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# The Continent

**'Have you seen Biya?'**



Illustration:  
Yemsrach  
Yetneberk



**Cover:** His aides insist that Paul Biya, the nonagenarian president of Cameroon, is not dead. But he has not been seen in public for weeks, and he was already starting to look a bit frail. Cameroonians are worried: not so much for the longtime president himself, who is not especially popular, but for the future of a fragile country that has no clear succession plan – and lots of hungry pretenders (p10).

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## Karibu Pambazuko

It's our pleasure to welcome Pambazuko as *The Continent's* newest syndication partner. Founded by veteran editor and longtime *The Continent* contributor Simon Mkina, Pambazuko is a Tanzanian newspaper distributed to 22,500 people on WhatsApp every week (subscribe by messaging +255744768263).

Mkina and his team will translate selected stories from *The Continent* for their Kiswahili-speaking readers. Media houses that would like to syndicate stories from *The Continent* – free for African newsrooms – are invited to get in touch at [read@thecontinent.org](mailto:read@thecontinent.org).



## SCIENCE

### **Malaria-carrying mozzies out-evolve bug-killing net juice**

Mosquitoes rapidly evolve to be resistant to the insecticides used in protective bed nets, says a new study published in *Malaria Journal*. Led by Burkinabé medical entomologist Mahamadi Kientega, the team collected mosquitoes from three villages in western Burkina Faso between 2012 and 2017 and sequenced their genomes. They observed “similar and consistent” changes in the genes that are typically targeted by the insecticide chemicals embedded in the anti-malaria bed nets that public health campaigns distributed in those areas.

## SOMALIA

### **Suicide attack kills seven**

A suicide bomber who detonated an explosive device at a cafe near a police training academy in Mogadishu on Thursday killed seven people and left six others injured. This comes just two months after another suicide bombing killed 32 people at a public beach in Mogadishu in August. The Al-Shabaab militant group, which seeks to overthrow Somalia’s government, claimed responsibility for both attacks. Somalia has long relied on African Union troops to bolster security in its capital but that mission is set to end by December.

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## FRANCE

### **De-frogged activist caught and released**

French authorities freed Beninese activist Kemi Seba on Thursday without charging him, after a three-day detention. Seba, who is vocal about French neocolonialism in Africa, was born in France, moved to West Africa years ago, and was stripped of his French citizenship last year. He was arrested while visiting France to see a sick relative and meet political allies. His lawyer says he was questioned over “collusion with a foreign power ... to foster hostility against France”.

## PALESTINE

## Israel kills Hamas mastermind of October 7 attack

After a year of bombing the Gaza strip and killing 40,000 people, Israeli soldiers killed Yahya Sinwar, one of the two men who planned the 7 October 2023 attack that prompted the invasion. Israeli Defence Forces footage analysed by the *BBC* shows that during a routine patrol of an already destroyed area of Rafah, Israeli soldiers spotted three shooters and shot back. Injured, one of them retreated into a building before it was shelled. He was later identified as Sinwar.

## CHAD-CAR

## Russian mercs 'invade' Chad after colleagues' arrest

Tensions flared at the Chad-Central African Republic border as over 100 CAR soldiers escorted Russian Wagner mercenaries into Chad over the weekend, resulting in the death of two Chadian soldiers. That's according to Central African news outlet *Corbeau News*. This follows the detention of three Russian nationals in Chad in September, including Maxim Shugaley, head of the Foundation for Defense of National Values, an NGO linked to the late Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin.



**Corn-a-nopia: Maize may no longer be exported from Niger, except to coup states.** Photo: Kola Sulaimon/AFP

## NIGER

## Cereal export ban doesn't apply to coup-coup pops

On Wednesday, Niger banned the export of cereals like millet, sorghum and maize, as well as rice, and protein legumes like cowpeas. The measure is meant to protect local supply with inflation driving food prices out of the reach of many residents. That inflation has been driven by several factors, including an economic slowdown triggered by sanctions imposed by the regional bloc Ecowas after a military coup in July 2023. Exports to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali, which weathered similar sanctions, are exempted from the ban.

## CONGO

## ICC renews probe into recent Kivu war crimes

Karim Khan, the International Criminal Court's chief investigator, says his office is renewing an investigation into crimes committed in the DRC's resource-rich North Kivu province since January 2022. More than 120 armed groups are operating in the area, including the Tutuiled M23, reportedly backed by Rwanda. A UN report revealed last month that M23 is collecting as much as \$300,000 a



**Taxing: DRC soldiers on patrol near the front line of the war with M23 rebels in North Kivu.** Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

month from “production tax” it imposed on mining in the Rubaya areas that it captured.

