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(Don't) Visit Rwanda: Rwanda's Sportswashing and Its Western Facilitators

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Abstract

Since the late 2010s, Rwanda has advertised its Visit Rwanda logo on the jerseys of prominent European football teams and has built new sports stadiums to host international sports competitions. Such strategies reflect the practice of sportswashing, which refers to the utilization of sports by political actors to gain global legitimacy while diverting attention from unjust processes occurring in their home countries. Dubinsky analyzes the effectiveness of Rwanda's sportswashing through the concept of authoritarian image management, arguing that the mutual interests shared between authoritarian and Western actors facilitate the country's sportswashing, despite the critiques it attracts.

Résumé

Depuis la fin des années 2010, le Rwanda met en avant son logo “Visite Rwanda” sur les maillots de prestigieuses équipes de football européennes et entreprend la construction de nouveaux stades afin d'accueillir des compétitions sportives internationales. Le concept de « sportswashing », qui désigne l'utilisation du sport par des acteurs politiques dans le but d'acquérir une légitimité sur la scène mondiale tout en détournant l'attention des injustices qui se déroulent dans leurs pays d'origine, est examiné par Dubinsky qui analyse son efficacité. Dubinsky examine l'efficacité du « sportswashing » au Rwanda en s'appuyant sur le concept de gestion de l'image autoritaire. Il soutient que les intérêts communs entre les acteurs autoritaires et occidentaux favorisent ce processus, et ce, malgré les critiques qu'il engendre.

Resumo

Desde finais da década de 2010, o Ruanda tem divulgado o seu logótipo “Visite o Ruanda” nas camisolas de proeminentes equipas europeias de futebol, e construiu novos estádios

para acolher competições desportivas internacionais. Estamos perante estratégias que refletem a prática da “lavagem desportiva”, designação que se refere ao uso do desporto pelos atores políticos com vista a conquistar a legitimidade mundial, ao mesmo tempo que desviam as atenções dos processos injustos que decorrem nos seus países. Dubinsky analisa a eficácia da lavagem desportiva que se processa no Ruanda à luz do conceito de gestão de imagem autoritária, e defende que os interesses mútuos partilhados pelos atores autoritários e ocidentais facilitam a lavagem desportiva, independentemente das críticas que esta suscita.

Keywords: Rwanda; authoritarianism; sports; diplomacy; international relations

Introduction

The global sports sponsorship industry continues to grow, reaching an estimated value of \$63.74 billion in 2023 (Business Research Company 2024). This growth has been stimulated by new actors entering the field, particularly states and state-owned corporations investing in international sports sponsorship. Chadwick, Widdop, and Burton (2022, 200) termed this trend “soft power sponsorship,” where governments use sports to promote national goals on global stages. The use of sports sponsorship spans all regime types, especially authoritarian ones, which seek to leverage the popularity of sports to reap various benefits such as legitimizing themselves domestically and internationally, attracting tourists, and developing necessary infrastructure.

Growing academic interest has linked global sports sponsorship to sportswashing—a process in which authoritarian leaders use sports to gain legitimacy and deflect attention from domestic injustices (Boykoff 2022). Yet, most studies focus on Eastern European and Asian countries (Chadwick and Anagnostopoulos 2024; Dubinsky 2023). Little is known about how African autocrats engage with the global sports sponsorship industry to advance their interests. This article addresses that gap by analyzing Rwanda’s efforts since the late 2010s to use international sports events and high-profile sponsorships of European football clubs to advance its state objectives—initiatives that commentators have framed as sportswashing (Abeza and Mamo 2023). This article constitutes a first attempt to analyze the effectiveness of Rwanda’s sportswashing. It explores to what extent the Visit Rwanda slogan that appears on the jerseys and across the stadiums of Arsenal FC, Paris Saint Germain (PSG), and Bayern Munich, alongside the hosting of sports events such as the Basketball Africa League (BAL), contributes to the country’s development goals.

The article makes three main original scholarly contributions. First, it contributes to the growing efforts by sports scholars to uncover the mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of sportswashing. The term has been criticized for being a misnomer considering that “sport does not ‘wash’ anything” (Grix and Brannagan 2024b, 5). Media reports and early literature initially portrayed sportswashing as an expression of a country’s efforts to hide its illiberal practices through sports. However, recent critical scholarship recognizes sportswashing as a complex process involving Western and non-Western actors with intersecting interests (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2025). The

following examination builds upon these understandings by introducing additional actors who contribute to the sportswashing phenomenon. This article emphasizes the vital role played by the private, Western-based capitalistic sector in facilitating sportswashing. Doing so contributes to a fuller understanding of the processes enabling sportswashing and extends the term's analytical scope to new terrains, as exemplified by the case of Rwanda. The article achieves this by examining the roles that the American-based National Basketball Association (NBA) and European-based football clubs play in encouraging and facilitating the practice of sportswashing. As will be seen, such cooperation stems from a mutual interest in benefiting from the global capitalist world of modern-day sports. Despite some backlash from Europeans and Africans in the form of protests and boycotts, resistance has proven insufficient to stop Rwanda's sportswashing. Indeed, the financial rewards reaped by Rwanda's facilitators outweigh the critical voices.

While the Rwandan case supports the view that sportswashing depends on reciprocal relationships between authoritarian and non-authoritarian actors (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2025), it also highlights a key shortcoming identified by Grix and Brannagan (2024b). The two claimed that sportswashing is "an arrangement in which capital rich countries seek to invest in cultural power and prestige (in this case, 'sport'); those who possess the cultural power and prestige (usually the 'west') are only too happy to take the money offered by capital rich states" (2024b, 6). This claim is relevant for oil-rich countries of the Middle East, but it does not apply in the case of Rwanda. Despite the country's economic growth in the current century, Rwanda does not qualify as a wealthy country by standard economic indicators. According to the World Bank (2024), Rwanda "aspires to become a Middle-Income Country by 2035 and a High-Income Country by 2050." Whereas sportswashing demands significant funding, the Rwandan case demonstrates that it is not exclusively a tool of wealthy nations.

