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THE PROMISE OF *IMIHIGO*:

DECENTRALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY IN RWANDA, 2006-2010

SYNOPSIS

In the wake of the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Front inherited the remnants of a highly centralized state administration. For a number of years the government engaged in crisis management, attempting to meet the basic needs of a traumatized population. In 2000, in an effort to improve local service delivery, the RPF-led government began a program of decentralization. Under the new arrangement, mayors were responsible for implementing development programs. A chief concern for the central government was how to make mayors accountable. In response to this challenge, the government in 2006 launched an innovative system known as the *imihigo* process. Imihigo had its roots in a pre-colonial Rwandan cultural practice whereby leaders or warriors would publicly vow to achieve certain goals—and face public humiliation if they failed. The modern imihigo process linked this traditional Rwandan practice with planning, monitoring and oversight. By 2010, government officials believed that the imihigo process had resulted in improved service delivery in the districts.

Daniel Scher drafted this policy note with Christine MacAulay on the basis of interviews conducted in Rwanda in May 2010.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2006, newly elected district mayors in Rwanda gathered in Murambi, a district just south of the capital, Kigali. At the retreat they learned about their new responsibilities and how their work in the districts fitted into the government's national development plans. President Paul Kagame addressed the mayors during an official induction ceremony. One mayor from a district in the Eastern Province, buoyant with his success in the district's first elections, shouted

out to those assembled that his district was going to be the best performing district in the country. Another mayor quickly countered, saying that his was going to outperform the rest.

The president intervened and pointed out that in Rwandan culture making bold claims about accomplishments was no small matter. He referred to the Rwandan traditional practice of *imihigo*, a pre-colonial tradition whereby warriors or leaders would publicly vow to accomplish certain deeds. Failure to fulfill these promises would result in shame and

embarrassment. Kagame challenged the mayors to come up with imihigo for their districts that he would then follow up upon later in the mayors' terms. He assembled a small team from the Ministry of Local Administration to consider ways to integrate the practice of imihigo into a comprehensive performance-management strategy for all district mayors.

The technical committee, chaired by Népo Rugemintwaza, the director general of Territorial Administration at the time, set about developing a system that would transpose a traditional Rwandan cultural practice into a tool for a modern public service. Rugemintwaza and his colleagues, including the highly respected minister of Local Administration at the time, Protais Musoni, created a system that was ambitious in both style and scope. By 2010, imihigo had come to refer to a combined performance-management system, planning tool, multi-layered oversight mechanism, and way of using social and traditional pressure to push mayors to greater levels of achievement. Governors, some ministries and other government units also signed imihigo. The government had also moved to introduce an imihigo process for other levels of government.

This memo concentrates on the imihigo process for district mayors because this application was the initial template and was the most developed. Performance-management systems in the civil service in countries around the world are often ignored or resented. In Rwanda, there was compelling evidence in 2010 that both mayors and their evaluators took imihigo commitments seriously.

CONTEXT

At the time of the first imihigo cycle, Rwanda had a population of about 10 million. In 2010, on a list of 227 countries ranked by per capita gross domestic product compiled by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, Rwanda came in at 216th, just below

Sierra Leone and a few notches above Afghanistan. Ethnic tensions between Hutu Rwandans and Tutsi Rwandans have played a significant role in politics of the contemporary Rwandan state. When Rwanda gained independence in 1962, a Hutu faction came to power. A widespread backlash against Tutsi, who were viewed as agents of colonial oppression, occurred and thousands fled into exile in neighboring countries. Sporadic attacks against Tutsi continued for the next 30 years, with waves of exiles arriving in Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and other countries. A rebel movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, emerged among these exiles. The RPF launched an invasion in the late 1980s aimed at overthrowing the Hutu dictator, Juvénal Habyarimana. Fighting between the RPF and government troops continued throughout the 1990s. In April 1994, Habyarimana was assassinated, and Hutu hardliners promoting a vicious brand of ethnic racism known as Hutu Power seized control. For 100 days, these hardliners directed an orchestrated genocide against Tutsis, as well as Hutu moderates, killing an estimated 800,000 people.

