

The Continent



**Upending
Mozambique's
establishment**

2025 Jan 25
GAO



Cover: Elections often play out as bastardised democracy: people go to polls, state who or what they want, and then are ignored through vote theft and other malfeasance by the powers that be. African opposition figures often boycott the fiasco after one or two disillusioning runs. But Venâncio Mondlane, who believes his victory in Mozambique's October election was stolen, is going another way, he tells us – and his approach already appears to be paying off (p15)

Welcome to Season 17!

Another year has come and after a few weeks of watching from the distance of our planning rooms, we are back here with you. A lot has already happened – but we've got each other, right? We do. At least, going by your lovely (and occasionally biting) responses to our reader survey we do (see p3). Last year, we moved home and got a new editor-in-chief. This year, we want to double the number of people who delight in this newspaper. Help us sign up 7,000 new subscribers in the next 12 weeks. Share this newspaper! Try sending it to two new people each week. We will (only once a week) prompt you with a reminder. The more subscribers we have, the easier it is for us to raise the funding to keep doing this kind of journalism.

Inside:

■ Museum of Stolen History:

A new series reclaiming what colonialism stole from us. *(We really want you to remember to read this one, so we are not even highlighting any of the other stories here. You'll see them as you scroll to page 19 and beyond.)*

Dear reader, Help us survive and thrive



Siphso Kings, Publisher

Welcome to 2025, or as a radio DJ violently referred to it, “a quarter of the way through the century”.

This is *The Continent's* fifth year of newspapering. We've done over 3,000 original stories from across Africa. And those have packed 187 editions, going out to every corner of the world, building empathy in an era where algorithms thrive on the opposite.

Journalism itself is at an extinction-level moment. Most of our industry is gone. What's left largely won't survive this decade. Yet, people will need quality journalism to build the world into a better place.

So we're doubling down on *The Continent*. We're launching a visual unit to get more photographs, illustrations and cartoons into the world. We're deepening

our relationship with great reporters. And we're planning some other surprises this year. Fancy some continental art on your wall?

Your ideas have really helped us in thinking about how we survive and thrive. Over 1,300 of you replied to our Big Annual Survey™ and the one thing that kept coming up was us being better at owning the success of *The Continent*: “Make some noise!”

We want people everywhere to open *The Continent* on a Saturday and share in the same reality. We don't want to lose journalism in the algorithms of that row of billionaire techbros who bent the knee at the US president's inauguration.

So we need you to keep sharing the newspaper. Here is our ask: Once you've read this edition, please share it with two people, telling them that one thing you found most interesting. Send them the link to subscribe.

Our growth so far has been entirely organic, thanks to you sharing it. That's how we have nearly 25,000 subscribers. Getting to more people also helps us make the case to funders and advertisers — which allows us to keep doing this, and to keep getting it to you for free.

Now, then. Onwards to the next quarter of a century. ■

The Continent, in your words:

*"A rare gem:
really good public
interest media."*

*"The go-to
source of news
that is African."*

*"A bold, brief
and informative
newspaper."*

*"Bold, irreverent,
big picture view."*

*"A portal.
A connection.
A friend."*

*"Impartial but
not neutral."*

*"The best
newspaper on the
continent."*

*"A tiny little bit of
absolute wisdom
that sadly only comes
once a week."*

*"A voice for self-
determination."*

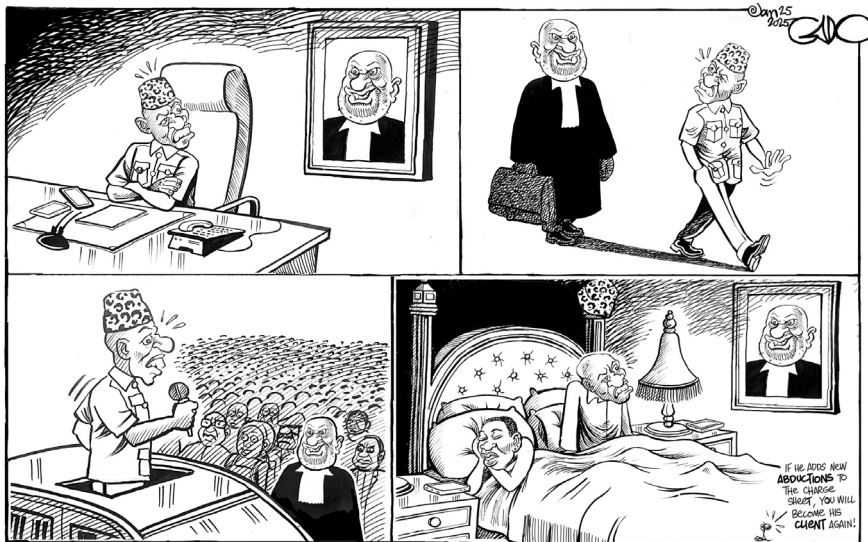
*"My Saturday
pick-me-up."*

*"Short, sharp,
insightful. Like a
super nutritious
shot."*

*"It's unique
and goes straight
to the point."*

*"Quick stories,
left-leaning,
pro-Africa."*

*"The Bible."
"You have to
read this ..."*



Some Kenyans want their president hauled before the International Criminal Court

TANZANIA

More Marburg puts medics on high alert

Tanzania has declared an outbreak of the Marburg haemorrhagic fever after identifying 26 suspected cases in the northwestern part of the country. The highly infectious disease is similar to Ebola. An outbreak in Rwanda between September and October 2024 killed 15 people (with 66 confirmed cases), a lower fatality rate than usual, thanks to swift contact-tracing, experimental treatments, and a trial vaccine. The Africa Centres for Disease Control has sent a team and \$2-million to Tanzania, hoping to nip this outbreak in the bud.

