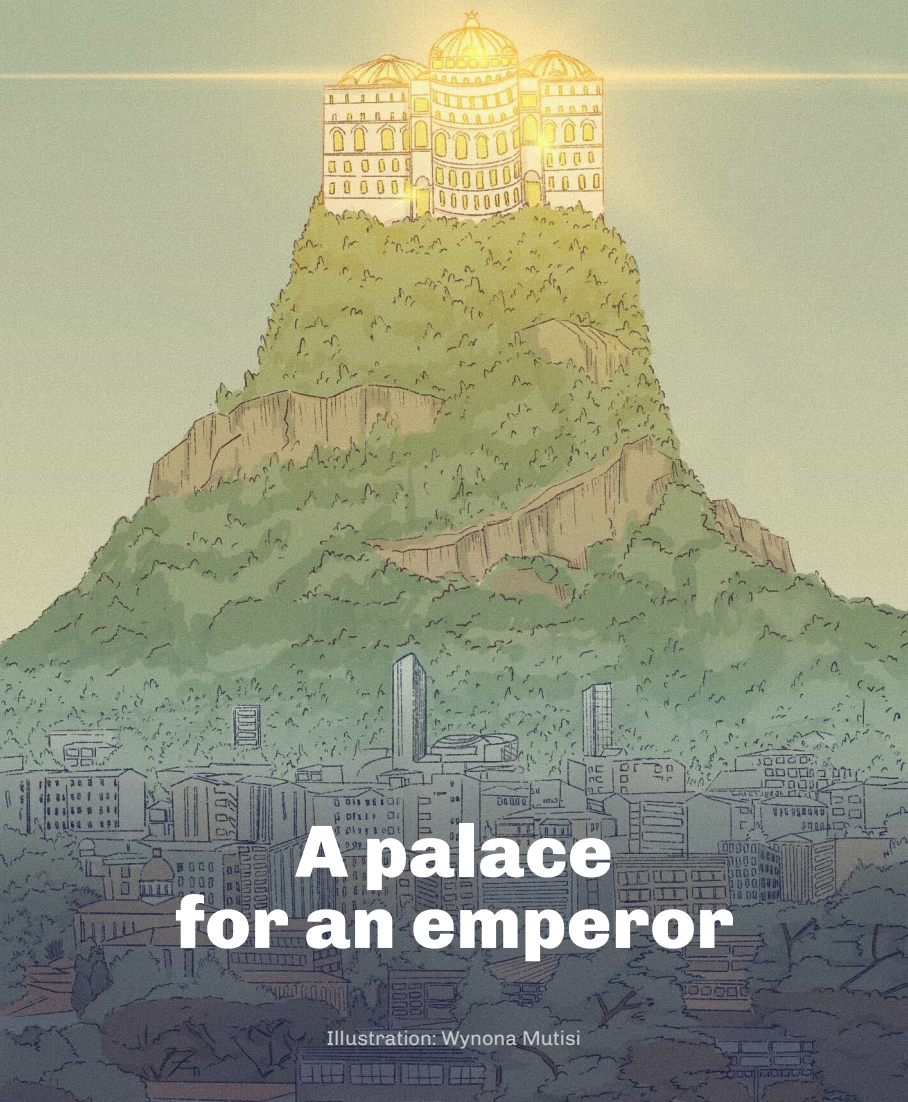


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The Continent



A palace for an emperor

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi



COVER: In the Yeka Hills above Addis Ababa, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is building a \$10-billion palace complex. Its centrepiece is a residence for himself, surrounded by luxury guesthouses for the African and world leaders who call on him (p15). The massive project is just one element of the grandiose vision that Abiy has to transform both Ethiopia and the region. A new book examines the making of the man who, in his own words, was always destined to be Ethiopia's next king (p19).

Inside:

- **Justice:** A rare win for victims of indifferent capitalism (p7)
- **South Africa:** Cyril Ramaphosa, the once and future king (p8)
- **Malawi:** The best president the country will never have (p10)
- **Migration:** There and back again (p13)
- **Review:** Ayra Starr is the princess she thinks she is (p21)
- **Comment:** Choose ubuntu and love your LGBTQ+ neighbours (p25)



See you next month!

It's time for a break. Making *The Continent* each week with our tiny team is exhilarating but also a bit exhausting. That's partly why we do four seasons of 10 editions each year, with breaks in between to let us catch up on the 1,527 emails in some of our inboxes. Our next edition (a mega investigation) will pop into your device on 13 July. Stay sane; keep hydrated. And if you would like to buy us a coffee, or help us pay journalists to do journalism, you can [donate here](#).



Abettor: The UN says the European Union is complicit in abuses inflicted on migrants detained on the Libya-Tunisia border. Photo: Hazem Turkia/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

TUNISIA

Migrant expulsions fuelling crime - UN

A confidential United Nations briefing has confirmed that the European Union's deals with Libya and Tunisia to curb migration have fuelled human rights abuses. First reported by Reuters, the briefing said Tunisian officials expelled migrants to Libya, where they were reportedly subjected to forced labour, extortion, torture and extrajudicial killings. A UN probe last year found that crimes against humanity were committed against migrants in Libyan detention centres managed by units that received EU funding.

SOMALIA

US denies that its airstrike killed Cuban doctors

The United States military says it is not to blame for the deaths of two Cuban doctors. Al-Shabaab insurgents claimed earlier that Assel Herrera and Landy Rodriguez, whom the militants abducted from northeastern Kenya in April 2019, died in a US airstrike in Somalia earlier this year. In its latest civilian casualty report, Africom, the US Africa Command, confirmed that it conducted an airstrike on 15 February near the town of Jilib but claims, as the US military often does, that there were no civilians killed.

UGANDA

Artefacts loaned back to owners

The University of Cambridge has lent 39 artefacts stolen from Uganda during the colonial era back to the country in what is being described as “a major act of restitution”. The items, which include traditional garb and pottery will remain the property of the British university's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. They will be in Uganda on loan for three years as part of the initial arrangement, but Uganda museum officials say this could be the first step towards local ownership.

NIGERIA

Swagger not stagger in Bola's 'Buga' loop?

At an event to celebrate 25 years of Nigerian democracy, President Bola Tinubu slipped and his body changed orientation from portrait to landscape. This triggered jokes from fellow Nigerians on social media but only because the jokers can't tell the difference between a fall and a swagger, apparently. "I had a swagger. They are confused whether I was doing Buga or Baban riga [dance moves]. I am a traditional Yoruba boy. I did my dobale [bowing to elders]," Tinubu clarified.