Second, the focus on Rwanda's sportswashing contributes a new perspective on its "Janus faced strategy" (Damman 2015, 46). Following the 1994 genocide, Rwandan President Paul Kagame skillfully exploited the "genocide credit" (Reyntjens 2013, xiii) that the international community awarded the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—credit that stems from its guilt for not stopping the genocide as the Hutu militias killed about 800,000 civilians, among them mostly Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Western governments, development agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have keenly supported the RPF's nation-building efforts through aid and donations while turning a blind eye to Kagame's authoritarian practices, human rights violations, and provocation of regional conflicts in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Even when Western governments acknowledge the grave violations that do occur, such as unlawful or arbitrary killings, restrictions on free expression, media, and political participation, or persecution of political opponents abroad (US Department of State 2022), and even when Western media reports on the "mysterious deaths and disappearances" of opponents abroad (Jalloh 2021), Kagame's RPF party continues to draw unconditional support. Whereas Rwanda's success has mostly been analyzed through geopolitical and economic

lenses (Reyntjens 2013), this article makes a genuine contribution by exposing how sports are used to cover up the RPF's wrongdoings while assisting the country in promoting its development ambitions.

The article also expands upon the growing body of literature on the sources of resilience of authoritarian regimes. Scholars of authoritarian studies have long been occupied with analyzing the characteristics of such regimes (Linz 1975). The rise of soft power and public diplomacy pushed research forward by foregrounding the tactics of states to influence other states and foreign publics (Melissen 2005; Nye 1990), thus expanding the scholarly attention concerning the importance of propaganda and branding to the efforts of authoritarian regimes to gain legitimacy. Next, scholars began highlighting the engagement of authoritarian regimes in deception and policing the information environment, understandings that led to the emergence of the concept of authoritarian image management. Dukalskis explains the concept as the "efforts by the state or its proxies to enhance or protect the legitimacy of the state's political system for audiences outside its borders" (2021, 4). These efforts include soft power and public diplomacy initiatives aimed at persuading policymakers, journalists, and global audiences that the regime is not malign, tactics that include hiring public relations (PR) firms and intimidating critics abroad.

Whereas Dukalskis (2021) offers a valuable framework for analyzing the endurance of authoritarian regimes, he does not elaborate on how authoritarian image management is evaluated. This article argues that assessing the "success" of authoritarian image management requires moving beyond a focus on tactics to instead examine the mutual interests that develop between authoritarian regimes and Western actors. The political, economic, social, and cultural interests authoritarian and Western actors share contribute to the effectiveness of the authoritarian image management and, in turn, help legitimize authoritarian rulers. As such, the article's third theoretical contribution lies in emphasizing the reciprocal relationships between authoritarian and Western actors that help determine whether authoritarian image management is successful. Such an argument helps not only in explaining the Rwandan "miracle" (UNESCO 2019), but it also sheds light on how other authoritarian regimes—in Africa and beyond—retain power while enjoying broad Western support despite grave human rights abuses. Linking the concepts of sportswashing and authoritarian image management provides a novel lens through which to understand the international drivers of authoritarian stability.

The article is structured into four parts. First, it reviews the development of the term sportswashing, which serves as the analytical framework through which Rwanda's sporting endeavors are examined. The second section surveys how, following the genocide, the RPF transformed Rwanda into a "donor darling" (Reyntjens 2011, 1) among Western institutions, a shift that laid the groundwork for garnering Western support for its sportswashing initiatives. The third section outlines the methodological approach and proceeds to analyze Rwanda's sportswashing through its hosting of international sports events and its sponsorship deals with prominent football teams.

Sportswashing

Leaders worldwide increasingly use sports to advance political interests, realize national and international goals, minimize friction, and bring strangers closer together—a phenomenon scholars analyze under the concept of sports diplomacy. Stuart Murray defines sports diplomacy as:

the conscious, strategic use of sportspeople and sporting events by state and nonstate actors to engage, inform, and create a favorable image among foreign publics and organizations to shape their perceptions in a way that is (more) conducive to the sending group's goals. (Murray 2020, 8)

This definition reflects the notion that the state does not have a monopoly on diplomatic affairs. Actors across the private, public, and third sectors can harness sportspeople, clubs, associations, and events to promote a state's policy within a global setting. Given its social and cultural significance, sports can serve as a means to access key state actors, reach target audiences that might otherwise be inaccessible, and engage both local and global media audiences (Skey 2023, 756). Murray (2020) identifies four main manifestations of sports diplomacy. Sports enable governments to reach broad publics by hosting events through which they disseminate political ideology; the popularity of sports makes it a powerful tool for pressuring regimes; states likewise harness sports to enhance their international image or solidify their emerging power; and nations, nonstate organizations, and athletes can misuse sports through cheating, violence, or other actions that deliberately increase friction.

The concept of sports diplomacy is influenced by that of soft power. In assessing US foreign policy during and after the Cold War, Joseph Nye (1990) argues that US global dominance derived not only from its military and economic strength but also from its values, culture, and ideology—factors he labeled as soft power. Initially, sports scholars enthusiastically adopted Nye's concept, asserting that a country could enhance its global image and accumulate soft power by hosting high-profile sporting events. However, in recent years, scholars have challenged these perceptions through the concept of soft disempowerment, which reveals that a country can risk losing its attraction or credibility due to unforeseen risks or outcomes (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018).

The recent utilization of sports by nondemocratic regimes has given rise to the development of another concept, that of sportswashing. The term gained significant media attention following the International Federation of Association Football's (FIFA's) selection of Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup. An initial scholarly definition describes sportswashing as "a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front" (Boykoff 2022, 342). This is intended to distract attention from, minimize, or even normalize moral violations (Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023, 101). A sportswasher seeks to launder a particular policy or ideology through sports, echoing other forms of "washing" that are

designed to deceive, cover up, and distract public attention from wrongdoing (Skey 2023).

