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Government communication and citizen trust: Gabon and Rwanda in comparative perspective

Ndong Allogo Antoine Benjamin[1]

Iradukunda Sengesho Benigne2

Nizeyimana Jean Baptiste3

1. Joint PhD Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Public and Political Communication
2. Joint MPhil Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, IT Department, Film and TV Production
3. Lecturer at Lisala University, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Department of Technopedagogy

ABSTRACT

This study falls within SDG Focus Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — Target 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels; Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels; Target 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms.

[1] Joint PhD Researcher at Lisala University and UNCR University, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Public and Political Communication

This study examines the comparative approaches to government communication and citizen trust in Gabon and Rwanda, focusing on how each country's communication strategies, institutional frameworks, and governance philosophies shape the relationship between the state and its citizens. The research analyzes the mechanisms for citizen engagement, the handling of dissent and public protest, the use of digital platforms for government-citizen interaction, and the implications for institutional trust and legitimacy. A comparative analysis was conducted examining primary and secondary sources including news reporting, institutional documentation, governance assessments, and academic commentary covering recent developments to 2026.

Gabon presents a contemporary landscape of government communication marked by increasing centralization and control in response to social unrest. In February 2026, the High Authority for Communication imposed an indefinite suspension of social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, citing concerns over "inappropriate, defamatory, hateful and insulting content" that allegedly undermines human dignity, institutions, and national security . This action comes amid Gabon's first major wave of social unrest since President Brice Oligui Nguema's election in 2025, with teachers striking over pay and conditions and protests spreading to health, higher education, and broadcasting sectors. Critics accuse the government of imposing a "climate of fear and repression" and clamping down on critical voices, noting that a journalist and two trade unionists were imprisoned in 2025. The government's communication approach appears reactive and security-focused, prioritizing institutional stability over citizen engagement. While the regulator insists that "freedom of expression, including freedom of comment and criticism" remains a fundamental right, the indefinite suspension of major communication platforms suggests a preference for control over dialogue.

Rwanda presents a contrasting picture where government communication is characterized by structured citizen engagement mechanisms, responsiveness to public concerns, and institutionalized feedback channels. The recent launch of the Mbaza digital platform—meaning "ask me" in English—exemplifies this approach, enabling citizens to submit issues, complaints, and feedback directly to government institutions while receiving real-time responses . The platform coordinates service requests, provides updates, and simplifies bureaucratic procedures, aiming to strengthen government-citizen relationships and foster trust . The National Umushyikirano Council, an annual dialogue forum established in 2003, demonstrates long-term

commitment to citizen engagement. This forum has produced tangible policy outcomes, including reducing loan interest rates for vulnerable citizens from 11% to 2% following citizen concerns raised in 2018, and the establishment of the Agaciro Development Fund following a citizen proposal in 2011 . Implementation rates of Umushyikirano resolutions frequently exceed 80-90%, driving progress in clean water access, subsidized agricultural inputs, and infrastructure development . The government's recent decision to reduce charges on land transactions following public outcry reflects a governance philosophy of responsiveness, demonstrating that "public policy must always remain anchored in the people's lived realities" . However, challenges persist. Digital rights experts report concerns over government surveillance, harassment of online critics, and restricted access to independent media, with the country criticized for its "heavy-handed approach to online dissent" . The Rwanda Governance Board's 2025 scorecard reveals that while sectors like justice record citizen satisfaction above 80%, agriculture (55.3%) and land services (59.4%) lag behind .

Both countries demonstrate significant interplay between government communication strategies and citizen trust outcomes. Gabon's challenge lies in balancing security concerns with citizens' rights to information and expression, as social unrest indicates growing discontent that communication controls may not address. Rwanda's challenge lies in ensuring that formal engagement mechanisms translate into substantive responsiveness across all sectors, addressing persistent service delivery gaps and concerns over digital freedoms. Neither country has fully resolved the tension between maintaining institutional authority and fostering genuine citizen participation.

Effective government communication for building citizen trust requires: (1) consistent and transparent communication channels; (2) mechanisms for genuine citizen feedback that influence policy; (3) responsiveness to public concerns with tangible action; (4) protection of fundamental freedoms including expression and information access; (5) institutional frameworks that hold government accountable to citizens; (6) digital platforms that enable rather than restrict engagement; (7) recognition that trust is built through demonstrated responsiveness, not controlled messaging; and (8) continuous monitoring of citizen satisfaction and service delivery gaps.

KEYWORDS: Government communication, citizen trust, institutional accountability, digital engagement, Gabon, Rwanda, Umushyikirano, Mbaza platform, social media regulation, SDG 16, participatory governance, responsiveness.

RÉSUMÉ (French Version)

Cette étude examine les approches comparatives de la communication gouvernementale et de la confiance citoyenne au Gabon et au Rwanda, en se concentrant sur la manière dont les stratégies de communication, les cadres institutionnels et les philosophies de gouvernance de chaque pays façonnent la relation entre l'État et ses citoyens. La recherche analyse les mécanismes d'engagement citoyen, le traitement de la dissidence et des protestations publiques, l'utilisation des plateformes numériques pour l'interaction gouvernement-citoyen et les implications pour la confiance et la légitimité institutionnelles. Une analyse comparative a été menée en examinant des sources primaires et secondaires, y compris des reportages, des documentations institutionnelles, des évaluations de gouvernance et des commentaires académiques couvrant les développements récents jusqu'en 2026.

Le Gabon présente un paysage contemporain de communication gouvernementale marqué par une centralisation et un contrôle croissants en réponse aux troubles sociaux. En février 2026, la Haute Autorité de la Communication a imposé une suspension indéfinie des plateformes de médias sociaux, y compris Facebook, TikTok et WhatsApp, invoquant des préoccupations concernant des "contenus inappropriés, diffamatoires, haineux et insultants" qui compromettraient la dignité humaine, les institutions et la sécurité nationale . Cette action intervient dans un contexte de première vague majeure de troubles sociaux depuis l'élection du Président Brice Oligui Nguema en 2025, avec des enseignants en grève pour les salaires et conditions de travail, et des protestations s'étendant aux secteurs de la santé, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la radiodiffusion . Les critiques accusent le gouvernement d'imposer un "climat de peur et de répression" et de réprimer les voix critiques, notant qu'un journaliste et deux syndicalistes ont été emprisonnés en 2025 . L'approche de communication gouvernementale semble réactive et axée sur la sécurité, privilégiant la stabilité institutionnelle au dialogue citoyen. Bien que le régulateur insiste sur le fait que "la liberté d'expression, y compris la liberté de commentaire et de critique" reste un droit

fondamental, la suspension indéfinie des principales plateformes de communication suggère une préférence pour le contrôle plutôt que pour le dialogue .