ALGERIA

Water riots erupt – a stark prelude to the climate wars to come

In a glimpse of the inevitable conflict that will emerge from the climate crisis, violent protests have erupted over an ongoing shortage of water in the Algerian city of Tiaret, about 250km southwest of Algiers. In videos circulating on social media, protesters are seen barricading roads and burning property in anger over alleged government inaction over the shortages. In a special report last week, *The Continent* revealed that cost of living protests across Africa have doubled in the past five years.



Extractor fan: An Australian firm, Woodside, owns an 82% stake in Senegal's first offshore oil field.

SENEGAL

You know the drill: Aussie, Aussie Aussie, oil, oil, oil

Australian company Woodside Energy announced on Tuesday that it had begun extracting oil in Senegal's first offshore field: Sangomar. The \$8-billion deepwater project is expected to produce at least 100,000 barrels a day. Senegal's national oil company Petrosen has an 18% stake in the project while Woodside owns the rest. The project's revenue sharing agreement has not been made public. Under the contracts negotiated by the previous administration, Senegal will get about 30% of the money made from its oil and gas.



Mined the gap: A man searches for flecks of gold in rock waste from North Mara mine in Tanzania. Photo: Trevor Snapp/Bloomberg via Getty Images

TANZANIA

Cops linked to gold mine killings

Police officers guarding the North Mara gold mine are linked to the killing of at least six people and the wounding of others, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). Canadian mining company Barrick Gold co-owns the mine with the Tanzanian government, in an arrangement reached under former president John Magufuli in 2019. According to HRW, the violence at the mine – which has not led to any arrests despite several reported deaths – is part of an ongoing culture of impunity by “mine police” guarding the premises.

WILDLIFE

Say Tembo but make it rumbling bass

Elephants address each other by name, but they're not called “Tembo”, “Jumbo” or “Dumbo”. In their low-frequency rumblings, a more common elephant sound than high-frequency trumpeting, they make distinctive sounds to catch the attention of individuals, like using an assigned name. So says a study published this week in the journal *Nature, Ecology and Evolution*. Elephants use these individually assigned calls in shout-outs to relatives over long distances and to comfort one another when in distress.

SUDAN

RSF is preventing boys from fleeing to safety

Boys as young as 15 are being prevented from leaving the besieged city of El Fasher in North Darfur. At checkpoints manned by the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group on the city's outskirts, boys presumed to be old enough to fight are separated from their fleeing families and killed, an activist said at a Crisis Action briefing on Thursday, attended by *The Continent*. This is believed to be a tactic either to compel the boys to join RSF or prevent them from joining groups resisting the RSF's genocidal violence.

CLIMATE

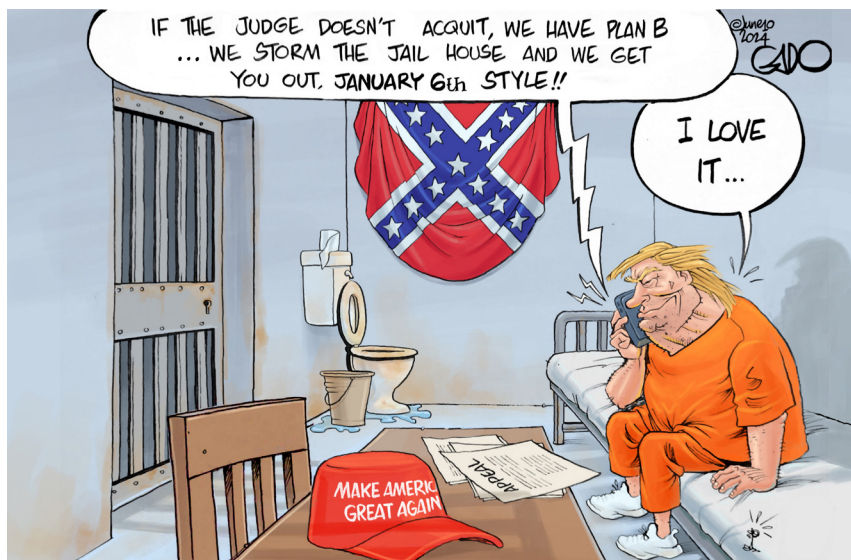
UN pushes to ban Big Oil adverts, but what about AI?

Corporations dealing in coal, gas and oil are “the godfathers of climate chaos” and should not be allowed to advertise – just like tobacco firms, said UN Secretary General António Guterres last week. He may have to add artificial intelligence to the naughty list. Microsoft says its \$1-billion investment in expanding AI since 2019 has increased its own carbon footprint so much that it’s now 30% worse than it was in 2020.

KENYA

Police officer shoots magistrate in open court

Angry that his wife’s bail had been cancelled, a senior police officer pulled his gun and shot at the magistrate who made the ruling on Thursday at a court in Nairobi. The shooter’s wife, a suspect in a criminal matter, had jumped bond without an explanation to satisfy the court. Other police officers reacted with fire and killed the shooter, but one of them were injured. The magistrate was taken to hospital.



A New York court convicted United States populist, Donald Trump, on 34 criminal offences but as he awaits sentencing in July, his presidential campaign has raked in more than \$53-million from supporters who are angry about the conviction.

Colombia

Banana corp held liable for death-squad murders

A US court has found a top multinational which financed a paramilitary group complicit in deaths.

Kiri Rupiah

After nearly two decades of litigation, Chiquita Brands International, the leading distributor of bananas in the US, has been found liable for the murder of civilians in Colombia – because it financed the paramilitary group that killed them.

Chiquita gave more than \$1.7-million to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) between 1997 to 2004, after the terrorist group allegedly threatened the company's assets and staff.

This money, a US court ruled this week, contributed to the AUC's capacity to execute brutal human rights abuses in Colombia. Chiquita Brands was ordered to pay \$38.3-million to 16 family members of people killed by the paramilitary group.

Thousands more are still awaiting justice.

Chiquita Brands began as United Fruit in the 1870s when Minor Cooper Keith, a wealthy New Yorker, began acquiring banana plantations alongside a railway line he was building for Costa Rica. United Fruit gave the world not just bananas, but also the phrase “banana republic” – a reference to corrupt dictatorships in Latin America that the firm propped up to secure its own interests.