The RPF's capture of the capital city of Kigali in July 1994 and its consolidation of control throughout the country ended the genocide. The RPF promoted non-ethnic Rwandan nationalism and outlawed language or actions that could promote ethnic tension and sectarianism. After 1994 the post-conflict government sought to rebuild state institutions. When the RPF took over the government in 1994, it inherited the tattered remnants of a highly centralized state administration. In the wake of the genocide, the RPF did what it could to reestablish state services, in many cases modeling administration on either the structures that had preceded them or on RPF party structures. The needs of the post-genocide Rwandan state were so urgent and in many cases so basic that there was little time to consider

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long-term matters. However, in 1997 and 1998, leaders organized a series of consultations about the government. Attendees included everyone from ordinary citizens to those at the highest levels of government. An official decentralization document from the Ministry of Local Administration noted, "In those countrywide consultations, the citizens showed a remarkable desire to have a voice in the affairs of the state. The decentralization policy is an answer to that call."

Musoni, cabinet minister and former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Local Administration, noted in a paper on decentralization in Rwanda that the process represented a way to rebuild trust, give local people greater voice in governance processes, increase transparency and maintain political stability—all of which were vital in post-genocide Rwanda. In the new decentralized state administration, local authorities would be the implementers of plans and policies drawn up at the national level. The national government would play a smaller role in implementation and a larger role in planning and evaluation.

There were two key reasons for this decision. First, those high up in the administration were concerned that they were out of touch with the demands and needs of ordinary citizens. Alexis Dukundane, former head of the Directorate for Community Development and Cooperatives at the Ministry of Local Government, recalled that they were concerned that "the thinking you have at the national level is not the real thinking of the people." Many of the new government officials were exiles who had never lived in Rwanda. Charles Munyaneza, former director general of Territorial Administration in the Ministry of Local Administration, recalled, "Sometimes some of us might have had some misconceptions. … I was a director in the Ministry of Local Government, but had not lived in Rwanda … so I couldn't assume,

although I was a director, to know the realities on the ground. I would have deceived myself. … Most of us in the government shared this problem. We had either read about Rwanda or we had seen Rwanda, only for not many years."

Secondly, many in the RPF felt that citizens at the local level had been manipulated and misled by local leaders into participating in the genocide. Ordinary citizens had no effective way to exert influence over local leaders or check their behavior. Decentralization was a way of addressing the needs of citizens more directly, while also making local leaders more accountable by giving ordinary citizens a greater role in policy formulation and evaluation.

In 2000, the government passed a National Decentralization Policy that presented a vision for a decentralized government centered on the concepts of good governance, service delivery for the poor and sustainable development. The decentralization vision articulated by the government had an explicit aim to "put people at the center of service delivery" and improve the government's effectiveness and responsiveness in delivering services, according to a 2006 government report on making decentralized service delivery work.

The first phase of decentralization began in 2004. The RPF had inherited a state system made up of 154 districts. By 2004, as part of the National Decentralization Policy, the government had reduced the number of districts to 30, grouped into six provinces. These new, larger districts had more staff, and the resized territories were easier to administer. During this phase of decentralization, mayors were appointed in the districts by the RPF-dominated central government. This was seen as a temporary situation, and the decentralization implementation secretariat made plans to shift to a system of direct election of mayors. At the time, a government-wide initiative focused on staffing new posts with competent people, raising salaries and attracting recent university

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graduates to technocratic positions in the districts.

By 2006, the groundwork was laid for the districts to deliver services in alignment with national goals. As Munyaneza put it, planners had created "viable administrative entities that can easily deliver services to the people."

THE CHALLENGE

Fred Mufulukye, director general of Territorial Administration and Good Governance, recalled that officials at the implementation secretariat and the Ministry of Local Administration were still concerned in 2006 with figuring out how to ensure that the districts delivered on the government's development programs. Their decentralization goals, which saw the central government as planner and facilitator, relied heavily on the ability of the districts to actually implement the projects they were assigned.

Munyaneza recalled that while officials were not specifically thinking about imihigo, "What people had in mind was accountability and performance and delivery. That's what people had in mind: to create institutions and to have leaders who would be accountable, who would deliver, and who would be responsible. … The issue of imihigo came as a way of implementing that or achieving that philosophical understanding."

