

# The Continent



**Botswana prepared for drought. Then it flooded.**

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi



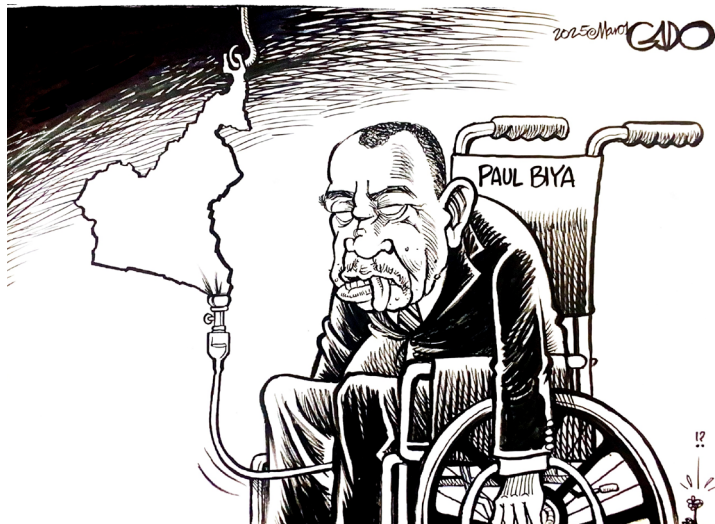
**Cover:** The Three Dikgosi monument commemorates the chiefs who talked the British Empire into keeping Botswana as its own country, instead of incorporating it into South Africa. The bronze statues – built by a North Korean company – are accustomed to the relentless onslaught of the sun. Rain? Not so much. In fact, the country as a whole was not really prepared for the torrential rainfall that it experienced earlier this month. The rains caused flooding in the capital and many villages – and more rain is expected next week. This may be Botswana's new climate reality (p10).

# Inside:

- **France, Russia and the Sahel:** A 'seamless' transition (p7)
- **United States of Autocracy:** As the old world order crumbles, the world falls into disorder (p8)
- **Zimbabwe:** Will he stay or will he go? (p14)
- **Museum of Stolen History:** Can you steal a 'gift'? (p17)
- **African Union:** Three steps to fix a critical institution (p21)
- **Afrobarometer:** Ethnic discrimination by states on the rise (p23)
- **Erased:** The lost art of tattooing in Upper Egypt (p24)

## We're looking for 300 more subscribers:

Can you think of someone who would benefit from knowing a bit more about the world? Maybe someone who likes a good cartoon, an illustration, some history mixed in with a bit of sarcasm, and the odd dollop of wisdom. If you do, and they aren't already a subscriber, please send them this edition of *The Continent*. We've added over 3,000 subscribers this season – help us get to 30,000.



## HAITI

### First Kenyan police officer killed in Caribbean mission

Samuel Tompei Kaetuai died after he was shot in the Artibonite area of Haiti, becoming the first Kenyan police officer to die while on a mission to the beleaguered Caribbean island. Some 600 Kenyan police officers were sent to Haiti last year, after an agreement was reached between Kenya's President William Ruto and his American counterpart, the then-president Joe Biden. Kaetuai was 28 years old, and due to be married: he reportedly signed up to the mission to make enough money for the wedding. He is survived by two young children.

## DRC

### Bomb blasts shake Bukavu amid M23 rebel occupation

Less than two weeks after M23 rebels occupied the city of Bukavu, bomb blasts killed at least 11 people at a rally on Thursday. Another 65 people were injured. The rally was intended to celebrate M23's recent military successes. It is unclear who the attackers were. M23 officials claim to have arrested two men for the attack. "This cowardly and barbaric act will not go without consequences," said a senior rebel leader. Congolese Prime Minister Judith Suminwa Tuluka said this week at least 7,000 people have been killed in the conflict this year, with 450,000 displaced.

## SOUTH AFRICA

## National regulator takes on Big Tech

Use Google from South Africa and, all too often, the search engine will rank global news outlets before local ones. According to provisional findings from the country's Competition Commission, this illegally distorts competition in the news industry. If these findings are confirmed later this year, Google may be on the hook for a penalty of up to R500-million (\$27-million). The commission is also looking into the business practices of Meta and X. The tech giants have until 7 April to send counter-arguments to the commission.

## CÔTE D'IVOIRE

## Ancient Africans kept it arboreal

Human beings have lived in the rainforests of Côte d'Ivoire for at least 150,000 years, according to a new study published in *Nature*. Until now, scientists believed that in prehistoric times, African rainforests – which were and remain incredibly dense – were simply too difficult for early humans to live in. But using new dating methods, researchers showed that stone tools of that age were present in a wet forest environment. Before this, the earliest forest-dwelling people were only thought to inhabit southeast-Africa as recently as 70,000 years ago.

## UGANDA

## M7's most ardent critic remains in jail

Kizza Besigye has run against Uganda's president four times in presidential elections. He is now in jail in Kampala after being kidnapped from Nairobi in November and illegally renditioned. On Monday, groups of lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, dentists, jurists and activists marched to Kenya's National Assembly to demand his release. After he was charged with treason and gun crimes, Uganda's Supreme Court annulled the military trial – but he was not transferred to a civilian court until he staged a hunger strike.