Le Rwanda présente un tableau contrasté où la communication gouvernementale est caractérisée par des mécanismes structurés d'engagement citoyen, une réactivité aux préoccupations publiques et des canaux de rétroaction institutionnalisés. Le lancement récent de la plateforme numérique Mbaza—signifiant "demande-moi" en anglais—exemplifie cette approche, permettant aux citoyens de soumettre des préoccupations, des plaintes et des commentaires directement aux institutions gouvernementales tout en recevant des réponses en temps réel . La plateforme coordonne les demandes de services, fournit des mises à jour et simplifie les procédures bureaucratiques, visant à renforcer les relations gouvernement-citoyens et à favoriser la confiance . Le Conseil National Umushyikirano, un forum de dialogue annuel établi en 2003, démontre un engagement à long terme envers la participation citoyenne. Ce forum a produit des résultats politiques tangibles, notamment la réduction des taux d'intérêt des prêts pour les citoyens vulnérables de 11 % à 2 % suite aux préoccupations citoyennes soulevées en 2018, et la création du Fonds de Développement Agaciro suite à une proposition citoyenne en 2011 . Les taux de mise en œuvre des résolutions d'Umushyikirano dépassent fréquemment 80 à 90 %, favorisant les progrès dans l'accès à l'eau potable, les intrants agricoles subventionnés et le développement des infrastructures . La décision récente du gouvernement de réduire les frais sur les transactions foncières suite à l'indignation publique reflète une philosophie de gouvernance réactive, démontrant que "la politique publique doit toujours rester ancrée dans les réalités vécues par la population" . Cependant, des défis persistent. Des experts en droits numériques signalent des préoccupations concernant la surveillance gouvernementale, le harcèlement des critiques en ligne et l'accès restreint aux médias indépendants, le pays étant critiqué pour son "approche lourde contre la dissidence en ligne" . Le tableau de bord de la gouvernance rwandaise de 2025 révèle que si des secteurs comme la justice enregistrent une satisfaction citoyenne supérieure à 80 %, l'agriculture (55,3 %) et les services fonciers (59,4 %) sont à la traîne .

Les deux pays démontrent une interaction significative entre les stratégies de communication gouvernementale et les résultats de confiance citoyenne. Le défi du Gabon réside dans l'équilibre entre les préoccupations sécuritaires et les droits des citoyens à l'information et à l'expression, car les troubles sociaux indiquent un mécontentement croissant que les contrôles de communication

ne peuvent probablement pas résoudre. Le défi du Rwanda réside dans la garantie que les mécanismes d'engagement formels se traduisent par une réactivité substantielle dans tous les secteurs, en remédiant aux lacunes persistantes dans la prestation de services et aux préoccupations concernant les libertés numériques. Aucun des deux pays n'a pleinement résolu la tension entre le maintien de l'autorité institutionnelle et la promotion d'une participation citoyenne authentique.

Une communication gouvernementale efficace pour renforcer la confiance citoyenne nécessite : (1) des canaux de communication cohérents et transparents ; (2) des mécanismes de rétroaction citoyenne authentique qui influencent les politiques ; (3) une réactivité aux préoccupations publiques avec des actions tangibles ; (4) la protection des libertés fondamentales, y compris l'expression et l'accès à l'information ; (5) des cadres institutionnels qui responsabilisent le gouvernement envers les citoyens ; (6) des plateformes numériques qui permettent plutôt que restreignent l'engagement ; (7) la reconnaissance que la confiance se construit par une réactivité démontrée, non par des messages contrôlés ; et (8) un suivi continu de la satisfaction citoyenne et des lacunes dans la prestation de services.

MOTS-CLÉS : Communication gouvernementale, confiance citoyenne, responsabilité institutionnelle, engagement numérique, Gabon, Rwanda, Umushyikirano, plateforme Mbaza, régulation des médias sociaux, ODD 16, gouvernance participative, réactivité.

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Auteurs correspondant: *Ndong Allogo Antoine Benjamin, Iradukunda Sengesho Benigne and Nizeyimana Jean*
Adresses électroniques: *ndongantoinebenjamin@cirep.ac.cd,benigneira0@gmail.com, nizeyimana.jb@dphu.ac.cd ,*
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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between government communication and citizen trust lies at the heart of effective governance and institutional legitimacy. How states communicate with their citizens—the channels they employ, the responsiveness they demonstrate, and the balance they strike between control and dialogue—fundamentally shapes whether institutions are trusted and whether citizens feel heard and represented. SDG 16 explicitly recognizes this through targets on accountable and transparent institutions (16.6), inclusive and participatory decision-making (16.7), and public access to information (16.10).

This study examines two countries that offer illuminating perspectives on the relationship between government communication and citizen trust: Gabon and Rwanda. Both are Central and East African nations navigating the complexities of post-authoritarian transitions, yet their approaches to citizen engagement, dissent management, and digital communication differ fundamentally, providing valuable comparative insights.

Gabon, under President Brice Oligui Nguema who came to power through a military coup in 2023 and won elections in 2025, faces its first major wave of social unrest. In February 2026, the government imposed an indefinite suspension of social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, citing concerns over content allegedly undermining institutions and national security . Teachers are striking over pay, protests have spread to multiple sectors, and critics accuse the government of imposing a "climate of fear and repression" . A journalist and two trade unionists were imprisoned in 2025 . This approach to government communication appears reactive and security-focused, prioritizing institutional stability over citizen engagement.