Desire Nyandwi, a member of Parliament and former secretary-general of the RPF, said, "If you work, there's got to be a target. … [Imihigo] creates an incentive for bureaucrats to get things done and not just sit in their offices with their arms crossed."

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In addition to imihigo, Rwanda drew on a number of other traditional practices to bolster its decentralization efforts at the local level. These included *gacaca*, a traditional form of dispute resolution in the justice system;

umuganda, or monthly community work projects such as planting trees and repairing bridges and roads; and *ubudehe*, or participatory planning and budgeting at the village level.

Definitions varied on what constituted a traditional imihigo. Some suggested that it was simply a vow, usually made in public. Others recalled it as having a basis in war, where warriors would throw a spear into the ground while publicly proclaiming the feats they would accomplish in battle. All agreed that the consequences were serious for those who failed to fulfill an imihigo. Dukundane put it simply when he said such a person would be considered an "incapable person," a humiliating label that was anathema to Rwandans.

Government reports suggested that because the practice of imihigo was tradition-based, familiar and well understood, the concept generated enthusiasm and a sense of ownership among the population. Dukundane recalled: "People wouldn't understand if you talk about performance contracts, but if you say imihigo, they understand."

Musoni, former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Local Administration, noted that imihigo targets should be aspirational. "You are not going to be acclaimed for doing what anyone else has done or could do," he said. "An imihigo is supposed to be a stretching of the abilities of both the leader and the people." To ensure appropriate goals as well as effective follow-through, the civil service's imihigo system incorporated specific measures for planning, monitoring and evaluation, and accountability.

Planning

The planning process, which included meetings at every level of government, gave central agencies and district governments a chance to negotiate targets. The procedure aimed to make targets measurable and achievable, and allowed the central government to keep tabs on districts throughout Rwanda. A

series of national plans guided the country's development priorities. The two main plans that framed the work of the national government were Vision 2020, which outlined the broad development goals of the government, and the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy. Development at the district level was governed by another set of plans that were designed to dovetail with the national plans while taking into account local needs. Local demands were obtained by talking with members of the various levels of community councils that operated in the districts. Key among the district plans in 2010 were five-year district development plans covering 2007 to 2012. Based on these five-year plans, district mayors developed three-year plans and, last, annual action plans.

Annual action plans were key documents in the preparation of an imihigo because they contained all the activities that the mayor and his staff pledged to complete during the year. These included rote administrative tasks such as preparing budgets, hiring staff, completing paperwork and reports. From the annual action plan, mayors selected the substantive activities that were going to have the most influence on the government's three priority areas, known as the three pillars: economic development, social welfare and governance. Activities included building schools, equipping health centers, building marketplaces, paving roads, building bridges and electrifying villages, as well as one-time activities such as building a genocide memorial or resettling villagers who lived in areas at risk from landslides or floods.

Before finalizing annual action plans and imihigo targets, district mayors engaged in an extensive process of consultation. The district executive structure consisted of the mayor, a vice mayor for social welfare, a vice mayor for economic development and an executive secretary. Together, they constituted the district executive committee.

Once a year all district executive committees met with representatives from the central government's line ministries in order for the districts to have a clear idea of goals and limitations. At these meetings, known as the Forum of Central and Local Government, the districts were made aware of central-government priorities as well as budgetary constraints that might affect their planning.

For example, Ministry of Education representatives would inform the districts of the money and resources available to build schools or hire teachers. Most development activities in the district were funded by the central government, using budgets developed in the ministries but disbursed directly from the treasury. Districts did have the ability to collect certain taxes: property tax, for which they set the rates, business trading licenses, and rental tax. Even though the districts had the legal authority to raise funds on their own, tax collection on a local basis was a struggle. For this reason, the districts were financially dependent on central budget allocations and the annual central/local meetings were critical in the planning process and in the production of realistic imihigo.

The district executive committees also set up and met with a Joint Action Development Forum (JADF). The JADF brought together all agencies that were doing development work in the district, including national and international nongovernmental organizations and civil-society groups. The purpose of these meetings was to eliminate any overlap between the work of the government and the work of other agencies in the area. These meetings were formal and included full written minutes. The minutes provided a record that aided district executive committees in monitoring the work being carried out in their districts by other agencies. It also provided a mechanism for holding NGOs and international actors accountable.