Increasingly, multinationals that once operated with impunity are being challenged over abuses that occurred in the Global South – albeit with limited success. Lawsuits brought against Nestlé, Cargill and other multinationals over child trafficking and slavery claims related to cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire have reached the US Supreme Court, only to be dismissed on technicalities. ■



Bitter fruit: Bananas have long been associated with corruption. Photo: Luke Sharrett/Bloomberg via Getty Images

South Africa

Ramaphosa rides again

Despite an electoral spanking, the ANC remains firmly in charge.

The African National Congress may have recorded its worst-ever performance at the ballot box – securing 40% of the vote in last month’s general election – but a familiar performance nonetheless played out in South Africa’s Parliament on Friday afternoon.

The new sitting of the National Assembly reappointed Cyril Ramaphosa as president of the Republic of South Africa, keeping the ANC in power, ostensibly for another five years. He looked pleased with himself.

The new sitting of Parliament came after two weeks of frantic behind-the-scenes negotiating. Without enough seats to make decisions unilaterally, the ANC was – for the first time at a national level – forced to work with opposition parties. Under the auspices of a government of national unity, it found a willing partner in the centre-right Democratic Alliance, the biggest opposition party.

The DA made surprisingly few demands in exchange for its support. Among them were to guarantee the



Still got it: President Cyril Ramaphosa and the ANC will be calling the shots for another five years. Photo: Wikus De Wet/AFP

independence of the central bank, and the sanctity of property rights (other opposition parties have called for some land to be expropriated without compensation). Tellingly, the DA did not demand control over any key government portfolios, such as finance, energy or home affairs – perhaps wanting to avoid responsibility if anything goes wrong.

Some members of the next-biggest opposition party, uMkhonto we Sizwe – led by disgraced former president Jacob Zuma – boycotted the parliamentary sitting. Zuma claims that the election was rigged against his party. There is no evidence to this effect, and a court has dismissed the allegation. He is also yet to face justice for his myriad crimes. ■

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Malawi

We were all waiting for Saulos Chilima

Jack McBrams in Mzuzu

On a rainy Monday morning, we set off on a 370km journey from Lilongwe to Mzuzu, to attend the funeral of Ralph Kasambara. Many of Malawi's political elite had gathered there to pay their respects to the late activist, who served as attorney-general and justice minister.

Vice-President Saulos Chilima was expected to be among them.

As we drove through the Chikangawa Forest, thick fog enveloped the area, hampering our visibility and reducing our speed to a crawl. When we finally got to the funeral, we heard that Chilima was still on his way but would be arriving soon to bid farewell to his close friend.

As we waited, nervous murmurs spread through the crowd. Apparently the military plane on which the vice-president was travelling, a Dornier-228, had been ordered to return to Lilongwe due to the poor weather conditions. It was impossible to land at Mzuzu Airport. The funeral continued without him.

That afternoon, as we began our drive home, a message arrived from one of our

sources in the military. It said that the vice-president's plane was missing – it had not landed in Lilongwe at 11am, as scheduled.

According to the source, the last contact with the plane had come as it was flying over the Chikangawa Forest.

There might have been a crash.

On high alert, we drove through the forest, scanning for signs of wreckage. But it was eerily quiet.

There was no other activity: no emergency services, no search and rescue. It was only later that evening that the government confirmed publicly that the plane had gone missing.

By that time, conspiracy theories about what had happened were already flying on social media.

The crash site was found the following day: Vice-President Saulos Chilima, along with nine others on board, was dead. ■



United in sorrow: Mourners gather at a vigil in Lilongwe to grieve for Malawi's vice-president, the late Saulos Klaus Chilima. Photo: Amos Gumulira/AFP

'The best president Malawi never had'

Saulos Klaus Chilima (1973 – 2024)

Golden Matonga in Lilongwe

News of the vice-president's death in a plane crash brought an outpouring of public grief unlike anything Malawi has experienced before. No one else transcended Malawi's traditionally tribal-based and region-based politics in the way that Saulos Chilima did. Strongest among the young, urban population, his appeal also held sway in rural areas.

Having deputised two presidents – first Peter Mutharika, and then Lazarus Chakwera – it was widely believed that Chilima was destined to become head of state. That dream is dead, and with it the hope for a new kind of politics in Malawi.

A workaholic and policy hawk, Chilima was the technocrat face of the government. His reputation as a transformative leader dated back from his corporate days, when he held senior positions, including managing director for Airtel, the telecommunications firm.

Professor Blessings Chimsinga, who served as a minister in the cabinet alongside Chilima, recalled a hard-working colleague who focused on issues rather than personality politics.

"He managed to popularise the idea of building a Malawi that would work for us



all, regardless of our position in society," said Chimsinga.

In 2018, Chilima shocked the nation when he accused his boss, then-president Mutharika, of corruption. This cemented his image as an anti-corruption crusader. That image was further enhanced when he endorsed both street protests and legal action against electoral fraud in 2019, personally attending court sessions. A later corruption case levelled against Chilima was dismissed earlier this year.

Chilima was a devout Catholic and a father of two. His death leaves a void in his family, his party – where there is no clear successor – and the country as a whole.

"He was the best president this country will never have," Khumbo Soko, his lawyer, told *The Continent*. ■



Illustrations: Roland Polman

East or West, home may be the least bad option

*To keep migrants away, Fortress Europe has extended its walls into African countries like Morocco and Mauritania. People caught in its barbs talk about vanishing into violent holes. One of these, a Senegalese migrant who attempted the journey to Europe only to be intercepted, jailed in the desert and forced back home, spoke to **Borso Tall**.*

For many young people in West Africa, Europe is something of an El Dorado. But Sidy Fall, who attempted the arduous journey to this fabled land of fabulous riches, only to be forced back into Senegal, says: “I know the hard times are

still here and waiting for us at home. But I will only see the end of this fight against my family’s poverty by staying alive. I’m alive and that’s the most important thing.”

Fall took menial jobs, including selling coffee in the streets of Dakar to raise CFA

550,000 (just over \$900), for a journey to Europe aboard a type of small boat locally known as a pirogue. He almost reached the promised land. But just 500km from the European coast, the pirogue he was sharing with dozens of others was intercepted by the Moroccan coast guard. They were taken to a desert detention centre in an area in Western Sahara called Bir Gandouz.

The European Union gave Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia nearly 450-million euros (\$480-million) between 2015 and 2021 for border control and “migration governance”. This “substantially contributed to the voluntary return of over 52,800 migrants” from North Africa, the bloc reports.