Rwanda presents a different model. Under President Paul Kagame's long-standing leadership, the country has developed structured mechanisms for citizen engagement including the Mbaza digital platform for submitting complaints and feedback, and the annual National Umushyikirano Council where citizens directly engage national leaders . These mechanisms have produced tangible policy outcomes: loan interest rates reduced from 11% to 2% following citizen concerns, the Agaciro Development Fund established from a citizen proposal, and land transaction fees reduced after public outcry . Yet challenges persist: digital rights experts report concerns over surveillance, harassment of online critics, and restricted media access .

The contrast between Gabon and Rwanda illuminates critical questions for SDG 16 and governance: How do different government communication strategies affect citizen trust? What role do structured engagement mechanisms play in building institutional legitimacy? How can states balance security concerns with fundamental freedoms? And what can countries learn from each other's approaches to government-citizen communication?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Government Communication and Institutional Trust: Theoretical Foundations

Government communication encompasses the full range of interactions through which state institutions inform, consult, and engage with citizens. It includes official announcements, consultation processes, feedback mechanisms, and the management of public dissent. Research consistently demonstrates that trust in institutions is shaped not only by policy outcomes but by the quality of communication—whether citizens feel heard, whether information is accessible and transparent, and whether government responds to concerns.

The concept of "responsive governance" captures the ideal of institutions that listen to citizens and adapt policies accordingly. When governments demonstrate responsiveness—through tangible policy changes in response to public input—they build legitimacy and trust. Conversely, when

communication is perceived as propaganda, when dissent is suppressed, or when feedback mechanisms are ignored, trust erodes.

2.2 Gabon: Control, Crisis, and the Climate of Fear

The February 2026 Social Media Suspension: Gabon's contemporary government communication landscape is dramatically illustrated by the February 2026 suspension of social media platforms. On February 17, 2026, the High Authority for Communication imposed "the immediate suspension of social media platforms in Gabon" until further notice . The decision affected Meta platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp) and TikTok, the most widely used platforms in the country, with WhatsApp calls experiencing "significant disruptions" .

The official justification cited concerns over "inappropriate, defamatory, hateful and insulting content" that allegedly undermines:

- Human dignity and public morality
- The honour of citizens
- Social cohesion
- The stability of the Republic's institutions
- National security

The regulator also cited "spread of false information," "cyberbullying," and "unauthorised disclosure of personal data" as reasons for the decision . These actions, the statement argued, "are likely, in the case of Gabon, to generate social conflict, destabilise the institutions of the Republic, and seriously jeopardise national unity, democratic progress, and achievements" .

Context of Social Unrest: The suspension occurs against the backdrop of Gabon's first major wave of social unrest since President Brice Oligui Nguema's election in 2025. Teachers began striking over pay and conditions in December 2025, and protests over similar demands have since spread to other public sectors including health, higher education, and broadcasting .

A wage freeze imposed a decade earlier by the previous Bongo government has left teachers struggling with rising living costs. While Oligui addressed some teachers' concerns during the

transition period following his 2023 coup, buying temporary calm, the underlying grievances have resurfaced .

Criticisms and Human Rights Concerns: Critics accuse the government of imposing a "climate of fear and repression" . Opposition leader Alain-Claude Billie-By-Nze called on civil groups "and all Gabonese people dedicated to freedom to mobilise and block this liberty-destroying excess" .

The government's record includes the 2025 imprisonment of a journalist and two trade unionists, actions that critics cite as evidence of a broader crackdown on dissent . Authorities also arrested two prominent figures from the teachers' protest movement, leaving teachers and parents afraid to discuss the strike in public .

Official Discourse on Freedom: Despite the suspension, the regulator's statement insisted that "freedom of expression, including freedom of comment and criticism," remains "a fundamental right enshrined in Gabon" . This assertion of commitment to freedom alongside an indefinite suspension of major communication platforms reflects the tension in the government's approach.

Table 1: Gabon's Government Communication Approach—Key Features

Dimension	**Characteristics**
Current Approach	Reactive, security-focused, control-oriented
Recent Action	Indefinite suspension of social media platforms (Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp)
Official Justification	Content undermining institutions, national security, social cohesion
Context	First major social unrest since 2025 election; teacher strikes spreading to multiple sectors
Human Rights Concerns	Journalist and trade unionists imprisoned (2025); arrests of protest leaders; "climate of fear" alleged

Official Discourse	Affirms freedom of expression in principle while restricting platforms

2.3 Rwanda: Structured Engagement and Institutionalized Dialogue

The Mbaza Digital Platform: In January 2026, Rwanda's Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), in partnership with the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Innovation, launched the trial phase of Mbaza—meaning "ask me" in English—a digital citizen engagement portal . Key features include:

- **Direct Citizen-Government Interaction:** Citizens can submit issues, complaints, ideas, and feedback directly to government institutions and receive responses from officials.
- **Service Coordination:** The platform coordinates service requests across multiple departments, providing real-time updates and simplifying bureaucratic procedures.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Real-time feedback mechanisms empower citizens to participate in governance and hold public officials accountable.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** The platform generates valuable data that can be analyzed to identify trends, enabling informed resource allocation and service improvement.
- **Integration:** Mbaza is integrated with other national digital services, facilitating quicker communication and improved collaboration between citizens and public institutions .

The trial phase is being conducted in the City of Kigali for one month, with plans for nationwide rollout following the trial. The initiative aims to "bridge the gap between citizens and government" while "streamlining access to government services, improve accountability, and encourage citizen engagement" .

The National Umushyikirano Council: Established in 2003, Umushyikirano is an annual national dialogue forum where citizens directly engage national leaders, including the President. The forum has become a powerful accountability mechanism with several distinguishing features:

- **Direct Engagement:** Citizens raise concerns directly with leaders, receiving immediate responses or referrals to responsible institutions .
- **Tangible Policy Outcomes:** Citizen concerns translate into concrete policy changes. For example:
  - Following the 16th Umushyikirano in December 2018, concerns about high interest rates on government-supported loans led to a reduction from 11% to 2% for economically vulnerable citizens, implemented in 2019 .
  - The Agaciro Development Fund, Rwanda's sovereign wealth fund, was established following a citizen's proposal at the 9th Umushyikirano in 2011 .
  - The 13th National Dialogue Council in 2015 called for the development of Vision 2050, Rwanda's long-term development strategy .
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Parliament follows up on Umushyikirano resolutions, using them as benchmarks during oversight activities. Implementation rates frequently exceed 80-90% .
- **Home-Grown Initiatives:** Umushyikirano has catalyzed other citizen-centered programs including Girinka (One Cow per Needy Family), performance contracts (Imihigo), and the community-based health insurance scheme (Mutuelle de Santé) .