District executive committees also held extensive consultations with various local-level

councils, which wielded significant authority in the districts. Each district was divided into sectors, and each sector into cells. Each cell was subdivided into a number of villages, each of which was made up of about 10 households.

Committees were elected at every level, and representatives from each sub-level were sent to the level above. For example, each village committee, made up of the heads of the 10 households in the village, put forward a representative to sit on the cell committee. Each cell committee in turn put forward a representative to sit on the sector-level committee, and so on, up to the district council. Individuals who sat on these councils were not full-time administrators but rather were respected members of the community who did this in addition to their regular jobs. The district executive committees sought input from all these levels, and the draft imihigo were presented to the district councils for approval.

Upon receiving approval from the district council, an imihigo document would be sent to a team known as the Quality Assurance Technical Team, made up of representatives from the Ministry of Local Administration and Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance. The quality-assurance team vetted the imihigo document for feasibility and, if necessary, made suggestions on how the targets could be improved.

Throughout the process, imihigo targets were linked to metrics that would be used to measure success or failure. For example, a district might commit to plant a million trees. The number of trees planted in the district by the end of the year would determine the percentage of the activity completed. Similarly, if a mayor committed to building a number of schools, the imihigo score would be based on the number of schools that were actually built. Some more complicated projects could be spread over a number of years. For example, a mayor may have committed to resettling villagers living

in a high-risk area. (Parts of Rwanda are on volcanic plates and prone to flooding and landslides).

But resettlement of people involved a number of imihigo targets, such as building new houses, new schools and new health centers for the affected community. In this case, the mayor might commit one year to resettling the villagers into basic accommodations in a new area, and the following year he would commit to building more facilities and amenities. Although this step-by-step process was not ideal for the resettled population, it reflected the limitations of both resources and capacity in a poor country.

At the end of the consultation process, having settled upon an imihigo and measurement metrics, district mayors publicly signed their imihigo with President Kagame.

The ceremonies were widely publicized on Rwandan television and radio, and the imihigo documents were made public on district websites and in the local press so that citizens in the districts knew exactly what their leaders had committed to.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation ensured that central-government scrutiny continued between the planning and accountability stages. District executive committees were required to keep accurate records of activities and expenditures. Halfway through the fiscal year they prepared a detailed report for the central government on the progress they had made toward achieving their imihigo targets. Initially, the district mayors were required to submit quarterly progress reports, but the requirement was scaled back because it was too time-consuming.

The district council monitored progress throughout the year, as did the governor of the relevant province. At the end of the fiscal year, two teams were assembled, each with a representative from the Ministry of Local Administration, the prime minister's office, the

economic planning and finance ministry, the Rwandan Association of Local Government Authorities, the implementation secretariat and an umbrella civil-society group called the Civil Society Forum. Each team was responsible for 15 of the districts, visiting each district for two days.

Leonard Rugwabiza, the director general of Planning and Research in the economic planning and finance ministry, noted that in 2010 the teams were made up of very high-level individuals, including directors-general. Rugwabiza remarked that it could be quite difficult for the central government to have high-level, skilled staff spending a month out of their offices at a time. However, he and others emphasized that it was vitally important to stress the seriousness of the evaluation process. The presence of high-level government officials ensured that mayors treated the teams' visits with the appropriate degree of respect and preparation. This strategy seemed to work, according to one vice mayor. "We get really nervous for these evaluations," he said.

A typical two-day evaluation would begin with the team in the district head office, auditing the district's paperwork. These audits could continue into the night, and involved sifting through piles of reports and paperwork. A vice mayor gave an example: "If we report that we have held a meeting of the JADF, they will want to see minutes from the meeting, a list of who attended, a list of what decisions were taken, and a report on the outcomes of the meeting," he said. (The executive committee was responsible for collecting information and reporting progress on the implementation of imihigo targets and activities, and the evaluation teams paid special attention to these reports.)