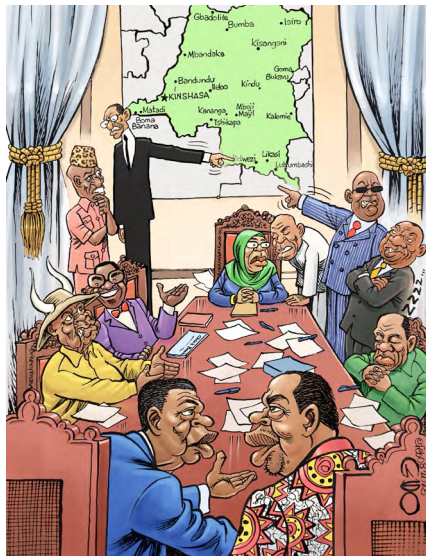


**Free Besigye: Protesters in Nairobi demand Kizza Besigye's release from a Ugandan jail. Photo: Simon Maian/AFP**

## DRC

## Bloc parties join the queue for Kinshasa

The east and southern African regional blocs are thinking of deploying troops to the parts of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo now controlled by M23, according to *Reuters*. Doing that would probably require that they beat M23 in battle, and troops from the UN and Southern Africa have already failed to stop them. For nearly two decades, a regional war has played out in the DRC as different nations scramble to get some of its vast resources. This year's dramatic advance by the Rwanda-backed M23, taking the two key cities of the country's east, has upended the scales.



**Congo line:** African leaders have been unable to lead each other to a solution to the DRC conflict. Illustration: Gado

## SUDAN

## Military plane crashes near capital

Nearly 50 people have died after a military plane crashed into homes in Omdurman, on the opposite side of the Nile from Khartoum. The plane belonged to the Sudanese military, which has been fighting a civil war against the Rapid Support Forces since 2023. As *The Continent* reported last week, the military has the upper hand and is taking ever-more of the capital. Civilians continue to die as two men fight for power.

## MARS

## Red planet's irony, comes out of the blue

We think of Mars as red, dry and inhospitable. But that colour likely comes from the fact that the planet was wet a few billion years ago. New research in the journal *Nature Communications* says the red dust comes from the iron mineral ferrihydrite – and that can only be created at lower temperatures and near cool water. This helps bear out other research that shows Mars was covered in water way back in the day.



**No tears for fears: Oh say can you not see there is no evidence of white genocide?** Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

## SOUTH AFRICA

### Judge confirms a drift from reality

“Clearly imagined and not real” is how a high court judge described claims of a white genocide in South Africa. The case involved a family trust where one of four brothers wanted to leave his \$2.1-million wealth to a local white supremacist group. The group in question, Boerelegioen, describes itself as a “civil defence movement that enables citizens to resist the promised slaughter of whites”. His brothers opposed the move. The judge pointed to the dangers of online radicalisation. Free speech zealots Elon Musk and Donald Trump must be in the same algorithm bubble.

## NAMIBIA

### Oil kaiju champing at their drill bits

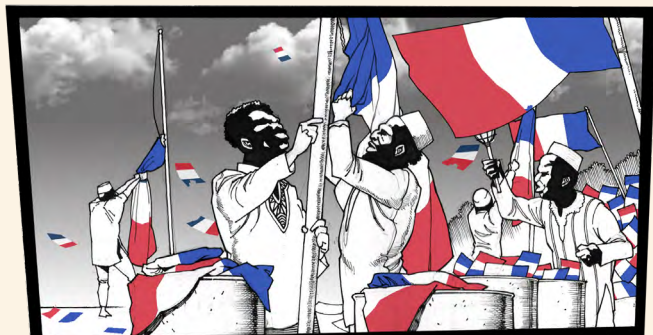
Petrochemical giants like Total, Shell and Chevron are scrambling to strike oil in the Atlantic off the Namibian coast. Galp, a Portuguese oil and gas company, said this week that it had found some. The state petroleum corporation has a 10% share in the venture so some money might stay on the continent. Which should totally make up for the whole world-on-fire thing.

## EXISTENCE

### BP turns back on eco spin, breaks wind

“Ten years to save the world.” That was the paraphrased warning from climate scientists in 2021 – halve global emissions by 2030, or risk the planet becoming increasingly uninhabitable. Big fossil fuel companies plowed fortunes into looking like they would do their part. One of these was BP, already rebranded as Beyond Petroleum. It committed to lower its emissions by 40%. It bought some wind turbines. Now BP is scrapping all these planet-friendly plans – and is selling those turbines. It will instead double down on drilling for the thing that is driving global warming. Its shareholders are demanding profit today over the health of the planet tomorrow.

# Sahel



# United States

## Tyranny by the book, 'til the book is burned

**As the empire suddenly restructures, healthcare, press freedom and energy security pay a steep price.**

**L**ate on Tuesday, dozens of South African organisations that provide HIV services were emailed a termination notice, noting that “continuing this programme is not in the national interest”.

