frustration with both sides. The President probably realizes that without the participation of the three strongest opposition parties the transition government would lack popular legitimacy and damage his domestic and international

credibility. But he may hope that by dividing the opposition over participation he can weaken its resolve and break the impasse without making further concessions.



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