AES

New regional force ready to deploy

The Alliance of Sahel States has rallied a 5000-strong joint force to stamp out insurgents in the central Sahel region, Niger's defence minister, Salifou Mody, announced during a televised address on Tuesday. The AES – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – formed their alliance after leaving Ecowas and cutting diplomatic ties with France. All three former French colonies are led by military juntas who took power promising to end violence insurgencies linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

GABON

Elections don't *always* spell dynastic doom

Gabon will hold its first post-coup elections on 12 April, government spokesperson Seraphin Akure Davain announced on Thursday. In November the country voted to adopt a new constitution which capped presidential terms at seven years. The country was ruled by father and son, Omar and Ali Bongo, for 55 years. In August 2023 Ali Bongo was deposed in a coup by his cousin Brice Oligui Nguema who has since served as transitional president and now hopes to win a more long-term placement at the ballot box.



Temping: Brice Oligui Nguema has been keeping the presidential seat warm.

Photo: Wilfried Mbinah/AFP

LIBYA

Italy releases wanted ICC suspect

The Italian government has yet to explain why it released Osama "Almasri" Najim, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court. Najim is alleged to have run the Mitiga detention centre in Tripoli, where horrific human rights abuses including rape and murder were committed. He now heads Libya's judicial police. But a court in Rome refused to validate the arrest warrant and he was flown back to Libya on a plane owned by the Italian secret service. Critics say it was quid pro quo rewarding Libya's cooperation in keeping migrants from heading to Italy.

GHANA

Army kills miners amid poverty crisis

At least seven artisanal miners were killed by soldiers guarding AngloGold Ashanti's Obuasi mine this week. The South African company took 160,000 ounces of gold (over 4,500kg) from the Obuasi mine between January and September 2024, making hundreds of millions from it. But Ashanti, where the mine is located, has 900,000 people living in poverty – the most in any region of Ghana. The imbalance creates a lot of tension between the local community and AngloGold Ashanti, exacerbated by a cost of living crisis, high inflation and growing unemployment in Ghana.

FRANCE

Six Algerians arrested in a month

A social media influencer arrested on Wednesday became the sixth Algerian detained by French authorities in the past month, *AFP* reports. The arrests come amid Algerian anger over French support for Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. Polisario Front, the Sahrawi independence movement, is based in Algeria. According to French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, the latest Algerian arrested, Rafik M, "called on Tiktok for the carrying out of violent acts on French territory".

ANGOLA

To infinity and beyond – on credit

The government in Luanda has agreed to borrow \$231-million from France for Angola's first ever high-resolution satellite system. The satellite, dubbed Angeo-1, will be built by Airbus Defence and French company Space, and is expected to collect data to improve disaster management, monitor climate changes and support agriculture. The firms will also train Angolan scientists in the tech's use. The loan from France is expected to cover construction, launch and long-term operation of the satellite.

Photo: Zain Jaafar/AFP



ISRAEL

War shifts from Gaza to the West Bank

Israel and Hamas finally signed an agreement to cease fighting in Gaza on 19 January. Over the next six weeks, Hamas will release 33 of the 94 hostages it is

holding and Israel will release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. An extension, if any, will be negotiated thereafter. While Israeli troops have since pulled to the edges of Gaza, others have intensified the war on another front: the occupied West Bank, where at least 12 Palestinians have been killed this week, according to *Al Jazeera*.



Snow flakes: Six G7 leaders skipped Davos this year. Not Olaf Scholtz though! Shem, it's probably his last one. Photo: Fabrice Coffrini/AFP

DAVOS

Davos dissed as rich list ditch Swiss tryst

Fewer of the world's rich and powerful attended their annual retreat in Davos, Switzerland this year. New US President Donald Trump called in via Zoom, while China's President Xi Jinping and the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, were no-shows. Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, was the only G7 head honcho present. On one hand, this meant fewer private jets revving carbon emissions into the atmosphere. On the other, it may be an early sign of nations withdrawing from international co-operation to look inward.

CAPITALISM

World Bank funded abusive hospitals

A new investigation by *Bloomberg* reveals that the World Bank arm that invests in private businesses – the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – has been lax in ensuring that it does not invest public money in unethical hospitals. This was after several IFC-funded hospitals around the world, including in Uganda and Indonesia, were found breaking laws and abusing patient rights with practices such as denying people emergency care if they seemed poor, and detaining patients until they paid their bills.

SAHEL

Coup club stamp Ecowas exit visas

The military juntas governing Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger appear determined to go through with leaving the West African regional bloc Ecowas. This week, they unveiled a new common passport for their alternative bloc: the Confederation of Sahel States. A statement from Mali's General Assimi Goïta said the passport will come into circulation on Wednesday next week, which is the same day their exit from Ecowas takes effect. People who hold Ecowas passports will still be able to use them until they expire.

Sudan

Peace is up to rival factions' cheerleaders

An international security watchdog says the powers backing Sudan's warring sides must broker a truce.