The EU ignores how this “voluntary return” happens but numerous media outlets, including *The Continent*, have reported that it often involves intercepting migrants and holding them at isolated desert locations until they agree to return home.

That is what happened in Fall’s case.

Along with 27 other Senegalese migrants, Fall was held in Bir Gandouz for weeks. Video clips from the facility showed a dirty prison with a filthy toilet and the migrants complained that they weren’t getting enough to eat or drink.

Ten of the Senegalese escaped but one eventually returned, after failing to find his way through the desert. Those who didn’t escape posted videos begging, “We just want to go home with dignity.”

They say guards beat them for releasing these videos. Fall is nursing an injured ankle.

Across three borders in handcuffs

After three weeks, Moroccan authorities sent the migrants back towards Senegal on a journey that Fall describes as “an indescribable ordeal”.

Aboard the bus hired by Moroccan authorities were people with a mix of injuries, from smashed noses to swollen faces and broken legs. They had only dry bread for food and were still wearing the clothes they had on when they were intercepted nearly a month earlier. “I was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt,” Fall says. All were handcuffed.

Aboard the bus hired by Moroccan authorities were people with a mix of injuries, from smashed noses to swollen faces and broken legs.

At the border with Mauritania, they were taken off the buses and left with local authorities who boarded them on new buses, still handcuffed, and drove them to the Senegalese border.

“We thought they were going to give us a decent welcome, but once we got home, our compatriots registered and questioned us, handcuffed. Then they set us free, with no money and no credit for our phones. We all begged for credit to call our relatives,” says Fall.

His father sent him money, with which he bought a pair of sandals, pants and a new T-shirt on the street. Others used their money to buy food.

Weeks after his return to Senegal, Fall has not yet seen his immediate family. “I just need to take care of myself, heal



first and let the noise around my forced return fade away,” he says. He is currently living with other relatives while he sees a marabout (traditional healer) who is caring for his injured ankle.

A busy route

Although he holds a high school diploma, Fall had given up hope of finding regular employment in Senegal. While his migration ordeal has made him reconsider going north, he is still sceptical about the prospects at home.

“Young people are used to organise and win elections but are often abandoned afterwards,” says the 30-year-old, who voted for President Bassirou Diomaye Faye in Senegal’s April elections.

And many young Senegalese who share such sentiments are still making the

treacherous journey to Europe. According to Frontex – the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders – the number of migrants arriving in Europe via the West Africa route increased by 510% in the first quarter of 2024 – most of them nationals of Mali, Senegal and Mauritania.

Hundreds continue to arrive each week, according to sources who spoke to *The Continent* from Spain.

The results of last weekend’s EU elections signal that little will change. The right-of-centre parties, custodians of the bloc’s already brutal immigration policies, kept power and they will be joined in the EU parliament by an ever-strengthening hard right.

These are parties that campaigned on keeping people out of Europe. ■

The prime minister's new home

Abiy Ahmed is building a sprawling, staggeringly expensive palace complex as a symbol of his grand vision. He wouldn't be the first.

Addis Ababa correspondent

Yeka Hills, a once-tranquil mountainous area overlooking Addis Ababa, has been transformed into an enormous construction site.

Excavators and bulldozers work through the night, flattening forests and farmland, on one of the most expensive infrastructure projects in Ethiopian history: an enormous palace complex that will serve as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's official residence. The prime minister himself is the most enthusiastic proponent of the development, known as the Chaka Project, visiting regularly to monitor progress.

"The noise runs at all hours," said one ambassador, who lives close to the new development. "It is becoming a nuisance and has disturbed our living arrangements. There is little appetite to hear our complaints."

As well as the palace, the sprawling, 503-hectare complex includes a luxury hotel, guesthouses for visiting heads of state, ministerial residences, high-end housing blocks and three artificial lakes lined with artificial palm trees. Some 29km of new roads are being constructed, as well as an underground tunnel to allow for easy escape in the event of an emergency – or attempted coup.

Government officials insist that this is not a vanity project, but serves to further Ethiopia's development priorities. "The question of a 'palace for the PM' is a very simplistic narrative unfortunately, and one crafted to incite intentional uproar," said Billene Seyoum, the prime minister's spokesperson, in response to questions from *The Continent*. "The Chaka Project is a grand national satellite city project that aims to transform the face and environs of Addis Ababa."

It is not just nearby ambassadors who are aggrieved, however. Critics have questioned the massive price tag, especially as 20-million Ethiopians are currently at risk of famine, and parts of the country desperately need reconstruction funding to recover from conflict. Seyoum rejects this critique, saying that the project has created thousands of jobs: "Those kind of complaints usually emerge from those who hold the perspective that development is 'charity'".

Blowing the budget

In total, according to comments made by Abiy to parliamentarians, the bill for the

project could run to \$10-billion. That is more than half of Ethiopia's 2024/2025 annual budget of \$17-billion, which was announced this week.

Abiy has said that funding for the project will not come from state coffers, but will be raised privately. It has been widely reported that the government of the United Arab Emirates is a major investor, while some local businessmen claim to have been intimidated into making financial contributions. One businessman told the *Globe & Mail* that he had “received endless phone calls, threats and warnings that he could be banned from receiving official contracts if he failed to donate”.

To make way for the new buildings, farmers and residents are being evicted en masse. *The Continent* has seen eviction notices posted on the walls of one local church – if your name is on the list, then you have just days to clear your belongings. Some residents who refuse to comply are being forcibly evicted, detained in makeshift temporary prisons, or assaulted by security forces. Evictees have been told to find new homes in Debre Berhan in Amhara, or Welega in Oromia, depending on their ethnicity.

Seyoum told *The Continent* that all evictions were being done in accordance with the law. “Land in Ethiopia is owned by the state and the constitution enables the government to fully develop land in accordance with the laws,” she said. “More importantly, a majority of the land being developed by the Chaka Project is uninhabited ... local residents are cognisant of the development implications



Highly salacious: Unity Park, formerly an imperial palace, features a museum and a whole zoo. Photo: M W Hailu/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

of public infrastructure expansion.”

Entry into the area is closely monitored, with security checkpoints on the roads leading in and out. People who previously used the area – such as church-goers at the Washa Mikael Rock-Hewn Church, and aspiring athletes who train on the hills – have been restricted from entering. Plain-clothes policemen are on patrol to prevent anyone from taking photographs of the construction.