On the second day, the evaluation team would meet with the executive committee, giving the committee a chance to explain any discrepancies or problems the team may have found in the paperwork. The team would consider any difficulties the mayor may have encountered while attempting to implement programs. The team then would present the mayor with a list outlining the particular imihigo targets that the evaluation team decided to spot-check. This would be the first notification the mayor had of the particular activities that would be checked. A sample list for a day could include the local land registry, the district police crime statistics office, a genocide memorial, new school buildings, resettlement sites for villagers in high-risk areas, health centers, community centers, or electrification projects. The evaluation team would base its assessment not only on the progress of the projects but also on the accuracy and completeness of the executive committee's report on imihigo progress.

The evaluation scores made by the teams were based on the completeness of imihigo activities. For example, an activity that was 90%-100% complete would be graded a score of 10; 80%-89% would be scored a 9; 70%-79%, an 8; and so on. These scores were part of a weighted final overall score based on a formula that assigned 60% to economic activities, 30% to social-welfare activities, and 10% to governance activities.

Mufulukye, the director general of Territorial Administration, said the relatively small percentage allotted to governance reflected the belief that good governance was an inherent part of the other activities. To successfully complete a project that contributed to economic development, effective strategic governance was essential, he said.

Using the weighted score, districts were assigned "traffic light" ratings. Green indicated 90%-100% of activities had been completed satisfactorily. Yellow indicated that 50%-89% of activities were completed. Red indicated that fewer than half of activities had been completed.

In their scoring, the evaluation teams commented on the reasons for any failure ratings. The teams also provided

recommendations on how any failures could be addressed in the future, with particular emphasis on how they should be carried forward into the next year's imihigo. These final reports were then publicly disseminated through the districts, on websites run by the Ministry of Local Administration and the economic planning and finance ministry, district councils, the JADF and other forums.

Final reports were officially presented to the mayors at a ceremony with the president, the same ceremony where the mayors signed their new imihigo. The end of one annual imihigo cycle thus also marked the beginning of a new one.

Accountability

While the technical grading and weighted scores were an important part of the process, highly anticipated district rankings were more significant. Districts were ranked based on their imihigo performance, both within their respective provinces and within Rwanda as a whole. This simple system translated the complicated scoring and percentage weighting calculations into a metric that was easily understood by most of the population.

A high-profile tour of all the provinces by the prime minister, with a special emphasis on the rankings, drew even more attention to the performance of the districts. Because districts were rated on the basis of their individual baselines, richer provinces had no edge over poorer ones in terms of performance. In fact, many government officials were eager to point out that poorer provinces were in fact the high performers.

A high ranking translated into bragging rights for district mayors and the governors in the districts. Mufulukye, the director general of Territorial Administration, said that one of the significant achievements of the system was the fostering of competition between districts.

"Now districts—both citizens and mayors—want to compete and want to be best," he said. "This competition drives development." As related by Leonard Rugwabiza at the economic planning and finance ministry, high-performing districts could receive special funding for projects.

Because the rankings were presented at public forums, citizens had simple information to judge the performance of their elected mayors. If a mayor was consistently underperforming, he could be removed by the District Council. Under the laws governing decentralization, the District Council, made up of indirectly elected, non-paid members, had exclusive authority to dismiss a district mayor. If the mayor was removed before his term was up, a by-election was necessary in the district.

According to one observer, 75% of mayors were removed from their positions between 2007 and 2009. It was unclear how many were removed for imihigo-related reasons. Enige Rugamba, the director general of planning at the Ministry of Local Administration, stressed that the high turnover of mayors must be viewed in the context of other developments in governance in Rwanda during the period. General oversight had been increased, with the strengthening of the auditor-general's office, the Ombuds office that investigates cases of maladministration, and the Public Procurement Agency. Many mayors had been ousted, and in some cases jailed, due to corruption and irregularities in procedures. Rugamba and others, such as Rugwabiza at the economic planning and finance ministry, saw the turnover rate as an initial spike as people became accustomed to new standards and procedures and increased scrutiny. Mufulukye added that he attributed mayoral turnover to accountability issues generally, of which imihigo was a part, and that separating the causes was difficult. For example, the increased scrutiny of the imihigo process may have resulted in the exposure of a corrupt mayor and his subsequent removal.

Thus while his removal was not for failing to meet imihigo targets, it was instigated by a component of the imihigo system.