## MALI

## Kyiv to Bamako: ‘It still wasn’t us’

Kyiv has once again told Bamako that it did not arm rebels with drones or confidential information. After *Le Monde* reported that Tuareg fighters were using Ukrainian drones, Ukraine's foreign ministry denied providing unmanned aerial vehicles to the Malian rebels. In August, Mali severed diplomatic ties with Ukraine after a Kyiv security insider suggested that Tuareg rebels received “necessary” information from the eastern European country to conduct an attack that killed dozens of Malian soldiers and allied Russian Africa Corps (ex-Wagner) fighters. The Ukrainian government later denied providing the information.

## SUDAN

## US comes for Sudan ‘hactivist’ brothers

The United States justice department is prosecuting a pair of brothers for being the masterminds behind Anonymous Sudan, a hacktivist group known for its brazen cyberattacks. Authorities say Ahmed Salah Yousif Omer and Alaa Salah Yusuuf Omer began operating Anonymous Sudan in 2023 and pulled off over 35,000 attacks. These include targeting Israel's missile alert system, briefly taking down OpenAI's ChatGPT in December, taking Microsoft's Azure cloud services offline for a few days, and disrupting hospital systems. According to a prosecutor, the brothers were motivated by “Sudanese nationalist ideology”. And money.



**Weaponised food: Palestinians receive rations at a makeshift displacement camp in Gaza.** Photo: Bashar Taleb/AFP

## HUNGER

# ‘Manufactured’ food crises are a weapon of war

A new report by Oxfam called *Food Wars* says the world’s food crises are largely manufactured. The United Kingdom-based charity released the report on World Food Day (Wednesday). Oxfam found that warring groups have weaponised food, often withholding food aid and targeting food production, energy and water sources. This has left 282-million people facing acute hunger in 54 conflict-affected countries. “Nearly half a million people in Gaza – where 83% of food aid needed is currently not reaching them – and over three quarters of a million in Sudan, are currently starving,” the report said.

## NIGERIA

# Over 150 killed in latest tanker blast

A mass burial was held on Wednesday in the Jigawa state, northern Nigeria, for dozens killed in the country’s latest fuel tanker explosion. At least 153 people were killed, and over 100 were injured. Last month, a similar incident killed 48 people further south in Niger state. Much of Nigeria’s oil is transported by road because widespread vandalism has decimated the country’s pipeline network but, as *The Continent* previously reported, at least 200 tankers have exploded since 2018, injuring or killing hundreds, if not thousands.

## NILE BASIN

# Egypt’s colonial privilege ends

A water-use agreement between Nile riparian countries came into effect on Sunday, much to Egyptian chagrin. The Nile Basin Initiative treaty is now officially recognised by the African Union as binding after South Sudan became the sixth eligible country to ratify it. It expands permission for upstream countries to use water from the River Nile for major projects, reducing the restrictions imposed by colonial Britain in favour of downstream Egypt. Sudan and Egypt rejected the treaty, seeing it as a risk to their water security.

# Kenya

## William Ruto deep-sixes his number two

### Supreme Court to get last word on Gachagua's exit.

Maureen Kasuku in Nairobi

**K**enya's Senate voted on Thursday to impeach Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua over charges of graft, insubordination, and engaging in divisive ethnic politics. Curiously, he was also accused of having funded the anti-tax protests that erupted in June.

Gachagua is the first deputy president to be impeached under Kenya's 2010 Constitution. His ousting comes after months of discord with President William Ruto with whom they teamed up to win the presidential ticket just two years ago.

The Senate's 53-13 vote endorsed last week's 282-44 National Assembly vote – in both cases exceeding the two-thirds majority required. Before the assembly last week, Gachagua put up a spirited defence saying he believed President Ruto was behind the move to impeach him. MP Mwengi Mutuse, who brought the impeachment motion in early October,

appeared to struggle to provide evidence during the hearing. This led to a standoff with Gachagua's defence for nearly two hours, and intense social media debates about the intrigue behind the motion.

When the impeachment sailed through the lower house, Gachagua unsuccessfully tried to get a court injunction against proceeding to the Senate, where he failed to show up for cross examination with his lawyers saying he had been hospitalised with "severe chest pains". His legal team staged a walkout after the Senate declined their request to adjourn proceedings.

Within hours of Gachagua's impeachment, Ruto nominated Cabinet Secretary and close ally Kithure Kindiki as his new deputy.