Imperial ambitions

The Yeka Hills development is the latest and most expensive of a series of controversial projects – initiated by Abiy – to modernise and beautify Addis Ababa. These include the renovation of Emperor Menelik II's Grand Palace as part of the new “Unity Park” development, which boasts a museum and a zoo; and the demolition of much of the capital's historic Piassa district, to make way for modern apartment blocks and walkways.

Abiy's example has inspired other Ethiopian officials to invest in similarly



extravagant projects. Shimales Abdisa, the president of Oromia – the state which surrounds Addis – has begun his own palace project, expected to be completed next year. The new palace covers more than six hectares in one of the capital’s more affluent areas, and is reported to cost more than \$1-billion. It will house the offices and residences of Oromia leaders. To make space, existing homes were demolished and residents displaced.

Abiy’s example has inspired other Ethiopian officials to invest in similarly extravagant projects. The president of Oromia has begun his own palace project, report to cost more than \$1-billion.

Abiy is certainly not the only world leader to build himself a grandiose new home. In Egypt, military dictator Abdel Fattah El-Sisi is investing \$59-billion into the construction of a new capital city – the imaginatively named New Administrative Capital – of which a presidential palace will be the centrepiece. In Türkiye, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Left: Türkiye President Recep Erdoğan’s ‘White Palace’. Photo: Aykut Unlupinar/ Anadolu Agency/Getty Images
Right: The derelict palace of the former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Mobutu Sese Seko. Photo: John Wessels/AFP

completed the 1,100-room, \$615-million “White Palace” outside Ankara in 2014, proclaiming it a symbol of his powerful and prosperous “new Turkey”.

Erdogan still lives in his creation, but not all leaders are so lucky. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir moved into the brand-new Republican Palace in Khartoum in 2015, only to be toppled in a revolution in 2019 – indeed, the palace was a focal point of the demonstrations against his authoritarian rule.

And perhaps the most infamous presidential palace of all belonged to Zairean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who built the “Versailles of the Jungle” in his ancestral home of Gbadolite, complete with a nuclear bunker and an airport capable of accommodating a Concorde.

It now lies in ruins, along with his self-proclaimed empire – a cautionary tale, perhaps, for Abiy’s own ambitions. ■

How much is \$10-billion?

Abiy Ahmed told parliamentarians that his new palace complex will cost \$10-billion. That's a lot of money. If he wanted to buy some real power, here is how much electricity that could unlock.

\$4-billion

6,000 megawatt Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

\$3-billion

10,000 megawatt, 11-country 'Desert to Power' scheme by the African Development Bank in the Sahel - Solar energy generation, distribution and environment projects

\$1.7-billion

600 megawatt Karuma power station and 300km of power lines in Uganda

\$425-million

100km natural gas pipeline in Kumasi, a gas plant in Prestea and a gas terminal at Takoradi Port in Ghana

\$324-million

150km of power lines in Morocco

\$23-million

200km of power lines and 100 distribution substations in Senegal

\$321-million

Funds left over

An intimate, unsettling portrait of the man who would be emperor

Simon Allison

Abiy Ahmed's destiny was foretold by his mother. She was an unusual woman: an Orthodox Christian who married a Muslim coffee farmer from Oromia, settling down with him in Beshasha, a small town in central Ethiopia. Abiy was her fourth child, born just two years after the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie.

She named him Abiyot, meaning "revolution" in Amharic, and from a young age would whisper in his ear that he was born to rule; that one day he would be king.

Abiy has spent most of his life trying to fulfil that prophecy – and, remarkably, succeeding – while struggling to reconcile its contradictions. Is he the emperor who will restore Ethiopia's glorious past, or the revolutionary who breaks it all apart?

This is the question that Tom Gardner seeks to answer in *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*, his new biography of the prime minister. Gardner was *The Economist's* Horn of Africa correspondent, based in Addis Ababa, from 2016 until he was expelled by Abiy's government in 2022.

These years will go down as some of



the most extraordinary in Ethiopia's long history, and Gardner witnessed it all: Abiy's dramatic, unexpected rise to power; his sweeping, previously unthinkable reforms to both ruling party and state; the end of the decades-long war with Eritrea, which won Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize; and then the brutal collapse into civil war and internal conflict, much of instigated

by the prime minister himself.

For better or worse, or both, Abiy is remaking Ethiopia in his own image – but who, exactly, is he? Answering that question is not straightforward.

“It was an iron law: the closer someone had been to Abiy, the less likely they were to talk about him,” writes Gardner. Nonetheless, the details that Gardner does unearth paint an unsettling portrait of a man who believes he was chosen by God for greatness – no matter how many casualties accumulate along the way.

For better or worse, or both, Abiy is remaking Ethiopia in his own image – but who, exactly, is he? Answering that question is not straightforward.

Growing up in a dilapidated house in Beshasha, from which his mother, Tezeta, sold honey wine, Abiy was “no doubt conscious from an early age of his relatively lowly social rank, as a younger and lesser-favoured son”. His father was mostly absent, and their relationship was difficult – when Ahmed Ali died in 2019, Abiy barely acknowledged it. But he idolised Tezeta, a “strong-willed and independent woman”, and it was from her that “Abiy seems to have drawn much of his titanic self-belief”.

A young Abiy showed a keen interest in politics, joining the local branch of the ruling coalition where he started off by delivering tea to more senior cadres, and then the national army. “Those who knew him back then recalled him

roaring around the camp on a motorbike, for instance, or chewing khat, a local stimulant, and getting drunk on local ‘tej’ honey wine in nearby bars.” His impish charm would always get him out of trouble. He would later use that same charm on world leaders, to similar effect.

Abiy spent 15 years in the army, training as a radio operator. It was during these years that he forged the political connections and developed the language skills – including basic Tigrinya – that were crucial to his future success.

He also served on the front lines of the brutal trench war against Eritrea in the late 1990s, and nearly died: one day, when he stepped out to position his antenna, the rest of his unit was wiped out in an explosion.

Abiy’s next move was into Ethiopia’s murky intelligence establishment. He orchestrated it himself, knocking on the door of a senior military intelligence official with a bold idea: to publish an Amharic-to-English dictionary that he had written. It never got published, but it got him noticed, and Abiy was soon recruited into the new Information Network Security Agency (INSA) – an electronic surveillance agency loosely modelled on America’s National Security Agency. In charge of protecting the government from cyber-hacking, Abiy spent six months in South Africa studying cryptography.