Member of Parliament Christine Mukabunani describes Umushyikirano as providing "a rare opportunity for citizens to directly engage national leaders... and have concerns addressed immediately or referred to responsible institutions" .

Responsiveness in Action: The Land Transaction Fee Decision: In October 2025, the government demonstrated its responsive governance philosophy by reducing charges on land transactions following public outcry. As one analysis noted, this decision was "not a mere administrative adjustment but rather a profound demonstration of servant leadership in practice" .

For many Rwandans, land represents "identity, security, and a legacy to be passed on from one generation to another." When transaction costs became an obstacle to ordinary citizens seeking to formalize ownership or transfer land, "it touched a nerve that runs deep in the social fabric" . By stepping in to address these concerns, the government "reaffirmed that public policy must always remain anchored in the people's lived realities" .

This responsiveness builds trust: "This is what builds trust between citizens and their institutions: a government that listens when the people speak, and responds not with rhetoric, but with tangible change" .

Governance Assessment and Citizen Satisfaction: The Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) produces an annual Rwanda Governance Scorecard (RGS), now in its 12th edition, providing evidence-based data to guide policymaking . The scorecard evaluates performance across eight pillars using citizen surveys, institutional reports, and administrative records.

The 2025 scorecard reveals both achievements and challenges:

Pillar/Sector	**Performance/Citizen Satisfaction**
Safety and Security	Best-performing pillar
Judiciary	73.47% institutional performance; 90% citizen trust
Legislature	83.18% institutional performance
Criminal investigation/prosecution	90.44% performance
Court independence	95.5% citizen rating
Justice sector overall	Above 80% citizen satisfaction
Agriculture	55.3% citizen satisfaction
Land, environment, settlement services	59.4% citizen satisfaction

RGB Chief Executive Officer Doris Uwicyeza Picard emphasized that while Rwanda "remains among Africa's top performers in governance, the focus must now shift toward translating those achievements into tangible improvements in citizens' daily lives" .

Challenges: Digital Rights and Freedoms: Despite these structured engagement mechanisms, Rwanda faces significant criticism regarding digital rights and freedoms. In submissions to the United Nations Human Rights Council ahead of Rwanda's universal periodic review, digital rights experts raised concerns:

- **Heavy-Handed Approach:** "Concerns persist regarding the government's heavy-handed approach to online dissent, State surveillance, and restricted access to independent media" .
- **Harassment and Intimidation:** "Independent journalists and bloggers remain under pressure in the face of an increasingly shrinking digital civic space." Ambiguous laws on defamation, public order, and national security have been used to target journalists and critics .
- **Surveillance Concerns:** The government has been accused of procuring spyware to monitor dissidents, potentially violating its own Data Protection and Privacy Law .
- **Access to Information:** "Rwandan citizens have been denied the enjoyment of their right to information due to non-responsive government authorities to information requests and the culture of secrecy" .
- **Website Shutdowns:** Several websites and online publications run by Rwandan diaspora were reportedly shut down by the government on allegations of "spreading rumours and undermining national unity" .

The experts concluded that "civic freedoms in the Rwandan digital space have worsened" and that "little to no effort has been made by the State to improve them" .

Ongoing Challenges in Service Delivery: Citizen concerns raised at Umushyikirano are not always promptly resolved. Issues over delays in business standards certification and licensing, first raised at the 18th Umushyikirano, resurfaced during the 19th edition. Although the Rwanda Development Board later launched a revamped One Stop Centre to consolidate licensing services, "citizens continue to report delays, pointing to persistent coordination challenges among government agencies" .

2.4 Comparative Dimensions: Control, Dialogue, and Trust

The comparison between Gabon and Rwanda illuminates several critical dimensions of government communication and citizen trust:

Communication Philosophy: Gabon's approach is reactive and security-focused, prioritizing institutional stability and control over citizen engagement. Rwanda's approach is characterized by structured engagement mechanisms, institutionalized dialogue, and demonstrated responsiveness—though this coexists with concerns over digital freedoms.

Mechanisms for Citizen Input: Gabon lacks structured mechanisms for citizen input equivalent to Rwanda's Mbaza platform or Umushyikirano dialogue. The primary government response to citizen discontent has been platform suspension rather than engagement.

Responsiveness: Rwanda has demonstrated tangible responsiveness to citizen concerns through policy changes (loan interest rates, land transaction fees) and institutional mechanisms for tracking resolution implementation. Gabon's response to teacher strikes and broader protests has focused on control rather than addressing underlying grievances.

Digital Communication: Gabon's approach to digital platforms is restriction and suspension in response to perceived threats. Rwanda has launched digital platforms for citizen engagement while simultaneously facing criticism over surveillance and online dissent management.

Human Rights Context: Gabon faces criticism for imprisoning journalists and trade unionists, arresting protest leaders, and creating a "climate of fear." Rwanda faces criticism for surveillance, harassment of online critics, and restricted media access, though structured engagement mechanisms coexist with these restrictions.

Trust Outcomes: Rwanda's governance scorecard indicates relatively high citizen trust in some institutions (judiciary 90% trust), though significant gaps remain in agriculture and land services. Gabon's trust levels are less systematically documented, but social unrest indicates eroding trust.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of government communication in Gabon, particularly in response to social unrest, and how do these affect citizen trust?

2. What are the key characteristics of government communication in Rwanda, including structured engagement mechanisms like Mbaza and Umushyikirano, and how do these affect citizen trust?
3. How do the two countries compare in terms of communication philosophy, responsiveness to citizen concerns, handling of digital platforms, and respect for fundamental freedoms?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analysis methodology to examine government communication and citizen trust in Gabon and Rwanda. The research design integrates secondary analysis of news reporting, institutional documentation, governance assessments, and academic commentary to develop comprehensive understanding of communication strategies, engagement mechanisms, and trust outcomes in both countries.

