

Rwanda

His music united a nation torn apart by genocide. Then the 'Dove' died in a cell...

Paul Kagame, the president of Rwanda. Critics say the west has long ignored the nature of his regime.

Ben Curtis/AP



Kizito Mihigo, a gospel singer and survivor of the 1994 violence, died exactly a year ago after writing a song mourning Tutsi and Hutu killings – and making an enemy of an autocratic president. Now, western donors want a full inquiry into his death, writes *Michela Wrong*

Masses will be held across at least four continents this week to mark the anniversary of the death of Rwanda's most famous gospel singer. But there will be a key difference in the ceremonies staged in Kizito Mihigo's country of birth and those abroad. In Rwanda, no one will dare publicly to question how – or why – the baby-faced singer met his end. In the rest of the world, fans will be clamouring for justice.

The 38-year-old star's death in

police custody last February sits near the top of a list of cases cited by human rights and civil society groups calling for a fundamental reappraisal of western governments' relationship with president Paul Kagame and his central African nation. Guilt over the international community's failure to stop the 1994 genocide, they say, has for too long encouraged donors to ignore the sinister realities of his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) regime.

In the US, campaigners' attention is focused on the forthcoming trial in Kigali of Paul Rusesabagina, the former hotel manager whose efforts to save his Tutsi guests from being slaughtered by Hutu extremists won him Hollywood fame. Rusesabagina, who became a vocal critic of the RPF, was renditioned to Rwanda last August and is facing charges of financing terrorism.

But Kizito's case perhaps reveals more about the twisted nature of Kagame's presidency. For in theory, he represented exactly the kind of

citizen the Tutsi-dominated RPF took power to protect. A Tutsi, he fled his home in 1994 after president Juvénal Habyarimana was killed and his Hutu army and extremist militias began taking revenge on a minority Tutsi community blamed for the assassination. His father was killed, making Kizito a *rescapé* – a survivor – a group theoretically allotted special status in Rwanda's post-genocide society.

Deeply religious, exceptionally talented, Kizito went to study music at the Paris Conservatoire. There, he set off on a lacerating spiritual journey. At one point he had wanted to join the RPF to avenge his father's death. Then he forced himself to mix with Hutus and confront the visceral hatred he felt towards that community. The traumatised youngster was determined to learn forgiveness.

He returned to Kigali hoping to put his commitment to ethnic reconciliation into practice. One of the incoming government's first acts had been to do away with the clas-

sifications dividing the former Belgian colony's citizens into Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, and he gave Kagame his enthusiastic backing. He set up a peace foundation, which spread the reconciliation message across Rwanda's schools and prisons, winning generous state funding.

For a few years, Kizito could do no wrong. His songs played incessantly on Rwandan radio and he was the performer of choice whenever the national anthem was sung at genocide commemorations. He was on friendly terms with first lady Jeannette Kagame, and rumours circulated he was dating the Kagames' daughter. A weekly television show made him a household name.

But he began to suspect the regime, which controversially called the 1994 massacres "the genocide of the Tutsi" – thereby consigning to oblivion Hutus also killed in 1994 for supporting democratic reform – was exploiting his community's victim status to keep Rwanda's Hutu majority cowed. He was repelled