He was also scheming. “It was by quickly rising through the ranks of INSA that Abiy was able to master the darker art of palace politics for which he would one day be so well known.” He developed “a



Seeing is believing: Abiy's colleagues claim that he is obsessed with appearances, believing that modern buildings, clean roads and thoughtful interior design can translate into real development. Photo: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP

reputation for eavesdropping on private phone calls”, and using this information against his rivals – although Gardner notes that these claims were never proven, “and given the closed nature of Ethiopia’s security agencies, never will be”.

It was also around this time that Abiy started going to church – specifically, the Ethiopian Full Gospel Believers’ Church, the biggest Pentecostal church in the country. Most Ethiopians identify as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians or Muslims, but Pentecostal churches have been growing in size and influence in recent years. Their teachings emphasise individuality over the collective, and modernity over tradition.

Abiy seems to have been especially taken with the Prosperity Gospel, which

equates financial success with God’s favour – so much so that he renamed the ruling party the Prosperity Party.

This, perhaps, explains Abiy’s obsession with appearances. “His hairline was always clean; he wore lotions; he had new shirts every morning,” recalls one employee. Wherever Abiy worked, his first move was always to renovate the offices, favouring a modern, corporate aesthetic – including that of the prime minister, when he finally got there.

Nowhere is this impulse more evident than in Abiy’s ambitious – and expensive – drive to modernise Addis Ababa. This includes building new roads, parks and museums, as well as a multi-billion dollar palace complex for the prime minister – that is, himself – to occupy.

“For Abiy, refashioning Addis Ababa was not just an aesthetic venture,” concludes Gardner. “Like King Solomon’s biblical Jerusalem, a clean and shiny Addis Ababa was but one step on the road both to heaven and a prosperous Ethiopia. The new-look Addis Ababa was, to Abiy’s mind, the future nation in miniature.”

But while the city may be thriving, that nation is falling apart. Gardner offers a compelling analysis of how Abiy ruthlessly exploited tensions between regions and ethnic groups to gain power and neutralise his enemies.

Once in office, however, those tensions only heightened, and then exploded into an all-out civil war between the federal government and Tigray province – a war that claimed tens of thousands of lives, and left millions at risk of famine.

Gardner’s descriptions of that war, and its lingering impact, are hard to read. Although a peace agreement was signed in November 2022, there is new conflict in the Amhara region, where Ethiopian troops have been implicated in war crimes, while other parts of the country are increasingly restive.

Abiy may have fulfilled his mother’s prophecy. He is king in all but name. But king of what, exactly?

As Gardner concludes: “It was a brittle sort of power, with hard and binding limits. Though Abiy faced no serious contenders for the throne, Ethiopia was a more dangerous, more violent place than it had been in decades. If the central state’s writ, under [former prime minister Meles Zenawi], had once reached every village,



Love, honour and Abiy: There are few serious challengers to the PM’s authority. Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP

now it seemed barely to extend beyond the capital.”

This is all part of the plan, claim Abiy’s supporters, and the prime minister still harbours grandiose ambitions. He has previously floated the idea of a single state that covers the entirety of the Horn of Africa, governed, no doubt, from his new palace in Addis.

“According to an old Amharic saying, which Abiy was said to hold dear, the night will darken before the dawn. Ethiopia, the prime minister seemed to have realised, could not be resurrected overnight. It would take time; far longer, maybe, than he’d once imagined. But the light, he continued to insist, would inevitably come. What mattered for now, above all else, was that he remain in power until it did – no longer loved, perhaps, but at the very least feared.” ■

The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia by Tom Gardner, published by Hurst in June 2024



PHOTO ESSAY

Survivors

The Tigray war, which lasted from 2020 to 2022, left at least 600,000 people dead and millions displaced, traumatised or facing famine. We may never know exactly how many women suffered sexual violence during the war but studies point to over 100,000.

Arlette Bashizi's *Survivors* – which was awarded an Honourable Mention in the Africa category of the 2024 World Press Photo Contest – features Shila, a mother of three who ran a hairdressing salon before Eritrean soldiers invaded her town and repeatedly raped her for three months. Sheltering at a site for internally

displaced people with other survivors of sexual violence, Shila is taking cooking classes and getting psychological support from a charity in Mekele. Her youngest child was conceived during her captivity but her other children don't even know it happened. She is uncertain if she will ever be strong enough to tell them the truth.

Photos: © Arlette Bashizi for *The Washington Post*



Top: A survivor of sexual violence waits for transport with her baby. Her parents rejected the child because he was conceived when she was gang-raped. They are keeping her older child away from her.

Below left: Tens of thousands of women were raped during the war. Some, like Shila, have found refuge at shelters for internally displaced people.

Below right: Shila joins a cooking class at the Daughters of Charity centre in Mekele. Her own daughter, just 13 years old, was also raped in the war.

Homophobia is not an African value

Foreign extremist propaganda pushes lies about anyone who is different, but African ubuntu treats others as human beings. We can see a person as different to us without desiring to hurt or punish them.

Winnie Byanyima

Around the world, human rights are threatened by well-funded, globally-coordinated attacks. One tactic used is to pick off different communities at a time, including LGBTQ+ people.

In Africa, some of those who propagate hate claim that attacks on LGBTQ+ people are in line with “African values”. As a proud pan-Africanist who has fought for the liberation of our people, I know this claim to be false.

Across the continent, as across the world, there has always been diversity in sexuality. I grew up in a small town, lived in the bush as a member of a resistance movement, and have travelled all across our beloved continent. There is not a place without LGBTQ+ people. And since Africa is the birthplace of humanity, LGBTQ+ people have existed on our continent the longest.

Lawmakers cannot decide that a country will not have LGBTQ+ people. They can only decide whether to treat all people with dignity, or to inflict cruelty. Colonisers brought laws that

punish LGBTQ+ people for who they are and who they love, but Africans have been removing those laws, including in Lesotho, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, Seychelles, Botswana, Angola and Mauritius. The Supreme Court of Mauritius wrote that the old law “was not the expression of domestic democratic will but was a course imposed on Mauritius and other colonies by British rule”.

Removing punitive laws has advanced progress in protecting everyone’s health, because health programmes are only effective when they are inclusive. On our continent, in countries where they are criminalised, men who have sex with men are five times more likely to be living with HIV than in countries that do not criminalise same-sex relations. Hate harms public health. Respect for all people powers public health.