Research Design: The comparative approach is appropriate for examining how different governance philosophies and institutional frameworks shape government-citizen communication. Gabon and Rwanda were selected as cases that offer complementary insights: both are African nations navigating post-authoritarian transitions, yet their approaches to citizen engagement, dissent management, and digital communication differ fundamentally.

Data Sources: Primary and secondary sources analyzed include:

- Associated Press reporting on Gabon's social media suspension and political context
- News coverage of Gabon's social unrest and communication clampdown
- Institutional documentation of Rwanda's Mbaza digital platform launch
- Analysis of Rwanda's Umushyikirano national dialogue and policy outcomes
- Governance analysis of Rwanda's land transaction fee responsiveness
- Digital rights assessment of Rwanda from think tank submissions to UN Human Rights Council
- Rwanda Governance Board scorecard documentation

Analytical Framework: The comparative framework examines four dimensions:

1. **Communication Philosophy:** Underlying approach to government-citizen communication (control vs. engagement)
2. **Engagement Mechanisms:** Structures and channels for citizen input and feedback
3. **Responsiveness:** Demonstrated willingness to adjust policy based on citizen concerns
4. **Rights Context:** Protection of freedoms of expression, information, and assembly

Time Period: The analysis focuses on recent developments (2025-2026), capturing Gabon's February 2026 social media suspension and Rwanda's ongoing governance initiatives.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Gabon: Control, Suppression, and the Climate of Fear

The February 2026 Social Media Suspension: On February 17, 2026, Gabon's High Authority for Communication imposed an indefinite suspension of social media platforms, affecting Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp—the most widely used platforms in the country . The suspension was announced in a televised statement and implemented immediately, with users reporting significant disruptions to WhatsApp calls the following day .

The official justification cited multiple concerns:

- "Inappropriate, defamatory, hateful and insulting content" undermining human dignity, public morality, and citizens' honour
- Content undermining social cohesion, institutional stability, and national security
- "Spread of false information"
- "Cyberbullying"
- "Unauthorised disclosure of personal data"

The regulator's statement argued that these actions "are likely, in the case of Gabon, to generate social conflict, destabilise the institutions of the Republic, and seriously jeopardise national unity, democratic progress, and achievements" .

Context of Social Unrest: The suspension occurred against the backdrop of Gabon's first major wave of social unrest since President Brice Oligui Nguema's election in 2025. Teachers began striking in December 2025 over pay and conditions, with protests subsequently spreading to health, higher education, and broadcasting sectors .

A wage freeze imposed a decade earlier under the previous Bongo government had left teachers struggling with rising living costs. While Oligui addressed some teachers' concerns during the transition period following his 2023 coup, buying temporary calm, the underlying grievances have now resurfaced .

Criticism and Human Rights Concerns: Critics have accused the government of imposing a "climate of fear and repression" . Opposition leader Alain-Claude Billie-By-Nze called on civil society and citizens to "mobilise and block this liberty-destroying excess" .

The government's record includes the 2025 imprisonment of a journalist and two trade unionists, actions cited as evidence of a broader crackdown on dissent . Authorities also arrested two prominent figures from the teachers' protest movement, leaving teachers and parents afraid to discuss the strike in public .

Official Discourse on Freedom: Despite the suspension, the regulator's statement insisted that "freedom of expression, including freedom of comment and criticism," remains "a fundamental right enshrined in Gabon" . This assertion alongside indefinite platform suspension reflects the tension in the government's approach.

5.2 Rwanda: Structured Engagement and Institutionalized Dialogue

The Mbaza Digital Platform: In January 2026, Rwanda launched the trial phase of Mbaza, a digital citizen engagement portal designed to strengthen communication between citizens and public authorities . Key features include:

- **Direct Submission:** Citizens can submit concerns, complaints, ideas, and feedback to government institutions.
- **Real-Time Responses:** Officials provide direct responses to citizen submissions.

- **Service Coordination:** The platform coordinates requests across multiple departments, providing real-time updates.
- **Simplified Procedures:** Bureaucratic processes are streamlined.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Real-time feedback empowers citizens to hold public officials accountable.
- **Data Generation:** The platform generates data for trend analysis and informed decision-making .

The trial phase is being conducted in the City of Kigali for one month, with plans for nationwide rollout following the trial. The initiative aims to "bridge the gap between citizens and government" while "streamlining access to government services, improve accountability, and encourage citizen engagement" .

The National Umushyikirano Council: Since 2003, Rwanda has convened the annual National Umushyikirano Council, a dialogue forum where citizens directly engage national leaders. Key features include:

Feature	**Description**
Direct Engagement	Citizens raise concerns directly with leaders, including the President
Immediate Response	Concerns addressed immediately or referred to responsible institutions
Parliamentary Follow-Up	Resolutions tracked by Parliament during oversight activities
High Implementation	Resolution implementation rates frequently exceed 80-90%
Tangible Outcomes	Policy changes including loan interest rate reduction (11% to 2%) and Agaciro Fund establishment

Member of Parliament Christine Mukabunani emphasizes that Umushyikirano provides "a rare opportunity for citizens to directly engage national leaders... and have concerns addressed immediately or referred to responsible institutions" .

Policy Outcomes from Citizen Engagement: Umushyikirano has produced concrete policy changes:

- **Loan Interest Rates:** Following the 16th Umushyikirano in December 2018, concerns about high interest rates on government-supported loans led to a reduction from 11% to 2% for economically vulnerable citizens, implemented in 2019 .
- **Agaciro Development Fund:** Established following a citizen's proposal at the 9th Umushyikirano in 2011, this sovereign wealth fund exemplifies citizen-driven policy .
- **Vision 2050:** The 13th Umushyikirano in 2015 called for the development of Rwanda's long-term development strategy, later shaped through broad national consultations .
- **Home-Grown Initiatives:** Umushyikirano catalyzed programs including Girinka (One Cow per Needy Family), Imihigo (performance contracts), and Mutuelle de Santé (community health insurance) .