Health news outlet *Bhekisisa* reported that some of the letters were signed off with “God bless America”.

When the new US leadership started destroying USAID – the country’s foreign aid arm – it responded to criticism by saying it had carved out exceptions for programmes like those preventing the transmission of HIV.

Opposition to this has bounced between courts, with the government ignoring or sidestepping court orders. As that fight continues, the president, Donald Trump, has persisted in volleying out decisions that rattle norms and undermine US imperial adventures.

In Africa, *NBC* reports that the

regime wants to downsize Africom, the military department that oversees US troops on the continent and the constant, undeclared wars the US has been running under Democrat and Republican leaders. It’s unclear if this will mean fewer drone strikes. *Bloomberg News* reports that Power Africa, a billion-dollar programme to fund renewable energy on the continent, has been gutted.

The Trump administration is also working hard to try and ensure fewer of its decisions make it into the public. The White House has barred journalists from three major outlets: the *Associated Press*, *Reuters* and *Huffington Post*. It is a textbook step from any would-be dictator.

The move has been described as a violation of the country’s First Amendment, which guarantees press freedom and is used to legitimise the hate speech of the people now in power. ■



**Careless: Health initiatives have halted abruptly.** Photo: Jekesai Njikizana/AFP



# Love *The Continent*? We deliver!

Get your weekly fix of the very best African journalism by subscribing (for free!)

*"Innovative, witty, insightful."  
As per the Big Annual Survey 2024*



Get it every Saturday morning on Whatsapp by clicking [this link](#)

You can also sign up on email ([read@thecontinent.org](mailto:read@thecontinent.org)), Signal, or Telegram (+27738056068)

**Share real news.**

**The Continent**

# Botswana

**‘We prepared for a  
natural disaster  
– just not this one’**

**Botswana was overwhelmed by the rapidly changing climate. As the world gets warmer, and its weather less predictable, it will not be the only one.**

Photo: European Space Agency

## Keletso Thobega in Gaborone

**R**ain is a scarce and precious resource in Botswana, a mostly arid country. This scarcity has fuelled a collective yearning for rain that is fundamental to Botswana culture. The pula, Botswana's currency, is named after the Setswana word for rain. At public gatherings or ceremonial occasions, there is always someone who will begin chanting "Pula!"; while the crowd responds with "A e ne!" – Let it rain! In particularly dry years, it is not unusual for the president to ask the country to come together to pray for the heavens to open.

Last week, nearly half a year's worth of rain fell in 24 hours.

In Gaborone and surrounds, it rained until cars began to float down the streets of the capital. It rained until bridges and walls collapsed, and people were swept away by the rising waters. Fifteen people were killed. It rained until the Gaborone Dam, which just a few months ago was two-thirds empty, began to overflow.

"After a prolonged period of drought caused by El Niño, the rains were influenced by the remnants of Tropical Cyclone Dikeledi, which came from Mozambique and South Africa," said John Stegling, the chief meteorologist of the Botswana Meteorological Service. "There were public alerts about the incoming floods, but perhaps the public did not anticipate the severity of the rains."



Far canal: A village on the outskirts of Gaborone, severely inundated after the rains. Photo: Unicef Botswana

El Niño is a regular weather phenomenon that leads to drought across the southern hemisphere. In a bitter irony, Tropical Cyclone Dikeledi is named for the Setswana word for “tears”. These cyclones are a regular occurrence, but usually lose their energy when they hit Madagascar and Mozambique. Stronger ones, like Dikeledi, make it further inland — Gaborone is 800km from that coast — and a hotter world means warmer oceans and more energy to power cyclones.

“Changing climatic conditions and weather patterns are causing extreme weather such as excessive heat and heavy rainfalls,” concluded Stegling.

For the people caught in the floods — anxiously awaiting rescue from disaster response teams, and very wet — it felt like a scene from a movie about the end times, and was just as unexpected.

“It was a scary sight,” said Abigail Segokgo, who woke up in her home in Tlokweng to find water seeping in through the front door. “I rushed into one of the bedrooms and called for help through my phone.” The water damaged her furniture, as well as parts of her yard and front walls.

**“From extreme drought to and super wet weather — we have to prepare for whatever might come.”**

Tshepo Morebodi, a poultry farmer in Mochudi, lost 100 chickens to the floodwaters. “I nearly collapsed when I went out and saw that all my chickens had died,” he told *The Continent*.



**Sink or swim: A man waits for rescue in the flooded steets of Gaborone.** Photo: Pheny Ramatu & Drones Botswana

“There was water all over the yard. I also lost a goat and my dog drowned in the water. I wanted to go out and save my animals but it was pouring down and I was worried about my safety.”

### **Come rain or shine**

Botswana’s government has spent many years, and many millions of dollars, preparing for natural disasters — just not this kind of natural disaster. The state’s attention, informed by decades of meteorological data, was focused instead on responding to drought.