Extremist foreign organisations are driving anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda by pumping millions of dollars into a neocolonial effort to turn Africans against each other and put in place even more damaging versions of the old colonial



Stand tall: Prince, a model from Rwanda's LGBTQ+ community, at a show in Kigali. African countries are dismantling colonial laws that legislate hatred. Photo: Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP

laws. It is part of a cynical global project for which Africa is only a testing ground.

Globally, economic and political power are concentrated among a small group of white, heterosexual men in the Global North and their elite allies in the Global South. Women's rights activists, LGBTQ+ activists, and democracy activists all threaten that unjust status quo.

Africa's liberation struggle has been for all its peoples. That is why feminist activists have been at the heart of liberation movements. That is why, on defeating the final bastion of white minority rule in Africa, the new South Africa recognised the human rights of LGBTQ+ people in its constitution. Because none of us are free until all of us are free.

As African feminists have taught us, all forms of oppression – including colonialism, neoliberalism, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia – are interconnected, and oppressive norms uphold oppressive structures. As long as people are divided, elites can rule without restraint, accountability or care.

Anti-rights propaganda pushes incendiary lies about anyone who is different. In contrast, Africa's traditions are of acceptance. We can see that a person is different from us, but that difference does not provoke in us a desire to hurt or punish them. As an African, and as a Christian, the values I was taught to live by were not to judge but to love our neighbour.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained: "Ubuntu means you cannot be human on your own. I am because you are. I can be me only if you are fully you. People with ubuntu use their strength on behalf of the weak, treating others as what they are: human beings. We are members of one family: the human family, God's family. The bad will not have the last word."

I am confident that the movement for the rights of all people will win, because whenever I meet with the African activists working to challenge criminalisation, discrimination and stigma, I am awed by their determination, courage, and love for humanity. Hate will not prevail. ■

Electric service: Still reliably uneven

In 2014/2015, Afrobarometer found that four in 10 Africans enjoyed reliable electricity in their homes. Almost a decade later, that has risen by four percentage points: On average across 39 countries, 44% say their households have electric power from the national grid that works “most” or “all” of the time.

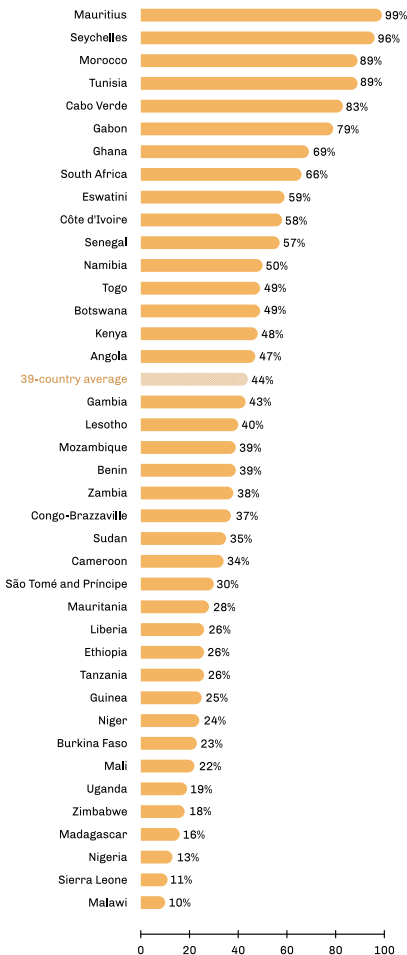
Should we call that progress or stagnation?

The inequalities in reliable service continue to be glaring: 24% vs 65% between rural and urban residents and 27% vs 77% between poor and well-off households.

The variation across countries is also vast: Only one in 10 households in Malawi (10%) and Sierra Leone (11%) report reliable electricity from the grid, compared to almost all households in Mauritius (99%) and Seychelles (96%).

In some countries where access to the national grid is high, the quality of service is low. In Nigeria, for example, 75% of respondents are connected to the grid, but only 13% enjoy electricity that works most/all of the time. Gaps between connection and reliable power are almost as large in São Tomé and Príncipe (86% vs 30%) and Cameroon (84% vs 34%). ■

Who has a reliable supply of electricity? | 39 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 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



Ayra Starr in full bloom

'The people's princess' turns on the charm and turns up the heat now that winter is coming.

Wilfred Okiche

Nigerian superstar Ayra Starr, born Oyinkansola Sarah Aderibigbe, sidesteps the sophomore curse neatly with *The Year I Turned 21* (TYI21). It's a sexy, confident record that positions her as a force to be reckoned with.

The album sands off the rough edges and complicates the sounds of Starr's debut *19 & Dangerous*, polishing work made possible only by the considerable

resources that Afrobeats' global expansion generated.

Grammy-nominated Starr strives to be more than a corporate product. Her bubbly, flirtatious personality and laid-back vocal stylings recall a young Wizkid. But her talent is distinct as her deep tone is also uniquely hers. This comes through clearly on every song on the album even when she invites a diverse team of players like she does on the empowerment anthem *Woman Commando*. Brazilian artist Anitta and American Coco Jones apply themselves credibly to the major bounce of the beat as they follow Starr's leadership.

TYI21 is very much of the times: Starr taps into the usual suspects of Afrobeats, hip-hop, dancehall and amapiano. She's also big on family, offering personal anecdotes in her lyrics and featuring co-writer (and brother) Milar on *1942*. On the standout *Jazzy's Song*, she pays homage to her mentor the iconic Nigerian producer and label boss Don Jazzy.

Starr is hard to pin down and the record gives the impression that this is deliberate. The base of the album is pop/R&B as can be heard on tracks like *21* and *Last Heartbreak Song* (with Giveon). But Starr also lets her wealth of influences and curiosity for eclectic sounds creep into the sound. *Orun* is smooth, diluted highlife boosted by some melodious guitar-licking and the surprisingly mellow *Bad Vibes* (with Seyi Vibe) is meant for the charts.

Engaging and thoughtfully curated, *TYI21* is proof that Ayra Starr is ready for her crossover. ■

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

"The more elections change there, the more we retain here."



1_ Who was Malawi's vice president who died this week?

2_ Who is Malawi's president?

3_ 'The Bright Stars' is the nickname of which African country's men's national football team?

4_ Who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019?

5_ Djamaa el Djazair (pictured) is Africa's largest mosque. In which country is it found?

6_ In which year did the Tigray war end?