Kiri Rupiah

After nearly two years of wartime atrocities by both the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the genocidal Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the solutions to Sudan's war may lie outside it, says a new report by the International Crisis Group.

It calls on Türkiye, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and the United States, to "lean on the parties to come back to the table and agree to a ceasefire". Both Egypt and the UAE stand accused of enabling and supporting one side or the other in the war.

The UAE has repeatedly been accused of arming the RSF, which it denies. But it nevertheless reassured US senators in December that it would not do so in future. Egypt backs the SAF as the legitimate governors of the country, even though it has lost control over much

of it to the RSF. Türkiye has offered to mediate talks. Saudi Arabia and the US have already led attempts at peace talks that went nowhere.

According to a recent report by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, during the first 14 months of fighting at least 61,000 people died in Khartoum state alone.

The SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, frequently bombards civilian areas from the air and has reportedly used chemical weapons. Local activists, the UN and the US say that the RSF, led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, has committed genocide in Darfur – again.

Neither side has the popular support to become a legitimate government, even if it were to win on the battlefield. None of them will simply give up their ambitions either. Peacemakers may have to offer some sort of power split between civilians and the military, and between SAF and RSF. ■



Rain of terror: Aerial bombardment has left Khartoum in ruins. Photo: AFP

South Africa

Police ‘closed the hole’ – and 87 miners died

Now the cops who orchestrated the Stilfontein tragedy are patting themselves on the back.

Job done. That was the message from acting North West province police commissioner Patrick Asaneng at a press conference on Thursday, as he announced plans to withdraw his officers from the Buffelsfontein Gold Mine.

They have been stationed there since last August, as part of a national police operation called Vala Umgodi – meaning “close the hole” in isiZulu.

The operation was designed to curb illegal mining activity in South Africa. Instead, it killed at least 87 miners in one of the country’s worst-ever man-made tragedies.

Home to the world’s richest seams of gold, South Africa was built on the profits – and the brutality – of its vast extractive industries. But minerals are a finite resource, and the country is littered with more than 6,000 abandoned mines.

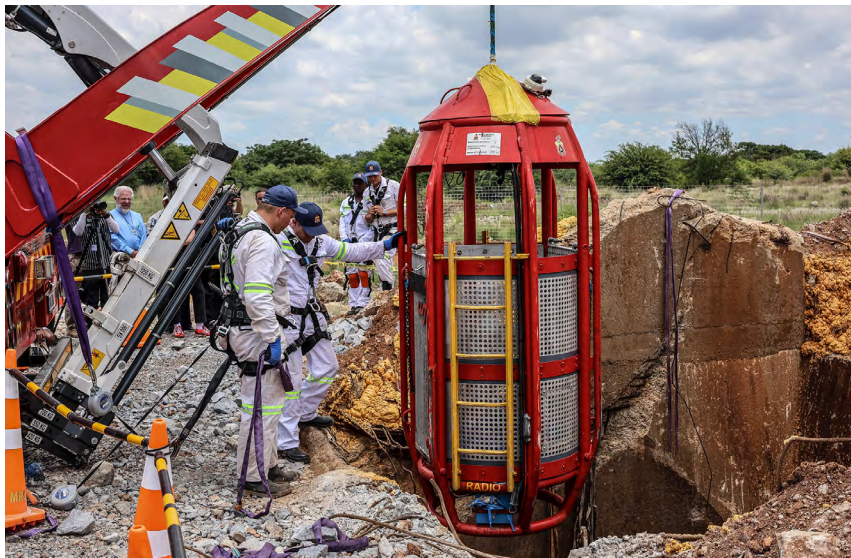
These are not profitable for big mining companies to operate, but networks of illegal miners – working in dangerous and often exploitative conditions – have moved in to extract whatever value was left behind. Hundreds of

these illegal miners – known locally as zama-zamas, or “chancers” – worked in Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, often staying deep underground for months at a time.

But when police arrived, they took the meaning of Operation Vala Umgodi all too literally – using explosives to seal off entries and exits, effectively laying siege to the miners. After a months-long stand-off and several court orders, the police finally allowed food and water underground, and sent rescue teams to bring miners to the surface. Of the 246 people who were rescued, most were emaciated and sick. And 87 bodies were brought to the surface. Many have yet to be identified.

Home to the world’s richest seams of gold, South Africa was built on the profits – and the brutality – of its vast extractive industries.

A cabinet minister defended the government’s decision not to send in supplies earlier, saying that the purpose of the operation was to “smoke them out”.



Siege shell: Workers lower a cage into a shaft during a final sweep to clear South Africa's Stilfontein mine of illegal artisanal miners. Photo: Linda Givetash/AFP

President Cyril Ramaphosa was similarly blunt: “The Stilfontein mine is a crime scene where the offence of illegal mining is being committed. It is standard police practice everywhere to secure a crime scene and to block off escape routes that enable criminals to evade arrest.”

Much of Ramaphosa’s estimated \$450-million fortune comes from his stakes in mining companies. In 2012, when 34 miners were killed by police during a wildcat strike in Marikana, Ramaphosa was widely criticised for advising law enforcement officials to take “concomitant action” to deal with the “dastard criminals” involved in the strike – advice which may have contributed to the heavy-handed response.