ASSESSING RESULTS

Although government officials insisted in 2010 that the imihigo process had resulted in better service delivery in the districts, no comprehensive data were available. Rugwabiza, Mufulukye and Rugamba were careful to stress that the system was not perfect and that they were constantly working to streamline it. Apollinaire Mushinzimana, coordinator of the decentralization implementation secretariat, noted that the system had created "a strong perception from local government that the central government is looking at us." Rugwabiza, of the economic planning and finance ministry, recounted a story he had heard circulating about the pressures of scrutiny as a mayor: "People were saying, you know, when you're the mayor you've got a contract of one-day renewable. So it means that every day you can leave. Every 24 hours you can be removed." Munyaneza, who in 2010 was serving as chief electoral commissioner, said that whenever he had to organize a by-election for a district mayor who had been ousted due to poor performance he saw it as a vindication of his earlier work on decentralization and the decentralization team's emphasis on accountability.

Mushinzimana noted that in 2006 district mayors inherited newly structured districts and a raft of new responsibilities. The imihigo process gave these mayors a place to start and a way to structure their work. Initially, some of their plans were overly ambitious, but both Rugamba and Mufulukye emphasized that they worked closely with the mayors to ensure that their imihigo were feasible and that the mayors were able to plan better as they became familiar with the system. Mushinzimana noted that both central and local governments were "engaged in deep reflection on how to design realistic plans."

The system did have critics. Frank Habineza, chairman of the opposition Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, drew a sharp distinction between decentralization and deconcentration. He believed that institutions may have been decentralized, but that decision making and planning were still very much a central-government activity and not as localized as the process might appear.

Habineza said the government lacked the capacity to truly monitor performance in the districts and "swallowed whole what the mayors say." However, a tour of the Nyabihu district with the central-government evaluation team demonstrated a genuine evaluation process that was taken seriously by both the district executive committee and the evaluation team.

In 2010, the success of district councils also was unclear. The idea behind vesting so much authority in an indirectly elected local committee was that such a group would be in touch with local demands and wield significant oversight powers. However, these committees were voluntary, and some members failed to attend the council's quarterly meetings. Some members of district councils in rural areas worked in Kigali and so might have been as out of touch with local priorities as central-government officials. Also, some members of district councils were employed by local governments, for example, as teachers. Because schools were dependent on allocations from mayors, providing real oversight might be problematic.

The system's strong requirements for planning, monitoring and reporting placed heavy burdens on government at both the local and national levels. Rugwabiza of the economic planning and finance ministry said he expected the monitoring burden to ease as the system became a part of standard procedures. Planning was aided by the establishment in 2010 of fully staffed planning offices in each ministry and the addition of a planning officer in each district.

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REFLECTIONS

While statistics on service delivery before and after the introduction of imihigo were not available in 2010, anecdotal accounts suggested improvement. A 2010 U.S. Agency for International Development report on family planning in Rwanda asserted that the inclusion of family-planning issues in the imihigo for the district of Nyamagabe more than doubled the adoption rate for modern contraception, to 18.4% from 7.2%, between 2006 and 2007. Protais Musoni, in his paper on decentralized service delivery, noted that the introduction of imihigo had resulted in fewer administrative conflicts in the local government from 2006 to 2007 and in improvements in local development projects, such as malaria eradication and tree planting.

Finally, Fred Mufulukye, director general of Territorial Administration, observed that "preliminary results show us great general performance, especially in: education (construction of [a new system of] nine-year basic education), health (health insurance coverage above 90% nationwide, construction of health centers, etc.), road construction, high agriculture production through land consolidation, environmental protection and governance."

Despite criticisms, the ambitious imihigo process in 2010 appeared to be delivering on much-needed development targets in Rwanda's districts. The system's sustainability, particularly in terms of the pressure placed on district mayors, remained to be seen.

While Rwanda is nominally democratic, its government is dominated by a single party whose interests are closely aligned with national development and the goals of the central government. Because of this, some observers have presumed that parallel RPF party structures exist at all levels of government. In any event, an extremely well-organized party structure is able to step in and enforce central priorities whenever the official system of government struggles. Some observers have suggested that this may account for some of the apparent success of the imihigo process.

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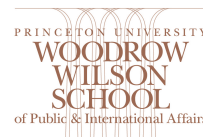
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