Whereas both sportswashing and soft power relate to a state's interest in utilizing the popularity of sports for promoting its interests, the two concepts represent different stages of a similar process. Sportswashing aligns with the initial stages of "soft power" accumulation for certain states (Grix and Brannagan 2024b, 7). It is often embedded within a state's long-term strategy that builds upon three "waves" (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2025). The first wave is marked by widespread criticism from media outlets, fans, and advocacy groups who challenge the sportswasher's involvement. The second wave emerges through media discourses that highlight negative narratives and counter-narratives surrounding the incompatibility of the sportswasher's norms with those of the club or event. The third and final wave entails the normalization of the arrangement: criticism diminishes towards the sportswasher and over time the sportswasher accrues soft power.

As much as the popularity of sports can help gain soft power, it can draw criticism towards the sportswasher. As Brannagan and Giulianotti suggested in their analysis of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, there exists a "soft power–soft disempowerment nexus" in which "states risk a loss of attractiveness or credibility" due to "unforeseen contingencies and unintended outcomes" (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, 1140–41). Thus, sportswashing should be seen as a process that can have different and contradictory effects. It sits at the beginning of a continuum that can eventually lead to soft power gains over time, yet also to soft power losses.

Whereas sportswashing and sports diplomacy share commonalities concerning the employment of sports to promote the state's interests on the world stage, writers tend to associate the former with negative usages. Sportswashing is mostly associated with propaganda—"efforts to deflect audiences' attention away from less favorable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sport" (Chadwick 2022, 696)—whereas sports diplomacy is viewed as the country's ability to "promote international understanding and friendship, as well as dispel stereotypes and prejudices" (Murray and Pigman 2014, 1102). Sportswashing is used as a pejorative term, unlike sports diplomacy, which is viewed as a legitimate activity. Another difference between the two terms stems from the country's identity. Sports diplomacy is associated with the activities of Western states, while sportswashing is mostly discussed in the context of non-Western states (Skey 2023, 757).

Sportswashing is often associated with hosting major sports events, obtaining ownership of a prominent club, or through sponsorship. Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2023) attribute three goals to those involved in this practice. First, the sportswasher seeks to distract attention from a moral wrongdoing by hosting an event that will expose people to the positive aspects associated with the sportswasher. A second goal is to minimize the wrongdoing so that people will not deem tackling it urgent or crucial. A third goal is to normalize the wrongdoing. This can be achieved when fans or spectators celebrate a team and associate its success with the hosts or owners, so much so that they do not recognize the sportswasher's moral wrongdoing.

Grix and Brannagan (2024a) offer a more critical approach to the term sportswashing. They claim that the adoption of sports by authoritarian regimes is a strategy to achieve an array of goals but not to cover up human rights abuses. The sponsorship of sports teams, the establishment of sports leagues, the high wages paid to attract players, and the hosting of mega sports events are aimed to “buy into the cultural power and prestige of global elite sport for economic gain, to improve the health of their citizens and for global recognition” (2024a, 1). Furthermore, according to this approach, countries such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have long-term goals to shift the current power structures in global sports. These countries seek to accrue power to decide where sports will be played and who will consume them.

The competing approaches as to what constitutes sportswashing attest to the need to explore it in new settings. Given that the concept is in its infancy, scholars have yet to discuss all of its aspects. First, most of the literature focuses on the same countries, yet, as Skey argues, “If sportswashing is to become a useful analytical concept, it needs to be applied to other parts of the world as well” (Skey 2023, 760). The following examination offers an initial attempt to analyze the applicability of sportswashing to the Rwandan context. Unlike Voets (2023), who examined the Visit Rwanda campaign from a branding perspective, my research examines Rwanda’s sportswashing from a geopolitical perspective. Such an approach reveals that sportswashing serves as a useful prism to observe how the RPF is adopting sports as part of its broader authoritarian image management strategy to shape a more positive narrative of the country in the West. Simultaneously, the state’s investments in sports are intended to contribute to the social development of the population and to improve the level of Rwandan athletes. Nevertheless, unlike oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, which seek to change existing power relations in today’s global sports structures by attracting mega-sports events according to *their* preferred time of the year and by signing world-class athletes in their leagues, the RPF does not (yet) seek to follow suit. The RPF’s main goal is to utilize sports as a tool to improve Rwanda’s image worldwide and host more international sports events that would improve the country’s economy.

Second, prevalent media reports about sportswashing associate the phenomenon with nondemocratic states (Rosenberg 2022) without considering the role of Western-based capitalistic endeavors within this dynamic. Narrow observations of the term use sportswashing to criticize nondemocratic states but overlook the encouragement “afforded by notionally democratic global capitalism and the ‘West’” (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2025, 2). All parties mutually cooperate to gain economic, cultural, and social capital, gains that would not have been possible without the Western, capitalistic conditions facilitating the sportswashing. Grix and colleagues demonstrate this point through the partnership between the FIFA and Qatar, and the World Wrestling Entertainment’s partnership with Saudi Arabia. The following examination extends these critiques that stem from Middle Eastern contexts to African contexts by exploring the BAL—which the NBA inaugurated in Rwanda—as well as Visit Rwanda’s sponsorship of European football clubs. Doing so exposes the mutual global mechanisms of sportswashing, as public sector agents and private, Western-based,

capitalistic sector agents share intersecting interests that facilitate and expand this phenomenon to new authoritarian terrains. Authoritarian states share a mutual goal of attaining foreign policy goals through sportswashing, yet they are not alone in this process but supported by Western actors.

Third, it is necessary to improve evaluations regarding the impact of sportswashing. The following examination will analyze public reactions to Rwanda's sportswashing, assessing whether sponsorship deals and event hosting contribute to the country's development goals. This will shed much-needed light on how the public can oppose sportswashers. As Skey notes, "We need to actively investigate who supports and who resists, through what means and channels and to what ends" (2023, 760). Considering that sportswashing often occurs in nondemocratic regimes, resistance is even riskier. The following examination uncovers how resistance to Rwandan sportswashing is made possible, where, and by whom.