Public sympathy for the dead in

Stilfontein has been limited. This is in part due to the role of organised criminal networks in illegal mining; and in part due to the fact that the zama-zamas are mostly foreign nationals.

The brutality of the police operation, and muted public opposition to it, is unsurprising given the anti-immigrant rhetoric that is espoused, with increasing virulence, by most major political parties.

Nonetheless, some commentators have wondered how the South African government can simultaneously paint itself as the “conscience of the world” in its efforts to hold Israel accountable for its war crimes in Gaza, while overseeing the deliberate starvation to death of dozens of people on its own territory. ■

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The Continent

United States

The big aid freeze: Who loses?

Lydia Namubiru

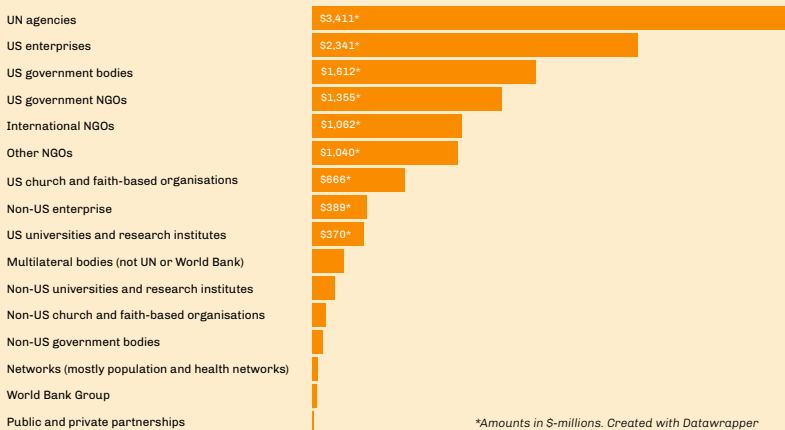
US President Donald Trump started his second term at a very different speed to his first. Dozens of executive orders were signed in front of an indulgent crowd. These pulled the country away from reducing its impact on the climate crisis, away from global institutions and instead focused the country on its own backyard. Several of the orders could have a profound impact on Africa, like leaving the treaty to get all countries to accept a 15% tax rate for companies and abandoning the World Health

Organisation. The orders were light on detail. Some are already being challenged in the courts, albeit in a country where Trump has already stacked the highest court in his favour.

One order that has had an immediate impact is a 90-day freeze on his country's foreign aid programmes. They can only go ahead after a re-evaluation to ensure that grants are fully aligned with Trump's foreign policy. It is far from clear what that policy is for Africa.

The freeze is terrible news, both in Africa and for the American organisations that get two thirds of that money.

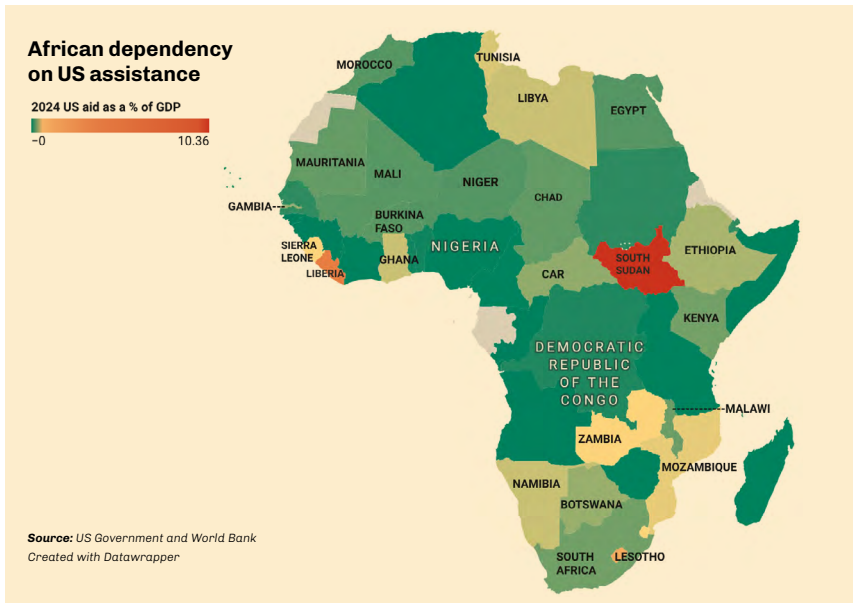
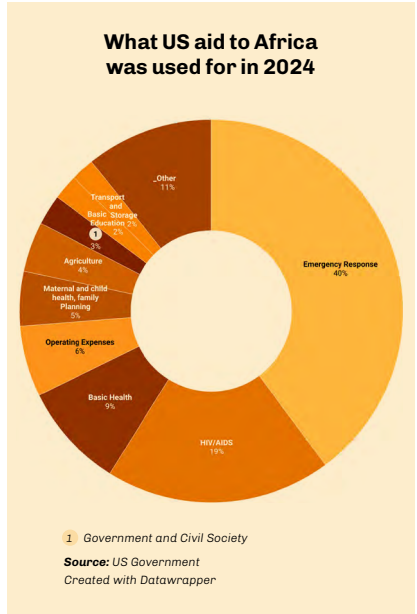
Who got US aid to Africa in 2024



*Amounts in \$-millions. Created with Datawrapper

While US aid is rarely ever given directly to local actors, what trickles to the ground is a sizeable plug for public service gaps, especially during humanitarian emergencies and in the health and education sectors. Contrary to popular talk about its promoting so-called “woke” agendas, less than 3% of aid went to civil society activities in 2024. That’s according to data reported by the US government on its [foreignassistance.gov](https://www.foreignassistance.gov) website.