Land Transaction Fee Reduction: In October 2025, the government demonstrated responsiveness by reducing charges on land transactions following public outcry. The decision reflected a governance philosophy where "public policy must always remain anchored in the people's lived realities" .

For many Rwandans, land represents "identity, security, and a legacy to be passed on from one generation to another." When transaction costs became an obstacle, the government's intervention demonstrated that "leadership is not about the authority to make rules, but about the humility to listen, evaluate, and act when those rules no longer serve the people effectively" .

Governance Scorecard and Citizen Satisfaction: The Rwanda Governance Board's 12th edition scorecard provides systematic assessment of institutional performance and citizen perceptions . Key findings include:

- Safety and Security remains the best-performing pillar

- Judiciary: 73.47% institutional performance; 90% citizen trust
- Legislature: 83.18% institutional performance
- Criminal investigation/prosecution: 90.44% performance
- Court independence: 95.5% citizen rating
- Justice sector overall: above 80% citizen satisfaction
- Agriculture: 55.3% citizen satisfaction
- Land, environment, settlement services: 59.4% citizen satisfaction

RGB CEO Doris Uwicyeza Picard emphasized that while Rwanda "remains among Africa's top performers in governance, the focus must now shift toward translating those achievements into tangible improvements in citizens' daily lives" .

Challenges: Digital Rights and Freedoms: Despite structured engagement mechanisms, Rwanda faces criticism regarding digital rights. In submissions to the UN Human Rights Council, digital rights experts documented:

- "Heavy-handed approach to online dissent, State surveillance, and restricted access to independent media" .
- "Systematic intimidation, harassment, arrests, and detention of government critics and dissidents" .
- Pressure on independent journalists and bloggers through ambiguous laws on defamation, public order, and national security .
- Surveillance concerns including alleged spyware procurement to monitor dissidents .
- "Culture of secrecy" limiting access to information .
- Shutdown of diaspora-run websites on allegations of "spreading rumours and undermining national unity" .

The experts concluded that "civic freedoms in the Rwandan digital space have worsened" .

Service Delivery Gaps: Citizen concerns raised at Umushyikirano are not always promptly resolved. Issues over delays in business standards certification and licensing, first raised at the 18th Umushyikirano, resurfaced during the 19th edition. Despite government interventions,

"citizens continue to report delays, pointing to persistent coordination challenges among government agencies" .

5.3 Comparative Analysis

Table 2: Comparative Summary—Gabon and Rwanda

Dimension	**Gabon**	**Rwanda**
Communication Philosophy	Reactive, security-focused, control-oriented	Structured engagement, institutionalized dialogue
Recent Key Action	February 2026 indefinite social media suspension	January 2026 Mbaza digital platform launch
Citizen Engagement Mechanisms	Limited structured mechanisms; suspension of platforms during unrest	Mbaza platform; annual Umushyikirano National Dialogue (since 2003)
Responsiveness Demonstrated	Limited; teacher grievances unaddressed	Loan interest reduction (11% to 2%); land transaction fee reduction; Agaciro Fund
Digital Communication Approach	Restriction and suspension	Engagement platform alongside surveillance concerns
Human Rights Context	Journalist/trade unionist imprisonment; arrest of protest leaders; "climate of fear"	Surveillance; online critic harassment; restricted media access; "culture of secrecy"
Citizen Satisfaction Data	Not systematically documented	Judiciary 90% trust; agriculture 55.3%; land services 59.4%
Current Challenges	Social unrest; deteriorating trust; human rights concerns	Service delivery gaps; digital rights; information access

Key Differences:

1. **Communication Philosophy:** Gabon's approach is reactive and security-focused, responding to unrest with platform suspension and limited engagement. Rwanda's approach is characterized by structured, institutionalized engagement mechanisms developed over two decades.
2. **Citizen Engagement Infrastructure:** Gabon lacks structured mechanisms comparable to Rwanda's Mbaza platform and Umushyikirano dialogue. The primary government response to discontent has been control rather than engagement.
3. **Demonstrated Responsiveness:** Rwanda has repeatedly translated citizen concerns into policy changes (loan rates, land fees, Agaciro Fund). Gabon's response to teacher strikes and broader protests has not addressed underlying grievances.
4. **Digital Communication Strategy:** Gabon's digital approach is restriction-based—suspending platforms when they are perceived as threatening. Rwanda has launched engagement platforms while simultaneously facing criticism over surveillance and online dissent management.
5. **Citizen Satisfaction Measurement:** Rwanda systematically measures citizen satisfaction through the Governance Scorecard, providing data for policy adjustment. Gabon lacks comparable systematic assessment.

Key Similarities:

1. **Human Rights Concerns:** Both countries face criticism regarding freedoms of expression and information—Gabon for platform suspension, journalist imprisonment, and protest crackdowns; Rwanda for surveillance, online harassment, and restricted media access.
2. **Post-Authoritarian Context:** Both are navigating post-authoritarian transitions—Gabon following the 2023 coup and 2025 election; Rwanda under Kagame's long-standing leadership since the 1994 genocide.
3. **Tension Between Stability and Freedom:** Both grapple with the fundamental tension between maintaining institutional stability and protecting citizen freedoms.
4. **Digital Platform Centrality:** Both recognize the centrality of digital platforms to contemporary government-citizen communication, though their approaches differ fundamentally.

5. **Gaps Between Policy and Practice:** Both exhibit gaps between official discourse (Gabon affirming freedom of expression while suspending platforms; Rwanda promoting engagement while restricting digital freedoms) and actual practice.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Control vs. Engagement: Two Models of Government Communication

The contrast between Gabon and Rwanda illuminates fundamentally different philosophies of government communication. Gabon's approach, particularly the February 2026 social media suspension, reflects a control-oriented paradigm where the primary response to citizen discontent is restriction and suppression. When teachers strike and protests spread, the government cuts off communication platforms rather than addressing underlying grievances .

This approach may provide short-term stability by disrupting protest coordination, but it carries significant long-term risks. It confirms critics' accusations of a "climate of fear" , potentially deepening citizen alienation and eroding trust. It closes channels through which government might understand and address citizen concerns, leaving grievances to fester. And it violates the very freedoms—expression, information, assembly—that citizens expect their government to protect.