Data and methods

This article draws on more than 100 media outlets published by European, US, and African press, social media posts, reports of human rights organizations, and state publications. These sources were found through Google searches with a combination of general keywords such as "Rwanda," "sportswashing," "sports," or "sponsorship"; sports activities, such as "football," "soccer," "basketball," "NBA," or "cycling"; and sports teams, such as "Arsenal," "PSG," or "Bayern Munich." Since "studying authoritarian regimes necessarily entails data limitations" and given that "Obscuring information is a feature of authoritarian systems, not a bug" (Dukalskis 2021, 9), most of the data was gathered from media publications. Rwandan state reports are not always transparent on the financial details of their sports endeavors, and the lack of freedom of press in the country means that critical voices can only be found in the foreign press.

The study focuses on Rwanda as a single test case to allow deeper analysis of its authoritarian image strategy. It allows a detailed analysis of how sponsorships and hosting of sports events enable Kagame to promote Rwanda's brand as a legitimate destination for business and tourism while enjoying Western support, despite its human rights violations. With over a third of the world's countries classified as authoritarian regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024, 4), Rwanda's case yields insights that researchers can apply to other authoritarian regimes.

Western support of postgenocide Rwanda

The Rwandan genocide ended in July 1994 when the RPF, headed by Kagame, assumed control of the country. Since then, Western governments and organizations have aided Rwanda's nation-building process. The international community's assistance to Rwanda was motivated in part by its lack of intervention throughout the genocide and partially by the RPF's policies. One way the RPF strengthens its dual image "as both hero and criminal" (Damman 2015, 31) is by

deploying peacekeeping forces. Following the genocide, many Hutus fled Rwanda to the neighboring DRC (then Zaire), including fighters who participated in the genocide. Kagame feared that these Hutus would regroup in the refugee camps in Congo and threaten Rwanda. As such, the Rwandan army combined forces with armed rebel groups in Eastern Congo to capture the Hutu extremists. In the early 2000s, as reports of the abuse and killing of thousands of civilians in Eastern Congo became public, and Western governments threatened to cut their aid to Rwanda, Kagame recognized that by sending humanitarian assistance to conflicts on the continent, he could improve Rwanda's global image, regain the lost aid, and continue the army's interventions in Eastern Congo. In 2004, Rwanda became the first African country to volunteer peacekeeping troops in Darfur as part of the African Union Mission in Sudan, following a prolonged international outcry for military action that did not result in any major actor willing to intervene (Damman 2015, 44). Since then, Rwanda has deployed peacekeeping troops to multiple other conflicts in Africa. Rwanda is now the world's second largest contributor of experts on mission, formed police units, individual police, staff officers, and troops, with a total of 5,879 personnel (United Nations Peacekeeping 2024).

Owing to the genocide credit and the RPF's policies, the regime managed to secure support from Western countries, which often turn a blind eye to the regime's growing authoritarian practices. Whereas the donor rhetoric reiterates the importance of promoting democracy in Rwanda, donors barely hold Rwandan policymakers accountable for its grave human rights violations. Paradoxically, the aid that Western donors provide to promote democratization enables the RPF to entrench its hold on power (Hayman 2011, 127).

This Western support has helped Kagame implement reforms that paved the way for building a new Rwanda. Rwanda presents itself as a country that has undergone a process of transitional justice, developing a market-oriented economy with a stable regime, visionary leadership, absence of ethnic frictions, a female majority in parliament, clean streets, and unique tourist attractions. However, these reforms—which Reyntjens calls “RPF-ization and tutsization” (Reyntjens 2013, 15)—have allowed Kagame and his allies to impede any chances of democratization. In the early 2000s, Rwanda passed laws outlawing the public identification of citizens based on their ethnicity to promote a unified nation rather than one still divided between Tutsis and Hutus. Yet in practice, key positions remain dominated by the Tutsi minority (Reyntjens 2004). Rwanda's political governance engenders structural violence that has enabled Kagame to gain full control over the state's affairs, while simultaneously placating or silencing international donors (Uvin 1998, 40–50). The RPF has been able to keep out critical observers from international NGOs, media, and academia, while simultaneously closing off the domestic space to political contestation by outlawing oppositional parties and arresting politicians who fail to adhere to the RPF's line (Matfess 2015, 191). Civil society and independent media have also been weakened through intimidation. The elimination of opposing voices, repression, information management and communication, the imposition of a monopolistic narrative, and the use of military might domestically and regionally have all helped the RPF consolidate its hold on power.

The mastermind leading this change while garnering Western support is President Kagame, who receives “red carpet treatment” (Reyntjens 2011, 2) in international forums owing to his authoritarian image management. Kagame employs two core strategies to attract Western support (Fisher 2015). First, he has personalized diplomacy by making himself accessible to Western donors and think-tanks, including by giving frequent lectures at the latter. Second, public relations (PR) firms have been lobbying Western government officials while emphasizing Rwanda’s economic success and favorable investment conditions based on its adoption of neoliberal economic reform packages. Kagame’s image management attests to the potential power of images, as well as how they can be malleable and controlled (Gallagher 2015, 2). Kagame’s portrayal of Rwanda as a stable, peaceful, market-orientated, and inviting country counters the negative images of Rwanda that followed the genocide while drawing Western support for the country’s nation-building.

Kagame’s authoritarian image management activities show “a multi effort to remake Rwanda’s reputation with the aim of enhancing regime security” (Dukalskis 2021, 140). The RPF hires PR firms that target Western state officials, leading businesspeople, and journalists in influential media outlets in order to counter negative portrayals of Rwanda. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the RPF signed contracts totaling more than \$1 million with Western-based PR firms, most of them hired to conduct lobbying and build good relations with members of the US government (Dukalskis 2021, 149). Simultaneously, to control the narrative circulating about Rwanda, the RPF restricts access to foreign journalists, researchers, and officials who are perceived to be critical of the regime. Researchers and development workers who are allowed to enter Rwanda report feeling under surveillance (Thomson 2018, 185). The RPF also attempts to preempt oppositional mobilization in the diaspora by discrediting those who publicly criticize the regime. When this fails, the government resorts to harsher repression.