In 2017, the World Bank approved a \$145.5-million loan to help improve the availability of water in drought-prone areas. In 2022, the government published a 78-page National Drought Plan that outlined, in detail, how the government would prepare vulnerable communities for when the rains failed.



**Rapid rise: The Gaborone Dam floods after exceeding 105% capacity.** Photo: Phenyo Ramatu & Drones Botswana

Botswana did not anticipate – or prepare for – floods.

The heavy rains exposed major vulnerabilities in urban drainage systems, according to Boitumelo Pauline Marumo, a climate communications specialist. “It has become apparent that parts of the city and surrounding villages are on flood paths, exposing poor urban planning. Additionally, flooding and infrastructure damage led to road closures in four districts, an apparent lack of resilient structures.”

“We were caught off guard,” said David Lesolle, a climate change policy adviser. He is advocating for the government to implement a much more comprehensive response policy – one that can respond to any kind of disaster. “No one knows for sure how the erratic rainfall patterns are going to turn out when the climate goes extreme. Over the past years we have observed changes from extreme drought,

heat extremities and super wet weather, so we have to prepare for whatever might come.”

For years, climate scientists have been saying that a warming world will lead to more extreme and unpredictable climate events. Last year was the warmest in Earth’s recorded history, with temperatures averaging 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels, and there is no sign of that trend changing.

It does not help that the world’s richest country and largest polluter – the United States – has just withdrawn from international efforts to slow down the pace of climate change. This almost certainly condemns Botswana, and the rest of the planet, to a future of more extreme droughts, floods and storms.

Given the erratic nature of these disasters, it is very hard to predict – and plan for – exactly what is coming. More rains are expected this week. ■

---

# Zimbabwe

---

## Crocodile's tears are a bit on the nose

**Emmerson Mnangagwa insists that he will step down in 2028. But even within the ruling party itself, few believe him.**

**Jeffrey Moyo in Harare**

**P**resident Emmerson Mnangagwa's term of office lasts for three more years. Already, however, Zimbabwean politics is consumed with the question: Will he stay or will he go?

His predecessor, Robert Mugabe, was famously reluctant to leave office. His wife Grace told a crowd that Mugabe would govern from the grave. She was wrong: Mugabe was forced out by a military coup in 2017, orchestrated by none other than his deputy – Emmerson Mnangagwa.

History is at risk of repeating itself, say Mnangagwa's critics. This is despite strong denials from the president himself. "I am a constitutionalist. I have my two terms. When they come to an end, the country and the party will move on by electing my successor," Mnangagwa told state media

editors in Harare earlier this month.

There is a very different message coming from the ruling Zanu-PF. In October, at its annual conference in Bulawayo, the party passed "Resolution #1", which called for the president's term to be extended by two years, until 2030. This would need a constitutional amendment. As recently as 17 February, Information Minister Jenfan Muswere argued there would be "nothing unconstitutional" about making such an amendment.

At rallies and funerals, party youths have been chanting Mnangagwa's nickname, Ngwena – crocodile, and holding banners demanding he remain in office beyond 2028. And on national television, jingles extolling the president's virtues have become commonplace.

In one of these jingles – much mocked on social media – young women wearing green Zanu-PF t-shirts and black and yellow miniskirts sing the praises of the 82-year-old leader: "Your rule Mr Mnangagwa excites me, your rule Mr Mnangagwa pleases me. The way you lure investors is amazing."

### **Opponents touch a nerve**

As expected, opposition parties and civil society activists have condemned the party's plans to keep Mnangagwa in power. Much more surprising is the depth of the opposition within the ruling party itself – and especially from among war veterans



**Burden of leadership: The late Robert Mugabe has so far failed to issue any edicts from beyond the grave.** Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP

who fought in the country's liberation struggle in the 1960s and 1970s.

The first and most prominent war vet to publicly contradict the party line was Blessed "Bombshell" Geza, who is a member of Zanu-PF's central committee. He told a press conference in January: "We are saying, as war veterans, enough is enough. You have shown you have failed."

Under Mnangagwa, inflation has skyrocketed and public utilities, including water and electricity supply, have all but collapsed. Mnangagwa himself, along with several senior officials, is under sanctions by the United States following allegations of corruption and human rights abuses.

Another war vet, Buster Magwizi, told *The Continent* in a telephone interview that amending the Constitution to keep Mnangagwa in power would cause instability in the country. "[Mnangagwa] must denounce resolution number one."

The criticism is clearly touching a nerve. After interviewing Geza, and airing his critical comments, journalist Blessed Mhlanga was arrested and charged with

"inciting violence or damage to property". On Friday, Mhlanga was denied bail and remanded in custody until 14 March by magistrate Farai Gwatima, who said: "The release of the accused will put the nation in unrest and undermine peace and security".

The Committee to Protect Journalists has called for Mhlanga's release, and accused the Zimbabwean government of "punishing the messenger".