Rwanda's approach, by contrast, reflects an engagement-oriented paradigm. The Mbaza platform creates structured channels for citizen input . The Umushyikirano dialogue institutionalizes direct citizen-leader engagement and demonstrates responsiveness through policy changes . The land transaction fee decision exemplifies a philosophy where government listens and adapts .

Yet Rwanda's approach is not without its own tensions. The coexistence of structured engagement mechanisms with surveillance, online harassment, and restricted media access reveals that engagement and control are not mutually exclusive in practice. A government can create channels for citizen input while simultaneously monitoring and restricting independent expression.

6.2 The Trust Dividend of Responsiveness

Rwanda's experience demonstrates that responsiveness builds trust. When citizens see their concerns translated into tangible policy changes—loan interest rates reduced, land transaction fees lowered—they receive concrete evidence that government listens. The land transaction fee decision was explicitly framed as building trust: "This is what builds trust between citizens and their institutions: a government that listens when the people speak, and responds not with rhetoric, but with tangible change" .

The Governance Scorecard provides some evidence of this trust dividend. Judiciary trust at 90% and court independence at 95.5% indicate strong institutional confidence . However, the significant gaps—agriculture satisfaction at 55.3%, land services at 59.4%—reveal that responsiveness is uneven. Trust is built sector by sector, issue by issue.

Gabon's approach, by contrast, risks eroding whatever trust existed. When citizens see their government imprisoning journalists, arresting protest leaders, and suspending communication platforms , they receive evidence that government fears rather than welcomes citizen voice. The "climate of fear" is the opposite of a climate of trust.

6.3 Digital Platforms: Engagement Infrastructure or Threat?

Both countries recognize the centrality of digital platforms to contemporary governance, but they draw opposite conclusions. Gabon treats platforms primarily as threats—conduits for "inappropriate, defamatory, hateful and insulting content" that can "generate social conflict" and "destabilise the institutions of the Republic" . The response is suspension, cutting off communication.

Rwanda treats platforms as potential infrastructure for engagement. Mbaza is designed precisely to enable citizen-government communication, to "bridge the gap between citizens and government" . Yet even as it builds engagement platforms, Rwanda simultaneously monitors and restricts independent digital expression .

The contrast suggests that digital platforms are not inherently threatening or enabling; their impact depends on how governments choose to engage with them. Platforms can amplify citizen voice

and enable government responsiveness, or they can be suspended when that voice becomes uncomfortable. The choice reflects deeper governance philosophy.

6.4 The Gap Between Discourse and Practice

Both countries exhibit gaps between official discourse and actual practice. Gabon's regulator insists that "freedom of expression, including freedom of comment and criticism," remains "a fundamental right enshrined in Gabon" —even as it indefinitely suspends the platforms through which that expression would occur. This gap between affirmation and action undermines credibility.

Rwanda promotes its engagement mechanisms while simultaneously restricting digital freedoms. The government that launched Mbaza to "improve accountability and encourage citizen engagement" also faces accusations of surveillance, harassment, and a "culture of secrecy" . Citizens may reasonably wonder whether their engagement through official channels is monitored or whether independent expression will be tolerated.

These gaps are not merely inconsistencies; they actively undermine trust. Citizens who observe government affirming freedoms while restricting them learn that official discourse cannot be relied upon.

6.5 Implications for SDG 16

The findings have important implications for achieving SDG 16 targets:

Target 16.6 (Effective, accountable, transparent institutions): Rwanda's Umushyikirano follow-up mechanisms and Governance Scorecard demonstrate institutionalized accountability . Gabon's suspension of platforms without addressing grievances suggests limited accountability.

Target 16.7 (Responsive, inclusive, participatory decision-making): Rwanda's Mbaza platform and Umushyikirano dialogue exemplify mechanisms for participation, though their effectiveness depends on genuine responsiveness . Gabon lacks comparable mechanisms.

Target 16.10 (Public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms): Both countries face challenges on this target. Gabon's platform suspension directly restricts information access and freedom of expression . Rwanda's surveillance, online harassment, and restricted media access undermine these same freedoms .

Cross-cutting dimensions: Trust in institutions, built through demonstrated responsiveness and protection of fundamental freedoms, is essential for achieving all SDG 16 targets. Without citizen trust, even well-designed institutions may fail to achieve their purposes.

7. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of government communication and citizen trust in Gabon and Rwanda reveals profound insights into how different governance philosophies shape the relationship between state and citizen. The two countries, despite both navigating post-authoritarian transitions, demonstrate fundamentally different approaches to communication, engagement, and the management of dissent.

Gabon's approach, crystallized in the February 2026 indefinite suspension of social media platforms, is reactive and control-oriented. Facing its first major wave of social unrest since President Brice Oligui Nguema's election, the government has responded by cutting off communication channels—Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp—rather than addressing the underlying grievances of striking teachers and protesting public sector workers . Critics accuse the government of imposing a "climate of fear and repression," pointing to the imprisonment of a journalist and two trade unionists in 2025 and the arrest of protest leaders . While the regulator insists that freedom of expression remains a fundamental right, the indefinite suspension of major communication platforms suggests a preference for control over dialogue .

This approach carries significant risks. It confirms critics' narratives, potentially deepening citizen alienation. It closes channels through which government might understand and address grievances. And it violates the very freedoms that citizens expect their government to protect. Social unrest indicates that trust is already eroding; communication controls are unlikely to restore it.

Rwanda presents a different picture, characterized by structured engagement mechanisms, institutionalized dialogue, and demonstrated responsiveness. The Mbaza digital platform enables citizens to submit complaints, ideas, and feedback directly to government institutions, receiving real-time responses . The annual Umushyikirano National Dialogue, convened since 2003, provides a forum for citizens to directly engage national leaders, with parliamentary follow-up ensuring resolution implementation rates frequently exceed 80-90% . These mechanisms have produced tangible policy outcomes: loan interest rates reduced from 11% to 2% for vulnerable citizens following citizen concerns, the Agaciro Development Fund established from a citizen proposal, and land transaction fees reduced after public outcry . The government's responsiveness is framed as building trust: "a government that listens when the people speak, and responds not with rhetoric, but with tangible change" .