Kagame’s authoritarian image management ranges from aggressive tactics to relatively “innocuous efforts” (Dukalskis 2021, 140) like sponsoring major European football clubs. Kagame recognized that the global popularity of sports could be used to promote Rwanda’s development goals, including improving the country’s image (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2020). Yet Rwanda’s sports endeavors have also attracted a great deal of criticism, with many describing them as sportswashing. The following sections analyze the contributions of these endeavors to promoting the new Rwanda, as well as the vital role Western actors play in supporting Kagame’s image management. This support serves as a vital source of resilience for the RPF.

Rwanda’s sportswashing: Hosting sports events

Hosting sporting events is a common sportswashing practice, as embodied in—to name a few—the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Each of these countries had distinct interests in hosting the events, but in general terms, the host either

sought to brand itself as an influential global power, improve its damaged reputation, or boost its global profile. Rwanda has followed suit by using sports events to promote its regional, continental, and global aspirations. To achieve these aspirations, Rwanda's Sports Development Policy 2020–2030 outlines a multimillion-dollar plan to develop the country's sports industry by highlighting the need to “improve and increase sports infrastructure facilities that meet international standards” and turn Rwanda into a “hub of sporting activities” that would increase its capacity to host international events (Ministry of Sports 2021, 16). Indeed, Rwanda has spent over \$250 million in the last decade on the construction of new sports facilities or refurbishment of existing ones, including a national sports stadium (\$165 million), a basketball arena (\$104 million), a golf course (\$16 million), and a cricket stadium (\$1.3 million) (Agence France-Presse 2023). In addition, the policy links sports and physical activity with the country's development by stressing that wider participation in sports would improve the health of the citizens, contribute to their well-being and happiness, teach vital values, challenge inequalities, and promote social cohesion.

The construction of sports facilities has enabled Rwanda to host international sporting competitions and to win bids to host future events. The most prominent and extended event so far is the BAL. In 2021, the NBA launched this annual competition as part of a broader drive to market the league in Africa. The Kigali Arena hosted the inaugural season in 2021; and in 2022, 2023, and 2024, the Kigali Arena hosted the crucial stages of the season. An agreement signed between BAL and the Rwanda Development Board (RDB)—the government institution responsible for promoting the country's development through private sector growth—indicates that the Kigali Arena will also host the 2026 and 2028 seasons (NBA 2023).

Rwanda is a pioneer in hosting other sports events for the first time on the African continent. In 2023, the Kigali Arena hosted the FIFA Congress—the annual gathering of international football's legislative body. This was the first elective FIFA Congress held in Africa (Republic of Rwanda *n.d.*). In 2025, Rwanda will become the first African country to host the Union Cycliste Internationale Road World Championships: the most prestigious bicycle road racing tournament of the year. The organizers expect the event to attract over 5,000 cyclists from around the world (Rwanda Convention Bureau *n.d.*). Rwanda's hilly and mountainous topography helped cement the country as a leading force in African cycling, as is also evidenced by its hosting of the annual Tour du Rwanda cycling tournament, which brings twenty teams to the country for an eight-day race. Rwanda was also the first African country to host the International Volleyball Federation Beach Volleyball World Tour for men and women. In 2023, Rwanda became the first East African country to host the women's AfroBasket. International Basketball Federation Africa Regional Director Alphonse Bile recognized Rwanda as a major sports host, noting: “Over the last three years Kigali became the capital of basketball in Africa” (FIBA 2023).

Whereas Rwanda's landscape explains its attraction for cyclists, it is not obvious that one of the smallest countries on the continent would become the center of BAL. Goldman and Paller (2023) offer several explanations for the NBA's connection with Rwanda. One of them is rooted in Rwanda's image as a secure

and stable country in terms of personal safety and business. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rwanda offered the NBA an ideal location to host hundreds of players safely owing to Kigali's infrastructure and facilities. Rwanda's safety is also noted by investors who seek to do business in the country (Hinks 2021).

While Rwanda does not have a long tradition of basketball culture, the NBA regards the country's stable economy as an attractive factor that can help them expand the game across the continent. Another reason for the NBA's connection with Rwanda stems from the personal relationships between Kagame and NBA executives (Goldman and Paller 2023, 177). Kagame is friends with Masai Ujiri, former president [as of June 28, 2025] of the Toronto Raptors and founder of Giants of Africa, a nonprofit organization that promotes basketball on the continent. Ujiri organized a Giants of Africa camp in Kigali in 2018, and Kagame granted him a large plot in the city to develop business and sporting facilities. On social media, Ujiri and Giants of Africa have praised Kagame's work and persona, noting that "He exemplifies how those in positions of authority can empower entire nations" (Giants of Africa 2023). Commissioner Adam Silver has on more than one occasion spoken publicly about Kagame's love of basketball. Kagame himself has attended several NBA games.

As part of the RPF's image management, the Rwandan government seeks to host international sports events to promote the country's name in Africa and beyond, goals that are deemed crucial for attaining the country's development goals. The country's ministers and governmental agency workers recognize the financial and social rewards deriving from the growth of the sports tourism industry, which has a trickle-down effect on local economies because sports tourists consume services and purchase goods. The hosting of sports events is also recognized as a means to showcase the positive sides of the country and to attract more business to Rwanda. Prior to the 2021 BAL, RDB CEO Clare Akamanzi noted, "We will reach millions of basketball fans from all around the world and promote Rwanda's natural beauty, budding sports tourism, and conducive investment and business environment" (Kagire 2021). While there is no data on the financial returns from the 2021 BAL, according to Visit Rwanda—which is part of the RDB—the 2023 BAL brought nearly \$10 million in revenue to Rwanda's economy via services, such as hotels, tour operators, marketing, and event-planning companies (Prinsloo, Hoije, and Girma 2024). Hosting sports events helps Kigali develop into a hub for both sports and business tourism. According to Minister of Sports Aurore Mimosa Munyangaju, "The end result of all those things is promoting Rwanda as a MICE [meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions] destination. This means the sport industry is one that can play a significant role in the country's economic development" (Thomas 2021). Munyangaju added that "sport and entertainment are interconnected. Having the privilege of hosting the BAL, Rwanda has positioned itself as a platform to accelerate the development of these industries locally and across Africa" (Rwanda Development Board 2023).