Stanford Nyatsanza, a researcher at the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, said the ruling party is not the only factor in deciding whether Mnangagwa stays. He told *The Continent*: "The succession battle is more likely to be settled by the military and it is now the question of who commands military authority between the two warring factions within Zanu-PF"

In this context, all eyes are on Constantino Chiwenga, Mnangagwa's deputy. Chiwenga is the former commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, and still commands loyalty within the ranks. He has not commented publicly on the matter. ■



## Book Review Jacqueline Nyathi

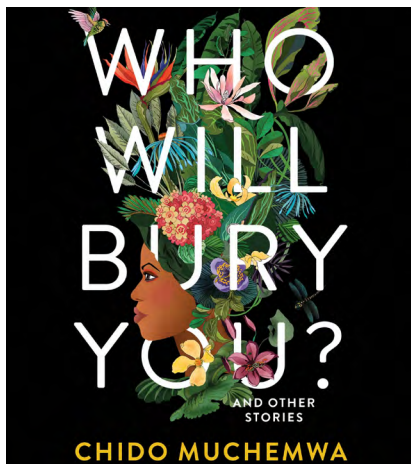
# Dying to live, living to love

What happens when people change – or when they are changed?

**P**art of this elegant and accomplished collection is an inquiry into that diasporan sorrow: What happens when your parent or grandparent dies while you're gone? It can be difficult to drop everything and come home. And if it's to stand vigil as they die, harder yet.

The stories of *Who Will Bury You?* ask what happens when you find yourself after you've left – and that self isn't acceptable back home? Several protagonists are lesbian, and from Zimbabwe, a profoundly homophobic country. What will your mother tell Mai Mfundisi, the reverend's wife, when she comes to visit?

Chido Muchemwa's stories preoccupy themselves with death, heartbreak and loss. Some are set in Kariba, and feature Nyami Nyami and the disruption to the traditional lifeways of BaTonga from the building of the dam wall. A favourite is *Paradise*, about Wickington, the only surviving one of a series of W-named brothers; he spends all of his time at the



cemetery where his siblings are buried. It's a poignant depiction of the fractures of African family systems brought about by immigration and yes, much death.

A tribute to African fatherhood, *Chasing Elephants* stands out. Not obviously about death, it's a warm account of a father-daughter trip to Mana Pools, replete with the awkwardness of a father who's never understood the modern compulsion to express affection – isn't it clear in how he provides for his child?

*Who Will Bury You?* feels like a diasporan love letter to Zim life and culture, but also a eulogy for what's inevitably lost as time and people move on.

If she isn't already, Muchemwa is set to be a leading light of modern Zimbabwean and African literature. Because of her skill, readers will be completely absorbed from the first page to the last. ■

*House of Anansi Press provided The Continent with a review copy.*



# The Museum of Stolen History

*Things can be taken. Their stories must still be told.*

Curated by Shola Lawal | Art direction by Wynona Mutisi



Ngwi Ndem ("The Bangwa Queen")  
Sculpture in wood  
Cameroon  
Circa late 1800s



Golden Crown  
Solid gold, alloyed with silver and copper  
Ethiopia  
Circa 1740s



The Cullinan Diamond  
Pure Diamond  
Mined in 1905  
South Africa



Okalor  
Sculpture in bronze  
Nigeria  
Date of creation unknown



The Rashid Stone ("The Rosetta Stone")  
Granodiorite rock  
Egypt  
Inscribed in 196 BC



Lions of Tsavo  
Taxidermy specimens  
Kenya  
Shot and killed in 1898



Photo: Christopher Furlong / Getty Images

## The Cullinan Diamond

**C**an one be accused of stealing an object if it was received as a “gift”?

Weighing in at 3,106 carats (that’s 621 grams), the mighty Cullinan Diamond is the largest rough diamond ever found in Africa – or anywhere else. It was discovered in 1905 in the small mining town of Cullinan in colonial-era South Africa. Now it lives on as several pieces, most of which are embedded in Britain’s Crown Jewels.

Following its discovery by the Premier Mining Company, the stone was put up for sale in Cape Town for several months.

No buyer could be found. It was decided the gem would be sent to London for sale. To transport it, the company faked a ceremonial entourage that travelled with a steamboat complete with a security detail. The real diamond was not on board: it arrived quietly in London via post. Unfortunately, it couldn’t sell there either.

In 1907, the Afrikaner government of the then-Transvaal Province, led by Louis Botha, decided to buy and gift the diamond to Britain’s King Edward VII. They paid 150,000 pounds for the privilege, about \$24-million today.

Botha had reason to splash out: the Second Boer War with the British (1899-1902) had just ended, leaving the Transvaal and the similarly Boer-led Orange Free State occupied and devastated. British soldiers had employed guerilla tactics, killing civilians indiscriminately, destroying farms and other food sources, and interning women and children in concentration camps.

Although the war was often seen as a “White Man’s war”, historians note that Black Africans, who had themselves been enslaved by the Boers, were either conscripted or volunteered to fight for one side or the other, often as scouts. At least 25,000 Afrikaners and 12,000 Black Africans died in the war.

Eventually, the Transvaal agreed to become a British colony in the Treaty of Vereeniging (1902), officially ending the war, and laying the foundations for the union that would become today’s Republic of South Africa. As Transvaal’s leader, Botha needed the Crown’s good favour – and funds – to rebuild the Colony and return it to self-rule.