In the poorest countries, this plug is critical. Local incomes and wealth are currently too low for the governments to raise enough money locally (e.g through better taxation) to meet the gap. In the extreme example of South Sudan, US aid amounts to more than 10% of the national GDP. In Liberia, it’s more than 3% of GDP. ■



A photograph of Venâncio Mondlane, a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie, wearing dark sunglasses. He is wearing a large, elaborate lei made of white and blue flowers. He is surrounded by other people, some wearing face masks. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor public event.

The most powerful man in Mozambique

Venâncio Mondlane may not be president, but his ideas are already reshaping the country's politics – and maybe its future.

Photo: Alfredo Zuniga/AFP

Luis Nhachote in Maputo

The official residence of the president of Mozambique is the Palácio da Ponta Vermelha, a sweeping glass-and-concrete structure overlooking Maputo Bay. That's where President Daniel Chapo, who was inaugurated on Wednesday last week, now lives.

Chapo's biggest rival – and the man who many believe to be the true winner of last October's presidential election – has set up his temporary headquarters just 1.5km away. When *The Continent* visits the City Lodge Hotel, where Venâncio Mondlane is living and building his shadow government, there are queues of diplomats and businessmen in the lobby, all hoping for an audience.

Mondlane's proximity to the seat of power is a statement of intent. President Chapo may have the title, and all the trappings of office, but it is Mondlane who holds Mozambique's future in his hands – and he knows it. “When you decide to bear a cross, depending on the size of the cross, it can be a painful thing,” he tells *The Continent*.

When the 51-year-old engineer-turned-politician announced his intention to run for president, on the ticket of a minor opposition party, nobody paid much attention. But his candidacy – fuelled by his own charisma and social media savvy – tapped into deep popular resentment towards the ruling party, Frelimo, and its recent history of corruption and economic mismanagement.

Frelimo have never lost an election,

and according to the electoral commission they did not lose this one. Everyone else, however, had major doubts. Opposition candidates said the vote was rigged, independent observers alleged widespread electoral fraud, and Mozambicans came out in their tens of thousands to protest against the result. Mondlane, they said, was the rightful victor, and should be the next president.

These demonstrations were the most widespread and sustained anti-government protests in Mozambique's post-independence history. The response from state security forces was brutal: Several hundred people were killed, and thousands arrested. Mondlane himself, fearing for his life, fled the country. He never stayed anywhere for long, skipping between South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Nigeria and Qatar, only returning home several months later.

His increased international profile has given him an extra degree of protection, but his life has changed irrevocably. His bank accounts have been frozen, he faces several politically-motivated lawsuits, and his employer has suspended his contract. He does not feel safe at home.

So he is here, at the City Lodge, trying to figure out how to translate his enormous popular support into real political power – and marveling at the impact he has already had.

The copycat-in-chief

The day before the interview, Daniel Chapo was inaugurated at a subdued ceremony in the capital. Over the noise of



Dan nation:
Daniel Chapo
 takes the oath
 of office as he
 is sworn in as
 the president of
 Mozambique at
 Independence
 Square in
 the capital,
 Maputo.

Photo: Alfredo
 Zuniga/AFP

protesters outside the venue, Chapo laid out his government's key priorities. To Mondlane, the speech sounded... familiar.

“The general lines of governance of the appointed candidate – I’m not even going to say elected, but appointed by the constitutional council – 95% of them represent not only what I defended in the manifesto during the campaign, but also the ideas I have been advocating for the last three to four years, which are very well known and that many people even considered utopian and unachievable.”

These ideas included eliminating deputy ministers and reducing the number of ministries to save an estimated \$260-million per year, and cutting some of the perks available to government officials.

The new president has also said he will introduce a new state procurement system to reduce corruption, and is pushing to digitise public services.

If implemented effectively, these measures would represent a sharp break

from the past – and that is making the ruling elites nervous.

During the broadcast of the inauguration, Mondlane was carefully watching the body language of outgoing president Filipe Nyusi and his predecessor Armando Guebuza.

“I noticed a certain discomfort, an unease, among members of Frelimo regarding the measures. They were caught by surprise. They did not expect it because, naturally, it is a break from a paradigm that has lasted 50 years.”

Mondlane is sceptical however that Chapo, with whom he has worked in the past, is capable of actually delivering this paradigm shift.

“The copy is never like the original,” he says. “I do not see him having the courage to implement the measures that require bravery. Challenging that party, that monolithic machine of Frelimo, to suddenly come out and say to the line of sons, nephews of comrades, and former combatants who were already prepared

to be deputy ministers, secretaries of state, permanent secretaries, and heads of inoperative institutes, to break all of this down, requires that courage.”

Impact beyond the ballot

Mondlane’s stunning challenge to the status quo of Mozambican politics has drawn comparisons to other insurgent candidates across the continent, like Ousmane Sonko and Bassirou Diomaye Faye in Senegal, who are now in power, and Peter Obi in Nigeria, who is not.

But where Obi has struggled to turn his energetic campaign into an effective opposition, Mondlane is determined to stay relevant. To do so, he is putting together a team of shadow ministers to keep the government on its toes – and is planning to use his enormous popularity to make sure the new president listens.