After the RDB signed a multiyear extension to host the BAL in upcoming seasons, Akamanzi further indicated the importance that the government attaches to Rwanda's successful cooperation with the NBA, recognizing not only financial rewards but also the development of local talent. Rwandan clubs and

athletes compete against prominent opponents in the competition hosted by the country, thus gaining international exposure and valuable experience. After the 2021 BAL, in which the local basketball club Patriots BBC reached an impressive fourth place, Munyangaju said: “By investing in the right infrastructure and bringing different events, we’re expecting our local players to raise their standards. ... By competing with the best, you will be there one day” (Thomas 2021).

Whereas hosting international sporting events yields financial and social rewards for Rwanda while cementing its status as an African sports and business hub, these events have also attracted negative coverage. Most criticism highlights the NBA’s partnership with a tyrant, a connection that contradicts the league’s Social Justice Coalition (n.d.). Despite the NBA’s declared commitment to democracy, transparency, and a just penal system, none of these are to be found in Rwanda. According to Freedom House’s democracy index (n.d.), Rwanda is classified as Not Free, referring to the RPF’s suppression of political dissent “through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, arbitrary detention, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents.” Despite this abysmal record, NBA officials praise Kagame as a basketball enthusiast without mentioning his human rights violations.

Given the NBA’s disregard for Kagame’s authoritarian practices, critics have accused the NBA of legitimizing a dubious regime. One of the most vocal critiques is Rwandan David Himbara, a former advisor to Kagame who has since adopted a critical stance towards the president. His critique mostly targets former US President Barack Obama, who serves as a strategic partner and minority owner in the NBA Africa endeavor. Himbara maintains that “by joining the NBA Africa as a strategic partner, Obama is joining one of the most brutal African strongmen” (2021). He objects to Rwanda’s connection with the NBA not only for moral reasons but also due to financial concerns, arguing that the sports infrastructure constructed in Rwanda turns into white elephants due to infrequent usage.

Other critics direct accusations at NBA Commissioner Silver. CEO of the Human Rights Foundation Thor Halvorssen wrote a letter to Silver requesting that the NBA reconsider its collaboration with Rwanda given the country’s record of human rights violations. Halvorssen warned that “Kagame will use the prestige of the NBA to whitewash his crimes, and to give his regime the false appearance of legitimacy and stability” (Human Rights Foundation 2021). Silver also received a letter from Taciana Rusesabagina, wife of Paul Rusesabagina. The 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* is based on his experiences as a manager of a hotel that saved the lives of Tutsis during the genocide. After the genocide, Rusesabagina became a critic of Kagame and in 1996 fled the country. Since then, the regime has targeted him. In 2020, Rusesabagina flew from Dubai to Burundi, yet the plane landed in Rwanda, where he was arrested. While imprisoned, his wife wrote to Silver, urging the commissioner to reconsider the NBA’s partnership with Rwanda in the wake of Rusesabagina’s arrest, as well as the harassment that other dissidents endure. She likewise warned that this cooperation would be detrimental to all sides in terms of PR (Zirin 2021).

While Rusesabagina was released after spending two and a half years in prison, the NBA’s links with Rwanda remain unchanged, indicating that

sportswashing does not exist in a global vacuum but is encouraged and supported by Western-based capitalistic companies. This cooperation stems from the mutual interest authoritarian and Western-based business officials share in benefiting from the global capitalist world of modern-day sports. When confronted with Rwanda's human rights violations, personnel working in the NBA or connected to the venture commonly respond that sports and politics should not be mixed. Such was the answer given by NBA Africa CEO Victor Williams, who "avoided any specific remarks on Kagame but stated that the BAL is part of the league's apolitical effort to further basketball in Africa" (Zidan 2021). Paul Hinks also made similar comments, noting that "Politics Should Stay Out of the NBA's Basketball Africa League" (2021). By turning a blind eye to the RPF's human rights abuses, Western organizations and companies help Kagame secure further international support and promote the game of basketball while simultaneously strengthening his international and national legitimacy.

Rwanda's sportswashing: Sponsorship

Rwanda's sportswashing is also demonstrated in the country's advertising of the Visit Rwanda logo on the shirts of leading European football clubs. Since 2018, Rwanda has signed three major sponsorship deals: the first with the English club Arsenal, the second with French PSG, and the third with the German club Bayern Munich. These deals have cost Rwanda an estimated total of \$161 million.¹ The partnerships with Arsenal and PSG are primarily sleeve sponsorships, displaying the Visit Rwanda logo on the jerseys of both men's and women's teams as well as on interview backdrops and across the stadiums. This ensures the global visibility of the logo, particularly considering the clubs' large fan bases and the regular broadcasting of their matches across the globe. As part of these deals, prominent players from these clubs have visited Rwanda, praised its landscapes, and publicly endorsed the country's development trajectory (Volcanoes National Park Rwanda 2022).

The Bayern Munich partnership includes advertising Visit Rwanda across the stadium and access to the club's business partners. According to Akamanzi, the rationale behind the partnership was that Germany ranks among Rwanda's top six tourism markets, with German tourists spending more per capita than visitors from any other country (Spotify 2023). Also, Bayern Munich is Germany's most successful football club and one of the leading powerhouses in Europe; thus, the deal sends a message to the world that Rwanda is striving to become a leading tourist and business destination. "We should not settle with simple dreams but think like giants—the giants of Africa. This is the message from our president," Akamanzi explained (Spotify 2023). Lastly, the deal grants Rwanda access to Bayern Munich's prominent German businesses, which Rwanda seeks to attract to invest in the country.

The Visit Rwanda campaign has also featured prominently in other sports competitions. Rwanda signed a sponsorship deal with the African Football League, a continental tournament that began in 2023. RwandAir—the country's

flag carrier airline—serves as the airline partner for that league. Visit Rwanda has also been a central sponsor of BAL.