7_ Sokode, Atakpame and Kpalime are cities in which country?

8_ Yoweri Museveni became president of Uganda in 1996. True or false?

9_ Malagasy is an official language of which country?

10_ Which African country goes to the polls on 29 June?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to **+27 73 805 6068** and we'll send the answers to you!

Of late we have been looking at our wardrobe and questioning whether we are “hot” or “not”. Yes, we know it’s giving Snow-White’s step-mum-in-Narnia. And we (grudgingly) concede our inability to do Tik-Tok and our love for leggings suggest it’s *possible* we’re not as on top of things as we’d like to believe.

Fortunately our wardrobe is well trained (and fearful of the woodsman’s axe) and wouldn’t dare “not” us. Which leaves us free to turn our attention to how well current trends in fashion, in life, and on social media are being upheld in the presidential palaces around the continent.

For some, the “hot” list would likely highlight tear gas, blocking the internet, the removal of term limits, and putting the “war” in “wardrobe”, while the “not” list might feature democracy, activists, and the opposition.

The size of some of their egos means they would probably put *themselves* at the top of the “what’s trendy” list, whereas people holding them accountable would definitely be considered *passé*.

Of course there would also be a fashion component to consider. We can easily imagine the likes of Congo-Brazzaville’s

President Dennis Sassou-Nguesso having designer suits – purchased in Europe via a private jet funded with taxpayer money – on his “what’s hot” list.

Our own “not” list includes going out, dealing with people and Rishi Sunak, while our hot and trendy list features our editors [*Wait, what? I’m taking that out – Ed / No leave it in, truth is truth – Other Ed*], Naledi Pandor and snacking our woes away.

Much like their Kardashian counterparts, our Coupdashians have created their own trends over the past few years: Staging coups, overthrowing leaders and in some cases breaking relationships with former colonial powers like France (Frexit, as we like to call it) and other

western countries.

This week, a joint announcement was made that the withdrawal of US forces and equipment from Niger is progressing ahead of the 15th September 2024 deadline. This comes just months after the junta in Niamey suspended its military agreements with Washington and accused the US of having a “condescending attitude” and trying to dictate who Niger should and should not be friends with.

Speaking of Niger, the past few weeks

‘Does this coup make my butt look big?’



CONTINENTAL DRIFT
Samira Sawlani

have seen escalating tensions between them and Benin. Tensions have been high since the junta came into power, and borders between both were closed as part of Ecowas sanctions. When the sanctions were lifted, Niger said “*Non!* We are not opening the frontier with Benin.”

An outraged Benin promptly told Niger that in that case they couldn’t export crude oil to China through the port of Cotonou. Chinese mediation aided with resolving that issue temporarily, but it seems the animosity persists.

Authorities in Benin arrested five Nigerien nationals who they accuse of entering the Seme-Kpodji pipeline terminal illegally. Niamey denies the claims, saying that those arrested were from the Wapco Niger oil company and were just there for work. This little back and forth does not look like it is going away any time soon.

While the string of coups in recent years may make overthrowing the government look like a trendy thing to do, this can also backfire. Just ask the 51 people who appeared at a military court in DR Congo accused of being involved in last month’s failed coup attempt.

The initial list featured 53 names, but two were removed, including alleged coup leader Christian Malanga, who headed up the “New Zaire Movement”. According to authorities, Malanga was shot dead because he tried to resist arrest. Three Americans are among those being tried – including Malanga’s 21-year-old son.

Some may argue that continuously talking about a conflict that feels largely



Hot-stepper: Look sharp, here comes Congo-Brazzaville’s Dennis Sassou-Nguesso. Photo: Issouf Sanogo/AFP

ignored by world leaders is not a trendy thing to do, and if that is the case then we are fine with being unfashionable.

The United Nations say that at least six children have been killed and many more injured as fighting escalates in El-Fasher, Sudan. Meanwhile, Doctors Without Borders said that on 8 June the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary attacked the last operating hospital in Darfur, the only one “equipped to manage mass casualties”.

Our thoughts are also with people in the Democratic Republic of Congo where 38 civilians were killed in a rebel attack, and where 80 people died in a boat accident in Mai-Ndombe province.

Sometimes continuing to highlight ongoing conflict and injustices in countries like DR Congo and Sudan feels like shouting into an empty room.

Still, we must raise our voices – for peace, for a world where everyone can live safely and in dignity. That’s a trend we’ll never let fall from fashion. ■

So far so disappointing: Tinubu's first year

The man leading Nigeria has much left to prove in the next three years of his tenure.

Afolabi Adekaiyaoja

President Bola Tinubu has just celebrated his first year in office, but few in Nigeria are celebrating. Despite succeeding a president from the same party, there was little continuity. Because of a large turnover of cabinet ministers and officials, the Tinubu administration neither hit the ground running nor learned from its predecessor's teething issues.

Tinubu began his time in office with a bold declaration in his inaugural address that the costly fuel subsidy programme was over. It forced Nigerians to pay more for a commodity their own country produces. At the same time, Tinubu created the largest cabinet in Nigeria since 1999's return to democracy by nominating 47 ministers and 20 advisors. Expanding the size of government while asking citizens to endure hardship, revealed an administration out of touch with reality.

The president also landed on his face on the foreign policy front. Within weeks of his inauguration, Tinubu was named chair of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) and asserted that coups would no longer be tolerated.

Niger, where President Mohamed Bazoum was removed by the military shortly after, apparently did not get the memo. The Nigerian government's heavy-handed threat to militarily intervene to restore Bazoum was quickly shot down, but contributed to the decision of Niger to leave Ecowas, along with the junta-led governments of Burkina Faso and Mali.

Despite these missteps, it is too early to conclude that Tinubu will be a one-term president given his ability to put together winning coalitions. As in 2015, the determining factor is likely to be whether an effective opposition coalition can be put together.

The current "merger" talk between Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party and Peter Obi of the Labour Party has been given short shrift by the government. But Tinubu should remember that the opposition would have won the last election in a landslide if it had been united. ■

Afolabi Adekaiyaoja is a Nigeria-based analyst and writer on the politics of policy, institutions and governance. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa



THE BIG PICTURE

The other Pride: The Simb or 'Fake Lion Show' is a tradition in Senegal where fabulously scary lion-men terrorise and thrill onlookers. Sadly, the practice is on the wane, mainly seen at festivals now.

Photo: John Wessels/AFP



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