Ideally, this would be a collaborative rather than combative relationship: Mondlane has said that he is ready to negotiate with the government, and even to work within it in some circumstances. His ability to trigger nationwide protests with a single livestream on YouTube means that he commands considerable leverage in any such negotiation.

To bolster this position, he is also calling on his fellow citizens to avoid paying tax – threatening the state’s key revenue stream. “A large part of the taxes we have are illegal and immoral; at a certain point, they are indeed a fraud and theft from the people.”

Mondlane is also arguing for foreign mining companies to provide more direct investment into the communities where



Stone wall: Venâncio Mondlane may not be president, but his considerable leverage could shape Mozambique’s future. Photo: Amilton Neves/AFP

they operate. This is a major political issue, given that extractive industries – and in particular a gas find in the north worth potentially tens of billions of dollars – have been at the centre of several major corruption scandals in recent years.

It is not hyperbole to say that Mozambique’s economic future is directly linked to how equitably those resources are exploited. Mondlane wants to use his scrutiny to ensure that this windfall – the portion that has not already been squandered – is used to develop the country rather than individual families.

In this way, Mondlane hopes to be as effective outside of the presidency as he might have been within it. “If they want to copy a victory from me, let them do it by decree, however they wish,” he says. “But, from the moment they follow this, it is also a way, to a certain extent, to influence the very economic and social policy of the country in advance.” ■

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 Ndém ("The Bangwa Queen")
Sculpture in wood
Cameroon
Circa late 1900s



This iconic, regal figure got its name – *Bangwa Queen* – from one of its possessors, Harry Franklin, who obtained her in 1966. But to her true owners, the Lebang of the rolling Bangwa grasslands

in southwestern Cameroon, she is Ngwi Ndem, the divine spouse who intercedes for those seeking fertility, bountiful harvests, and protection against evil.

The wooden sculpture, at 82cm tall, is

striking. She has an expressive face and a body in motion, perhaps dancing or singing, with a rattle in her one good arm. The predator tooth necklace and the brass bangles on her wrists and ankles denote a woman of nobility among the Bangwa.

Ngwi Ndem was sent to Europe by Gustav Conrau, a German trader and colonial agent. In 1898, Conrau was the first European to visit the Bangwa Mountains, where he sought trading contacts, as well as manual labour – slaves – for the deadly rubber and palm oil plantations of the then German-held Kamerun. Conrau was also mapping out the country, reporting potential banks of resources and hinterlands for future conquest by Berlin.

Conrau settled for several months with the Lebang. Their fon, or chief, Fontem Asonganyi, welcomed him at first. Some accounts have it that Asonganyi gifted or sold the wooden sculpture and several other artefacts to Conrau at this time.

But Chief Charles Taku, Asonganyi's great-grandson and a lead counsel at the International Criminal Court, told *The Continent* that Conrau stole the sculpture, along with dozens of others, from a sacred forest called Lefem. Conrau returned to Bangwa a few months later in search of more labourers. But the fon grew angry,

insisting the first group return first. In his notes, Conrau describes himself as being taken prisoner. He died by suicide in December 1899.

Believing Conrau was murdered, German authorities declared war on the Lebang. Their troops attacked communities and looted more sculptures. Asonganyi was captured several years later, and banished from the area.

Ngwi Ndem was recorded as a new addition to the National Ethnological Museum of Berlin in 1899. She has changed hands several times since, becoming a pop culture icon in 1935 after renowned artist Man Ray photographed her with a nude model for an edition of *Paris* magazine. She made news again in 1999 when she was auctioned a last time for a whopping \$3.8-million. The purchase, by the Paris-based Dapper Foundation, which once ran a museum, made Ngwi Ndem the most valuable African artwork at the time.

She is still in the Dapper Foundation's possession. Since 2017, Chief Taku has been writing to the organisation, seeking the queen's freedom from what he says is enslavement. The Dapper Foundation has continued to assert its right of ownership, he says. The foundation did not respond to a request for comment.

Illustration note, by Cameroonian artist Eric Takukam: This artwork (next page) depicts the queen in her natural and original environment, far from the hostile and cold European climate. In the Grassfields region, we call her Magne, the mother of twins – a symbol of fertility. I have given her a fire to warm her, and restored her left hand, missing from the sculpture. The Ndop fabric in the foreground is often worn by nobles, and the clay pot symbolises the spirit of sharing: the mother of twins traditionally cooks twice a day, to feed all those who come to witness God's grace upon her. Colonialism eroded these traditions, and modernity is doing the rest: traditional building materials, like the bamboo raffia of the wall and chair, are in short supply due to aggressive agriculture. With their disappearance, some of the essence of Bamileke heritage disappears too.





An overdue, anxious and complicated homecoming

The cultural displacement haunting a tense Benin is as visceral today as ever.

Line Sidonie Talla Mafotsing

In December 2020 France passed a landmark law giving the Musée du quai Branly in Paris one year to transfer 26 artefacts back to the Republic of Benin. About a year later, 129 years after they were seized by French troops

from the royal palace of King Béhanzin in Abomey, the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey, the artefacts returned “home” to Cotonou. Blending fiction and documentary, French-Senegalese director Mati Diop’s newest work, *Dahomey*, follows this historic return.