These sponsorships underscore the pivotal role of Western PR agencies in crafting Rwanda's branding (Voets 2023, 147). In 2017, RDB tasked the London-based PR agency Portland Communications (PC) with changing perceptions of Rwanda in the UK media and increasing the number of visits from the UK. This task of rebranding Rwanda to attract more tourists accorded with the country's Vision 2020 plan, which aimed to transform the country into a middle-income nation by developing its tourist sector. PC began promoting Rwanda as a tourist destination and a tech hub so that visitors would not simply leave after seeing gorillas but stay for longer periods. In 2018 PC created the Visit Rwanda brand. The official reveal of the logo occurred on May 23, the same day as the sponsorship deal with Arsenal was announced (Voets 2023, 147).

According to state representatives, the Visit Rwanda sports sponsorship has been a success. Rwanda attracts more visitors, thus expanding its tourism sector, and sends a message to the world that the country is safe and open for business. Akamanzi (2023) noted that the partnership with Arsenal and PSG generated over US\$160 million in 2022, helping to generate US\$445 million in tourism revenues owing to the over one million visitors to Rwanda that year. These figures suggest the Visit Rwanda sponsorships have been successful both economically and in terms of branding, given the positive image of the country that they have promoted. Akamanzi also explained that 10 percent of the revenues generated at national parks are shared with nearby communities, thus indicating that the Visit Rwanda sponsorship has a direct and indirect impact on the economy and livelihoods of Rwandan people. Akamanzi did not reveal the amount that Rwanda paid for the sponsorships but noted that the sponsorships are funded by the revenues from the country's national parks. Akamanzi added that the Visit Rwanda sponsorship helped Rwanda form its links with the NBA because the latter was impressed by the country's ambition.

Similar to the international sporting events Rwanda hosts, the Visit Rwanda sponsorships are enabled by Western-capitalistic disregard of the RPF's human rights violations and mutual financial benefits. In 2022, a spokesperson for Arsenal was asked why the club cooperates with a tyrant, to which he replied: "Arsenal has always adhered to the principle of not involving itself in politics" (D'Urso and McNicholas 2022). This is a dubious answer, considering that Arsenal has posted on social media about Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, and LGBT+ issues. In 2023, Arsenal was again asked about this cooperation. The Arsenal representatives replied that their agreement is with the RDB and not the government (D'Urso 2023). This is similarly dubious because the RDB is a governmental department. Instead of addressing the critiques concerning Rwanda's violations, Bayern Munich CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen emphasized how the deal has contributed to the development of grassroots football in Rwanda. He added: "It's clearly—as stated also from Rwanda's side—that they want to promote the issue of tourism in Rwanda. And I don't see it as sportswashing that we as a club are promoting that" (Fahey 2023). Such responses indicate that sportswashing does not exist in a global vacuum but is encouraged and supported by Western-based capitalistic companies. The Visit Rwanda sponsorship is another manifestation

of the RPF's authoritarian image management, which is vital to its domestic and international efforts to secure international legitimization. The sponsorship deals reveal the extensive support the RPF gets from its Western facilitators—support that, in turn, contributes to the stability of the authoritarian regime.

Despite the Western-based capitalistic backing of Rwanda's sportswashing, there are growing signs of criticism of the Visit Rwanda sponsorships. After the deal with Arsenal was publicized, British tabloids claimed that the UK was indirectly funding the Arsenal deal. According to a *Daily Mail* piece titled "Shirt of Shame," in 2018 Rwanda received £62 million of aid and paid £30 million to Arsenal (Craven 2018). Journalist Ian Birrell added that the sponsorship deal highlights "the utter absurdity of British aid policies." *The Sun* criticized the British government and Kagame for spending millions while orphans in the country "are so poor they can't even afford a football" (Dale 2018). Whereas in practice, the UK aid to Rwanda in 2018 was £54,746,000 million (Department for International Development 2020), the tabloids raised public awareness concerning a potential link between the UK's aid and the Visit Rwanda sponsorship. MP Andrew Bridgen criticized this dynamic, noting that "If this isn't a perfect own goal for foreign aid, I don't know what is. It serves to expose the complete idiocy this system is based on" (Craven 2018). Such critics echo arguments made by economists who agree that fungibility exists, but it is not necessarily problematic since it allows receiving governments to allocate their budgets according to their needs (Apodaca 2017). According to Feyzioglu, Swaroop, and Zhu (1998, 30), "An aid-recipient country could render earmarked aid fungible by reducing its own resources in the sector that receives aid and transferring them to other sectors of the budget." Nevertheless, unlike the tabloids' claims, there is no evidence that this occurred in the case of Rwanda's sponsorship of Arsenal. Officials from both countries rejected such notions. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) spokesperson claimed that it "does not give any money to Visit Rwanda or the Rwanda Development Board. All UK aid to Rwanda is earmarked for specific programmes only, such as education and agriculture, and we track results to ensure value for money for UK taxpayers" (Dale 2018). Rwandan Deputy Foreign Minister told the Associated Press that the sponsorship deal is funded by tourism revenue (Ssuuna 2018). Despite such refutes, the tabloids' claims were widely circulated—including in reputable sources (BBC 2018)—thus giving further voice to the criticism surrounding the sponsorship deal. English and German football fans have also voiced their objection to the sponsorship deals, as covered by leading national media outlets (Augustus 2022; Krepela 2023). In England, fans have used the hashtag #Don'tVisitRwanda on social media to share posters calling on people to attend rallies against the sponsorship, videos of fans burning their jerseys, and information about the country's human rights violations. Such negative coverage impedes the RDB's goals of using the Visit Rwanda campaign to improve the country's public image.