Yet Rwanda's approach is not without tensions and challenges. Digital rights experts report concerns over government surveillance, harassment of online critics, and restricted access to independent media, with "civic freedoms in the Rwandan digital space" described as having worsened . The Governance Scorecard reveals significant service delivery gaps, with citizen satisfaction in agriculture at just 55.3% and land services at 59.4%, compared to judiciary trust at 90% . Concerns raised at Umushyikirano are not always promptly resolved, with issues over business certification delays persisting across multiple dialogues .

Several cross-cutting insights emerge from this comparison:

First, control is not communication. Gabon's platform suspension may temporarily disrupt protest coordination, but it does not constitute communication. Genuine government communication requires channels that enable two-way exchange, not just top-down messaging or platform shutdowns.

Second, responsiveness builds trust; suppression erodes it. Rwanda's demonstrated willingness to adjust policy based on citizen input—reducing loan rates, lowering land fees—provides tangible evidence that government listens. Gabon's suppression of communication platforms while leaving grievances unaddressed signals that government fears rather than welcomes citizen voice.

Third, engagement mechanisms require genuine responsiveness to be meaningful. Rwanda's Umushyikirano and Mbaza are well-designed mechanisms, but their effectiveness depends on whether citizen input actually influences policy. When concerns persist across multiple dialogues , citizens may conclude that participation is performative.

Fourth, digital platforms are not inherently threatening or enabling. Gabon treats them as threats to be suspended; Rwanda treats them as engagement infrastructure while simultaneously monitoring independent expression. The impact of platforms depends on government choices.

Fifth, gaps between discourse and practice undermine credibility. Gabon affirms freedom of expression while suspending platforms; Rwanda promotes engagement while restricting digital freedoms. Citizens who observe these gaps learn that official discourse cannot be relied upon.

Sixth, systematic measurement enables improvement. Rwanda's Governance Scorecard provides data on citizen satisfaction across sectors, enabling evidence-based policy adjustment . Gabon lacks comparable systematic assessment, making it difficult to identify and address sources of citizen discontent.

Seventh, trust is built sector by sector, issue by issue. Rwanda's high trust in judiciary coexists with low trust in agriculture and land services . Governments seeking to build overall institutional trust must address specific service delivery gaps, not rely on general engagement mechanisms alone.

For Gabon, priorities emerging from this analysis include:

1. Recognize that platform suspension does not address underlying grievances. Engage with striking teachers and protesting public sector workers to understand and address their concerns.
2. Develop structured mechanisms for citizen input that operate consistently, not just in response to crisis. Learn from Rwanda's Mbaza and Umushyikirano models while adapting to Gabonese context.
3. Demonstrate responsiveness through tangible policy changes that address citizen concerns, building evidence that government listens.

4. Address human rights concerns by releasing imprisoned journalists and unionists, ending protest leader arrests, and restoring communication platforms.
5. Begin systematic measurement of citizen satisfaction across sectors to identify and address sources of discontent.

For Rwanda, priorities include:

1. Address digital rights concerns documented by UN submissions . End surveillance, harassment of online critics, and arbitrary website shutdowns. Bring practice into alignment with engagement discourse.
2. Tackle persistent service delivery gaps in agriculture and land services, where citizen satisfaction remains below 60% . Use Governance Scorecard data to target interventions.
3. Strengthen follow-up mechanisms for Umushyikirano resolutions to ensure that concerns raised do not persist across multiple dialogues .
4. Implement the Data Protection and Privacy Law effectively, ending reported violations including spyware procurement .
5. Address the "culture of secrecy" limiting access to information , implementing the right to information in practice, not just in law.

For the international community, the lessons are clear: government communication that builds trust requires structured engagement mechanisms, demonstrated responsiveness, and protection of fundamental freedoms. Gabon's control-oriented approach offers warnings about the consequences of suppression; Rwanda's engagement mechanisms offer models while also highlighting persistent challenges. SDG 16's targets on accountable institutions, inclusive decision-making, and access to information are not merely aspirational but essential for building the citizen trust that enables effective governance.

The ultimate measure of success is not whether governments control communication but whether citizens feel heard, whether institutions respond to concerns, and whether trust enables the collaborative relationship between state and citizen that sustainable development requires.

8. LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources rather than primary empirical research. Direct observation of government communication practices in both countries, interviews with government officials, journalists, civil society representatives, and citizens, and participatory research would provide valuable additional perspectives and ground-truth the findings from published literature. Second, data availability and comparability vary significantly between countries. Rwanda benefits from extensive documentation through governance assessments, institutional reporting, and international monitoring. Gabon's sources are more limited, with recent developments documented primarily through news reporting rather than systematic governance assessment. Third, the study focuses on recent events (2025-2026) that are still unfolding; longer-term outcomes of Gabon's communication strategy and Rwanda's engagement mechanisms remain to be seen. Fourth, the voice of ordinary citizens—particularly in Gabon, where communication platforms have been suspended—is mediated through news reports rather than captured directly. Future research should prioritize participatory methodologies that center citizen perspectives on government communication and trust. Fifth, the study does not comprehensively address the political economy dimensions—the interests, power relations, and structural forces that shape government communication choices in both countries. Understanding why Gabon's leadership chose control or how Rwanda's engagement mechanisms coexist with surveillance would require deeper political economy analysis. Sixth, the transferability analysis is necessarily speculative. While principles can be identified, actual transfer of communication strategies depends on countless contextual factors including political systems, historical legacies, and institutional capacities that cannot be fully anticipated. Despite these limitations, the comparative analysis provides valuable insights into the relationship between government communication and citizen trust, with implications for both countries and for broader efforts to achieve SDG 16.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the research methodology, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest. No funding was received from organizations with interests in governance, communication policy, or related sectors.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including news reports, institutional documentation, governance assessments, and submissions to international bodies. Primary sources are cited in the bibliography and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or political advice. Government communication practices, institutional frameworks, and citizen trust dynamics are subject to change, and readers should consult current sources for specific information about Gabon, Rwanda, and government-citizen communication.

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