The Amsterdam-based jeweller Joseph Asscher was commissioned to cleave the stone. It is rumoured that he fainted upon successfully splitting the diamond, due to days-long anxious pre-examination of

how best to cut it without damage, using the limited technologies of the time. In the end, nine big stones emerged from the diamond, and about 90 fragments. The biggest, the Great Star of Africa or Cullinan I, was embedded in the King’s Sceptre with Cross. The second-biggest, the Second Star, was embedded in the Imperial State Crown.

Cullinans III through IX are part of brooches or other jewellery used by members of the royal family.

Amid a continent-wide push for stolen art to be repatriated by former colonial powers, South Africans too are demanding that the diamonds be returned to the country. Those demands heated up during King Charles’ coronation in May 2023. But it’s complicated, says Wits University’s Roger Southall: the Cullinan was given by the government of the day, not looted in the traditional sense.

Lawyer Mothusi Kamanga, who campaigns on social media for the diamonds to be returned, disagrees. The gem was sent to the UK as a gift by settler colonialists who had illegally occupied South Africa, Kamanga told *The Continent*. Those colonists did not receive consent from Black Africans, the true owners, therefore they could not have gifted it to the king, he said.

---

**Illustration note, by South African artist Chris J. Sassman:** *Precolonial Africa never placed value on diamonds or gold. Instead, value was rooted in things that fostered community and connection to the land – animal husbandry, livestock, craft trade and agriculture. A diamond may have been a novelty, but it was never truly valuable. A bead necklace may have had more sentimental value than a diamond. In this artwork, I chose to depict a young Ndebele child (the Ndebele were the first recorded inhabitants of the Pretoria region where the diamond was found, after the San people) playing with the Cullinan Diamond as if it were just a paperweight. Nonetheless, I think Britain should return the diamonds: not because of their monetary value, but rather as redress for the injustices which surrounded its acquisition.*



Illustration: Chris J. Sassman

# The African Union can thrive in the new world order

But first, three things need to change.

**Carlos Lopes**

The African Union has made significant strides in its mission to unite the continent and propel it towards a prosperous future. A great example of this is the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which lays a foundation for continental economic co-operation.

Yet there are deeper, underlying problems that make it hard to progress further. Unless these are resolved, the continental body will remain a passive observer on the world stage. Given the rapid shifts in global geopolitics that are currently underway, it is more important than ever that the African Union is able to effectively protect and promote the interests of this continent and its people.

These are the three issues that the AU needs to resolve first.

The most critical is also the most contentious: the principle of subsidiarity, which is the most persistent obstacle to effective regional integration. This is the idea that regional bodies – like the Southern African Development Community, the Economic Community of West African States and the East African Community – should play a

leading role in resolving conflict within their own spheres. This principle has been repeatedly undermined in practice, with neighbouring countries too often using it to promote their own interests rather than contribute to regional peacebuilding.

The principle of subsidiarity has also been weaponised by states who invoke it to prevent the African Union, or other international actors, from playing a more active role in conflict resolution. This is one reason why regional efforts to defuse the wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have failed, with such devastating consequences.

The second major challenge is Africa's fragmented and ineffective voice on the global stage. Rather than presenting a unified front in international talks, Africa's position is often splintered, reducing its influence and bargaining power. And whether in climate negotiations, trade talks, or efforts to reform the international financial system, Africa's approach often revolves around asking for more aid – without challenging the structural barriers that continue to hinder its development.

For example, in climate negotiations, Africa's stance has typically been centred around asking for more financial support, even though the promises made

in previous agreements have not been honoured. This focus on aid, rather than regulatory reforms that would support long-term industrialisation and economic transformation, keeps Africa stuck in a cycle of dependency.

Now that the aid is disappearing – both the United States and the United Kingdom are drastically reducing their funding for international development, with other rich countries potentially following suit – the AU needs to find another, more assertive approach.

The key to this may lie in the current conversation around renewable energy and critical minerals. Africa is once again being positioned as a mere supplier of the commodities – lithium, cobalt, rare earth elements, green hydrogen – needed for global energy transitions. Powerful nations, in particular, continue to treat Africa as a resource base to fuel their green energy ambitions. And they will continue to do so, unless the AU seeks to set the global agenda rather than serve it.

### **The AU relies on external donors, limiting its ability to chart its own course and control its agenda.**

The third issue lies within the AU: the internal effectiveness and sustainability of its institutions. Despite the efforts of the AU Reform Team, to which I belonged, that have focused on improving funding formulas, talent management, and budgetary restraint, much remains to be done. The AU continues to rely on external donors, limiting its ability to chart its own

course and control its agenda. The lack of financial independence makes the AU vulnerable to external pressures, which in turn hampers its capacity to implement its strategic priorities effectively.

Moreover, the institution's internal governance structures, though improved, still face significant challenges in terms of managerial effectiveness and the efficient use of resources.