Given the lack of freedom of speech in Rwanda, there has hardly been any opposition to the Visit Rwanda campaign in the country. Victoire Ingabire, one of the few vocal opponents of Kagame who was jailed for eight years for her political activism, criticized the sponsorship deals as a waste of money (Agence France-Presse 2023). Ingabire's claims were refuted by governmental

officials. In a news piece bearing the headline “Sportswashing? No. Rwandans Benefit from the Business of Sport,” Akamanzi (2023) claims that Ingabire’s criticism is “counterproductive and cynical.” Ruling party MP John-Ruku Rwabiyoma called the critics “ignorant” (Africanews and AFP 2023). President Kagame likewise argued that “I am the one who knows what we put in; I know how much we are getting out,” without offering specific details regarding the return on investment of the Visit Rwanda deals. Rwandan Journalist Sanny Ntayombya (2023) overlooked the core claim voiced against Kagame’s Rwanda and instead attacked the Western media, which doubts how Rwanda can afford the sponsorship deals.

In the wake of the futile opposition from within Rwanda and across Europe, more substantial resistance has been voiced by Rwanda’s neighbors. The Congolese football club, TP Mazembe, refused to display the Visit Rwanda logo on its jersey during their 2023 African Football League matches. They also refused to use the services of RwandAir, instead using the presidential airplane to fly to their quarter-final match against Esperance de Tunis. Mazembe explained that their refusal stemmed from Rwanda’s support of the M23 rebel group in the Kivu region in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mtuta 2023). In 2024, Burundian club Dynamo taped over the Visit Rwanda logo on its jerseys at a BAL game, subsequently forfeiting two consecutive matches, which led to their withdrawal from the competition. This follows accusations voiced by Burundi’s President Évariste Ndayishimiye that Rwanda’s government has been backing the Red Tabara rebel group, which killed twenty people in the country. A club player revealed that the instructions to tape over the Visit Rwanda logo came from President Ndayishimiye himself (BBC 2024). These short-lived acts of resistance indicate the regional shortcomings of the Visit Rwanda campaign. The geopolitical tensions between Congo and Burundi, on the one hand, and Rwanda, on the other, motivated these protests. Likewise, the financial stakes are lower than those of Rwanda’s Western facilitators.

Conclusion

“Rwanda is perhaps the most successful example of authoritarian image management in the contemporary world” argues Dukalskis (2021, 157) based on his analysis of the RPF’s strategies of hiring PR firms that shape the country’s image abroad, its misinformation campaigns, and its attacks against those who challenge its narrative. This article extends Dukalskis’s argument by evaluating Rwanda’s branding “success” through the conceptual lens of sportswashing. Since the mid-2010s, the RPF has incorporated sports as part of its authoritarian image management. Hosting competitions and publicizing the country’s name have helped attract Western support, visitors, and investors as part of the RPF’s efforts to improve Rwanda’s public image. Although Rwanda’s social, political, and economic ills have increasingly attracted global scrutiny, the RPF has largely withstood criticism and calls for boycott, given the mutual financial benefits reaped by Rwanda and its Western facilitators. The criticism directed at BAL and the Visit Rwanda sponsorships from media and the public, alongside counter-

narratives that the NBA and European clubs circulate to deflect critiques, indicate that the country is currently in the second wave of its sportswashing process. A long-term perspective is necessary to assess whether Rwanda will progress into the third wave, in which ties with the country become normalized, “the critique dies down, media interest declines and the benefit of the injected economical capital begins to come to fruition” (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2025, 8).

Future scholarship should also extend the analysis of sportswashing to other African contexts. Given that twenty-two out of fifty-four African countries are classified as authoritarian regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025, 55), Rwanda’s successful sportswashing can serve as a model for other regimes across the continent. For example, the geopolitical tension between Rwanda and the DRC escalated into the sports realm in 2024, with the government of the DRC offering Italian football team AC Milan a sponsorship deal in which a Visit Congo logo would appear on the players’ shirts and across the stadium (Borrelli and Schipani 2024). Although that offer had not materialized, the DRC signed a memorandum of understanding with French football team AS Monaco to display a Visit Congo logo on the team’s shirts (Tshiamala and Chanson 2025). In addition, the DRC’s Foreign Minister Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner sent letters to Arsenal, Bayern Munich, and PSG, calling the clubs to end their sponsorship deals with Visit Rwanda (Stevens and Makumeno 2025). Whereas these calls were not answered, the DRC’s efforts highlight the expanding role of sports diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy and public relations across Africa.

Future research could also broaden the scope of the current article by incorporating the framework of African agency (Fisher 2018) to examine the growing phenomenon of sports diplomacy among all types of regimes across Africa. An analysis of this trend would help push research forward on African agency beyond “the tired tropes of an Africa that is victimized, chaotic, violent and poor” and towards “a focus on interaction, rather than oneway domination” by external powers (Brown and Harman 2013, 2). Doing so will contribute to our understanding of how Africans from autocratic and democratic states exert their agency through the realm of sports. African state and nonstate actors express their agency as they seek to exploit the global popularity of sports—and particularly football, “the continent’s beautiful game” (Iheka 2024)—to promote their own interests. These actors adopt a rhetoric of local and national development to attract foreign investment and foster partnerships with global powers (Dubinsky 2024; 2025), visioning that hosting international sports events would contribute to their geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural goals. To uncover the agency of African actors who seek to promote their national and international interests, we need to look no further than the sports stadiums across the continent.²

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Notes

1. The figure is calculated based on the sponsorship deals with the three teams. First, in 2018, Rwanda signed a three-year deal worth £30 million with Arsenal (Waterson 2018). In 2021, the agreement was extended for four years at £40 million (D'Urso 2023). Second, in 2019, a three-year sponsorship deal was signed with Paris Saint Germain for approximately €10 million per year (De Ryck in Voets 2023, 147). In 2023, the deal was extended for two more years. The extension's details were not disclosed, but it is reasonable to assume that the amount was comparable to the initial deal. Third, in 2023, Rwanda signed a five-year sponsorship deal with Bayern Munich worth €25 million (Pearson 2025). Using exchange rates of £1 = \$1.24 and €1 = \$1.03, the total value of these sponsorship deals amounts to \$161 million.
2. Alegi (2010) provides a useful historical survey of the importance of football—including stadiums—throughout the continent, and how Africans have appropriated the game to promote their own interests.

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