Diop gives the statue of King Ghezo, labeled “No. 26”, a literal voice through which it draws the audiences into its imagined interior life. “Why didn’t they call me by my name?” he asks himself. “Don’t they know it?” Throughout the film, No. 26 questions his purpose in the world as it is now and contemplates the last 129 years away from home.

In the Beninese capital, the artefacts are welcomed with pomp and circumstance. Their return is a public relations coup for politicians in both France and Benin. It’s a “good faith” act by France, which was already losing influence in West Africa even in 2021. During a 2017 speech at Burkina Faso’s University of Ouagadougou, French President Emmanuel Macron had specifically promised “temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage”. A few years later, he appears to be delivering – or beginning to.

The return also helps the popularity of President Patrice Talon. His government has invested in a Beninese “cultural renaissance”, drawing attention away from criticism that it is authoritarian. Before Talon came to power in 2016, Benin had been considered one of Africa’s best examples of democratic governance.



While you've been gone: The return of looted artefacts has been coming for a long time. Now to foster their reconnection to the people of Benin. Photos: *Dahomey*

But just months before the return of the artefacts, several opposition figures were barred from running against Talon, who ultimately got a second term with 86% of the vote in April 2021.

Fittingly, then, the second half of the film steers us towards civil society and what Beninese society has to say about all of this. Students and their teachers discuss the historic moment at a forum at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi.

One student remembers the artefacts being vaguely mentioned in high school, without emphasis on their deeper importance. Another muses about how his childhood was spent watching western animated shows but none centred around his own cultural heritage. Now, with precious little historical or cultural context, the young Beninese students are meant to receive, interpret, appreciate

and eventually preserve the centuries-old artefacts. If, against these odds, the artefacts win the hearts and minds of the younger generation, they might continue the pursuit for the thousands of other cultural treasures that remain abroad.

But will they?

For now, they are still trying to figure out their relationship to them.

With care and understanding, Diop captures the complications of trying to reconnect with what once was – by both the artefacts and the Beninese people.

Today, the statue of King Ghezo and the other 25 returned artefacts are stored away somewhere in Benin. Plans for a museum in which they will be displayed for the public keep getting postponed. *Dahomey* opens the space for these bittersweet storylines to play out side by side. ■

PHOTO ESSAY

Raising spirits at Benin's Vodún festival

On 10 January every year, in the ancient town of Ouidah – a former slave trading port in Southern Benin – Beninese faithful gather to celebrate a religion that is often maligned elsewhere: Vodún, sometimes referred to as Voodoo. Thousands of locals and foreigners are drawn to the annual spectacle in Ouidah to dance and take part in religious ceremonies and

elaborate banquets.

The Vodún festival opened in 1996 after Benin's government overturned a decades-long ban on practicing Vodún. It is now the country's official religion and about half of the population follows it. Vodún is rooted in animism, the belief that all things have a spirit, and combines West African beliefs and Catholicism. ■



Spirit dance: An Egungun, a visible manifestation of departed ancestors who periodically revisit the human community for remembrance, celebration, and blessings dances in Ouidah. Photo: Olympia De Maismont/AFP



Whirled wide: A Kokou initiate – a devotee of the warrior god in the Vodún religion – dances in the Ouidah forest. Photos: Olympia De Maismont/AFP



Parlay Vodún: A celebrant in Egungun vestments leads a procession on the sandy festival ground in Ouidah. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



Princely sons: Family members of King Kpodégbé Lanmanfan Toyi Djigla, the 16th king of the Fon State of Allada in central Benin, head to an engagement in the Royal Palace. Photo: Olympia De Maismont/AFP



Shrouded in mystery: Two celebrants in spirit garb leave a convent in Ouidah, on their way to a traditional Vodún ceremony nearby. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



Tonic: A Kokou initiate, his body already covered in vegetable red oil mixed with maize flour, sits in a trance as he is drizzled with gin during a Vodun ceremony in Ouidah's sacred forest. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



Water: A devotee at the Mami Wata Temple in Ouidah. Mami Wata is a feared and revered water spirit or goddess across western, eastern and southern Africa. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

Heading into 2025 – are we going in the right direction?

What better time to take stock than the start of a new year (and the week of the World Economic Forum jamboree at Davos)? So how are Africans feeling about what lies ahead?

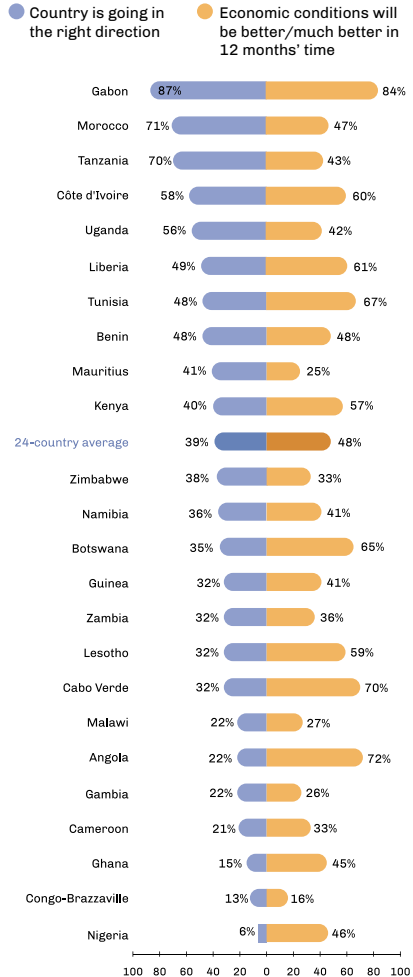
Afrobarometer has fresh data from 24 African countries surveyed in 2024. The overall outlook, unfortunately, is mixed. On average, only four in 10 Africans (39%) said their country was headed in “the right direction” – while 59% thought it was on the wrong path.