Until the AU's financial independence is fully realised, and its internal machinery becomes more agile and responsive, the organisation will continue to be constrained by a lack of autonomy.

It is against this backdrop that the recent election of Mahmoud Ali Youssouf as chairperson of the AU Commission, with Selma Malika Haddadi as deputy chairperson, offers a renewed sense of hope. Their experience as seasoned diplomats – well-versed in the intricacies of Addis Ababa's diplomatic dynamics – offers a real opportunity for reform.

Youssouf and Haddadi are acutely aware of the shortcomings that have plagued the AU and are uniquely positioned to push for necessary changes. Their diplomatic skill and political savvy will be crucial as they work to recalibrate Africa's approach, both internally and on the international stage. ■

---

*Carlos Lopes is a professor at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town. He is a former executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and has worked extensively with the African Union including on Agenda 2063 and the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area*

# Zeroing in on ethnic discrimination

**R**ecent ethnic cleansing campaigns in Sudan and Ethiopia remind us Zero Discrimination Day (1 March) still marks a distant aspiration. Based on 46,269 face-to-face interviews conducted by Afrobarometer, we may be losing ground.

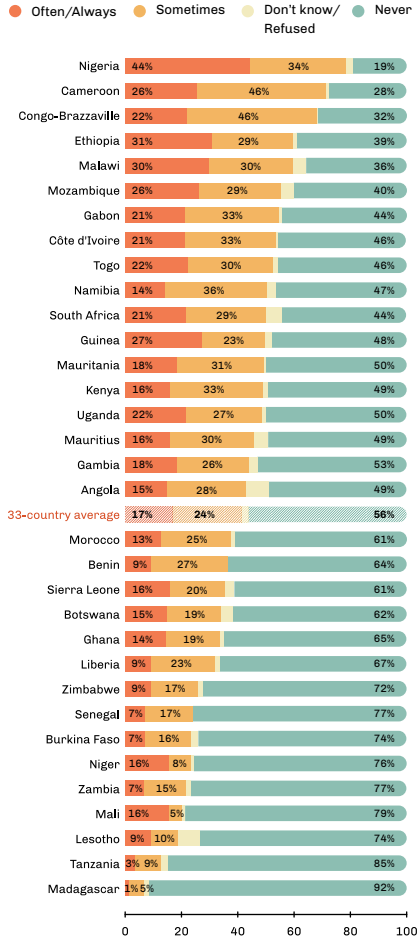
Across 33 African countries, four in 10 respondents (41%) say their government “sometimes” (24%), “often” (10%), or “always” (7%) treats members of their ethnic group unfairly. Poor people are more likely to report ethnic discrimination than those who are well off (49% vs. 33%).

That leaves a majority (56%) who say their group is never treated unfairly, led by Madagascar (92%), Tanzania (85%), and Mali (79%). But the sense of fairness is far less sturdy in Nigeria, where 44% report frequent ethnic discrimination.

So do more than a quarter of Ethiopians (31%), Malawians (30%), Guineans (27%), Mozambicans (26%), and Cameroonians (26%).

Across 25 countries where we’ve asked this question for the past decade, we find cause for concern: Since 2016/2018, reports of at least occasional ethnic discrimination by the government have increased by eight percentage points. ■

Unfair treatment of ethnic group by government | 33 African countries | 2021/2023



**Source:** Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200 to 2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.





**Needle work:**  
Bedouin women  
took pride in their  
tattoos. Photo:  
Lehnert & Landrock/  
Getty Images

## Taboo artists: The fading of Egypt's healing ink

**Yasmin Shabana**

**S**eventy years ago, in August, 12-year-old Nema Ahmed and her family visited the Monastery of the Virgin Mary in the mountain village of Dronka in Assiut, Upper Egypt. It was there, at the urging of the older women in her community, that Ahmed had a tattoo – a daq as it is called in Arabic – etched onto her left wrist. The purpose was not aesthetic but therapeutic. She had been suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome for more than five years.

“Miraculously, after she got the tattoo, the pain disappeared and rarely returned,” said her granddaughter, Mona Fathy.

Along the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt,

tattooing became common in the early 20th century, primarily among women. These tattoos were both decorative and, at times, believed to have healing properties. The most popular tattoo designs of the time featured three evenly spaced lines, a circular dot at the end of the chin, and bracelet-like patterns on the hands.

According to the Egyptian Archive for Folklore and Popular Traditions, tattoos were historically used to signify class distinction, tribal affiliation, or social status. The practice was common in rural areas in northern and southern Egypt and among Bedouin communities.

When tattoos were employed for therapeutic purposes, short lines or dots



were inked on the sides of the head to alleviate headaches or on the back of the hand to relieve pain in the fingers and hands.

Typically, a local female expert performed the tattoos, travelling from village to village and summoning women with her calls. In her book, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, English anthropologist Winifred Blackman described how tattoo specialists displayed various designs in the village market, the most popular of which was a tree. Her tools were simple: needles attached to a short stick, the end wrapped with thread. Soot from gas lamps was often used for ink.