But nearly half (48%) expected economic conditions to get better over the next 12 months, and optimists outnumbered those who expected things to get worse (31%) or stay the same (14%).

Majorities expressed confidence in their country’s direction in Gabon (87%), Morocco (71%), Tanzania (70%), Côte d’Ivoire (58%), and Uganda (56%). But just one in 20 Nigerians (6%) agreed. Only 15% of Ghanaians approved of their country’s direction – but that was in August, and then they voted in a new president in December, so we’ll see whether they get the change they wanted.

What better time to correct course, if necessary, than a new year? ■

Going in the right direction, things will get better | 24 African countries | 2024



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.

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

"Resource envy puts silverback gorillas at risk from greenback guerrillas."



- 1_** How many colours does Sudan's flag have?
- 2_** The Virunga Mountains (pictured) span which three countries?
- 3_** True or false: Ali Bongo is the current president of Gabon.
- 4_** Which country has the highest population of mountain gorillas?
- 5_** Abomey was the capital of which former West African kingdom?
- 6_** In which region of Africa are the Cabo Verde islands located?
- 7_** Which country was once known as "Italian North Africa"?
- 8_** Does the Southern African Development Community have 12, 14 or 16 member states?
- 9_** Name the South African comedian who will host the Grammy Awards for a fifth consecutive year next month.
- 10_** Which country is footballer Sadio Mané from?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to [+27 73 805 6068](tel:+27738056068) and we'll send the answers to you!

The inauguration of chaos

*In a nod to the broad-brush tradition of western foreign correspondents,
Patrick Gathara reports on the inauguration of Donald Trump.*

Septuagenarian strongman Donald Trump once again took the oath of office on Monday, in a ceremony witnessed by a small group of aging elite members of the oligarchy that has ruled the United States for decades.

Shortly after the traditional oath rituals, Trump declared expansionist plans: reclaiming the Panama Canal, renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the “Gulf of America”, and promising to plant a flag of his troubled nation on Mars.

The ceremony was held inside the US parliament, the scene of an attempted coup four years ago. Organisers claimed to have been forced to move the event indoors by frigid weather. However, some analysts say the move was designed to avoid humbling comments on crowd size that dogged Trump’s first oath-taking ceremony in 2017.

Deposed leader Joseph Biden had earlier in the day issued last-minute “pre-emptive” pardons to members of his family who may have faced probes into how they acquired their wealth – a traditional final act of corruption by an outgoing ruler. The unpopular, millionaire octogenarian is commonly derided as “Genocide Joe” because of his steadfast support of Israel’s war on Gaza.

Monday’s events were yet another worrying sign that the former British colony is failing in its centuries-long effort to become a democracy. The theme of the oath ceremony, “Our Enduring Democracy”, disguised 250 years of voter disenfranchisement, gerrymandering to pre-emptively steal elections, minority regimes, and global warmongering.

While still considered the lynchpin nation of the Caucasian bloc, the US appears to be sinking as a greedy political class dismantles its laboriously assembled system of checks and balances. The latest turn of events is expected to concentrate power in the hands of the executive arm. Already deeply corrupted, the judiciary recently declared the president all but above the law, an eye-popping move now that the US has handed power back to a man whose convictions include a court award for sexual abuse.

Many around the world stand in solidarity with the oppressed people of the US, whose lives are blighted by corruption, gun violence and armed Christianist militia roaming the streets. This solidarity is crucial now when US pro-democracy activists, whose numbers were decimated by the Biden regime’s



crackdown on anti-genocide protests, struggle to regroup to oppose Trump.

But the peoples of the world might themselves find their hands full if Trump makes good on his threat to occupy Canada and the Danish colonial possession of Greenland, perhaps sparking another Caucasian tribal conflict. He wouldn't be the first tribal demagogue to bring ruin upon his country and the world.

Many worry about his economic policies. Nigerian economists say his promise to base the country's future growth on expanding oil production is misguided. It is also a recipe for environmental disaster at a time when the country is struggling to cope with massive forest fires that have been linked to a warming planet. Experts say his plan for tariff wars with important trading

partners could lock his country, already too expensive for manufacturing, out of affordable imports.

On the other hand, Trump may be less committed to genocide than his predecessor. It is alleged that he pressured the apartheid state of Israel to pause its 15-month extermination of Palestinians.

Trump's dictatorial leanings could also unite the splintered pro-democracy activists in the US and give African civil society an opportunity to support civic education programmes in the country. This could lead to an American Spring in which the people rise up and cast off the yoke of gerontocracy, and in a real sense, take their country back. ■

Patrick Gathara is a Kenyan journalist, cartoonist and author

THE BIG PICTURE

Mane character energy: Riders in traditional garb perform a mock cavalry charge down the Ouka-Djermaya course in N'Djamena, at a celebration to mark the start of Chad's horse racing season.

Photo: Joris Bolomey/AFP



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