As the years passed and religious conservatism – particularly Salafi-Wahabi influences – spread throughout the region, the tradition of tattooing gradually faded. It is viewed as incompatible with stricter interpretations of Islam.

For many in Upper Egypt today, *daq* is a relic of a bygone era, a once-vibrant tradition now consigned to memory.

According to Khalil Manon, an anthropologist, the infiltration of Wahhabi thought into Egypt began in earnest during the mid-1970s, when the late president Anwar Sadat launched his Open-Door Policy after the October 1973 war.

This period also saw an exodus of Egyptians to the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. They returned bringing with them conservative religious ideologies that had taken root in the Gulf. These ideas, including stricter interpretations of Islamic teachings, began to permeate Egyptian society, influencing social norms and practices.

The pressure to conform to these new standards grew, particularly in rural areas, where traditional customs began to be viewed through a more religiously conservative lens.

With the rise of these religious edicts, some people attempted to convince Fathy's grandmother to remove her tattoos, but she refused. According to Fathy, her grandmother would say: "These were our customs and traditions. Our hearts and intentions were pure, and our reckoning is with God, who knows our true intentions."

**“These were our  
customs and traditions.  
Our hearts and intentions  
were pure, and our  
reckoning is with God.”**

Today, the practice of tattooing has all but disappeared from the villages of Upper Egypt. The only traces that remain are on the bodies of the elderly women, or in old family photographs.

In 2003, Fathy's grandmother suffered from another carpal tunnel episode, this time in her right hand. Fathy recalls how her grandmother was eager to get another tattoo, just as she had done decades earlier to relieve the pain.

“We tried to find the tattoo artists – who were often Romani women that could be found at religious festivals – but we couldn't locate anyone in the Upper Egyptian villages where we asked,” she said. ■

---

*This article is published in collaboration with Egab*

# THE QUIZ

**0-3**

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

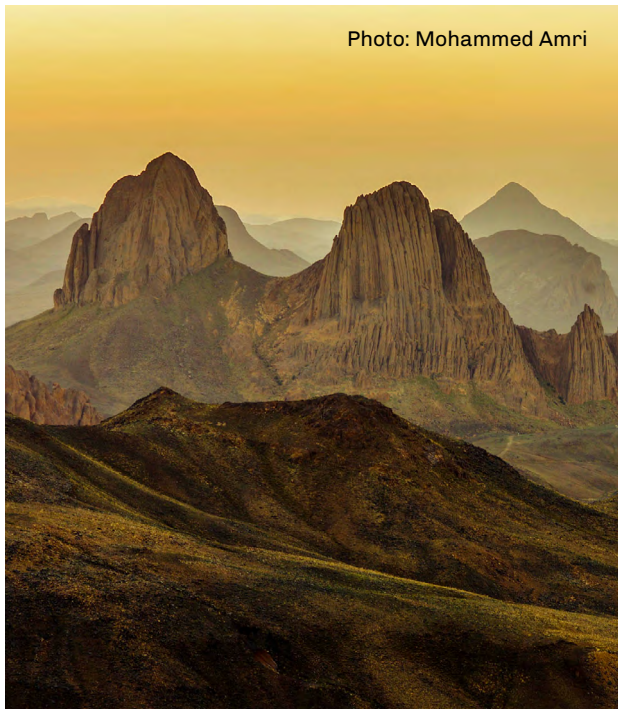
**4-7**

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

**8-10**

"Give me a big enough lemur and a fulcrum to place it on and I will move the world."

Photo: Mohammed Amri

- 
- 1\_** Assekrem (pictured) is a high plateau in the Hoggar Mountains, in which country?
- 2\_** Which ocean does the Zambezi River flow into?
- 3\_** Lemurs are endemic to which island country?
- 4\_** What colour is the star on Cameroon's flag?
- 5\_** The dalasi is which country's currency?
- 6\_** What is Liberia's official language?
- 7\_** Which country's national football teams are nicknamed the "Eagles of Carthage"?
- 8\_** Denis Sassou Nguesso is which country's president?
- 9\_** Present-day DRC was colonised by which country in 1885?
- 10\_** Mochudi is a village in which country?

**HOW DID I DO?** WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to [+27 73 805 6068](https://www.whatsapp.com/text/27738056068) and we'll send the answers to you!

# THE BIG PICTURE

Punching up: A boxer trains at Atton Quarshie Gym in Accra, which is gaining international renown for the network of scrappy gyms teaching the sport in the city's Jamestown district.

Photo: Olympia De Maismont/AFP



The Continent is a member of the Press Council of South Africa. This means we adhere to its Code of Ethics. It also means that there's an independent body you can reach out to with a complaint about our reporting. That process is on their website — [www.presscouncil.org.za](http://www.presscouncil.org.za).

**all protocol observed.**

*publisher of* **The Continent**

The Continent is published by All Protocol Observed, a not-for-profit based in South Africa. Our home is dedicated to creating a space for African journalists to do quality journalism, which we then get to you wherever you are. For suggestions, queries, complaints, or to make a donation, please contact us at [read@thecontinent.org](mailto:read@thecontinent.org)