Gachagua is expected to appeal his impeachment at the Supreme Court. ■



**The boot: A cobbler reads *The Daily Nation's* report on Rigathi Gachagua's firing.** Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP

# Libya

## Super Eagles super insulted, and they super ain't playin'

Damilola Adeyera

The men of Nigeria's national football team boycotted a match in Libya this week citing "trauma, fatigue, and body aches" following "cruel and unimaginable treatment" from their Libyan hosts.

The Super Eagles spent 20 hours in the terminal building of the Al Abraq Airport in Abraq, Libya, starting Sunday when they travelled for a game against the Mediterranean Knights, Libya's national football team, in the qualifiers for the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations.

Ademola Olajire, the director of communications for the Nigeria Football Federation, said the team's aircraft was approaching Benghazi, Libya – the initially agreed point of arrival – when the control tower told the pilot to redirect to the Al Abraq International Airport. This was more than 230km away and a three-hour bus ride from the match venue in Benina.

But before a bus could be arranged, the team was left to languish for 12 hours in what their captain described as an "abandoned airport." William Troost-Ekong also alleged that the airport gates were locked and that they were left "without phone connection, food



**Grey area: Nigeria's men's football side boycotted their Afcon qualifier in Libya, saying they'd been poorly treated**

or drink. All to play mind games." The Nigerians subsequently refused to take the bus for the game. "We will not accept to travel anywhere by road here – even with security it's not safe," said Troost-Ekong.

An unapologetic statement from the Libya Football Federation accused Nigeria of treating Libya's footballers poorly when they travelled to Nigeria for the first leg of the qualifier.

The LFF condemned the decision to boycott the match, apologised to Libyan fans and said that the Nigerians "will bear full responsibility for failure to hold the match". ■



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# Cameroon's president is very old and missing in action

## What is going to happen when Paul Biya dies?

Correspondent in Yaoundé

**W**hen rumours circulated last week that Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera had suffered a stroke and died, the 69-year-old quickly dispelled them with a gentle jog down the streets of Blantyre. At one point, he stopped and did 11 push-ups in quick succession – to the applause of his party supporters and onlookers.

The health of the president is a sensitive issue in Malawi. It was only a dozen years ago that the inner circle of Bingu wa Mutharika spent several days pretending that the late president's corpse was, in fact, alive, in a failed bid to subvert the constitutional transition by hijacking the plot of *Weekend at Bernie's*.

In Cameroon, the health of the president is a similarly delicate matter. Rumours that 91-year-old Paul Biya may be dead are bubbling. Despite official denials, he has not gone jogging – or been seen in public at all. This is despite authorities announcing on 8 October that he would be returning to Cameroon “in the next few days”.

The last time Biya was seen in public anywhere in the world was on 8 September in Beijing, after attending the



**Been there:** Cameroon's former president Ahmadou Ahidjo was ousted by Paul Biya, who is now in a state of quantum superposition. Photo: OFF/AFP

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. He was conspicuously absent from the UN General Assembly meeting in the US weeks later, and from the Francophonie summit in Paris this month.

Biya's cabinet chief, Samuel Mvondo Ayolo, insists that the president is in an “excellent state of health” on a “brief private stay” in Geneva. Not many believe

him, with social media rife with rumours, speculation and jokes.

Biya's presidency, which began 41 years ago, has always been opaque, and he has never been an enthusiastic public speaker. Long absences from the country, and public life, are nothing new. But the recent speculation is driven by something different: the frailties that he exhibits when he does make a public appearance.

In recent years, the president has seemed barely able to carry his frail body around unaided. At the US-Africa Summit in Washington two years ago, on stage after being called up to speak, Biya turned to his protocol officer and asked where he was and if there were any important guests in the hall, apparently unaware that the lapel mic he was wearing was still on.

Government spokesperson René Emmanuel Sadi said the rumours of Biya's death were "pure fantasy and imagination" by detractors aiming to destabilise the country. The interior minister has classified the president's health as a matter of national security and banned media debates about it. "Offenders will face the full force of the law," Interior Minister Paul Atanga Nji said. He empowered regional governors to set up monitoring units and crack down on dissent.

Rather than threatening journalists, there is an easier way to stop the speculation, says Angela Quintal, who heads the Africa programme at the Committee to Protect Journalists. "It would have been simpler to arrange a public appearance for President Biya, wherever he may be."

## Laagering around an ailing Biya

Cameroon has one experience of dealing with a dead president – but it did not go smoothly. The country's only other previous head of state, Ahmadou Ahidjo, died in 1989. He does not rest in peace.

After being usurped by Biya, Ahidjo fled into exile in Senegal in 1983. Six years later, he suffered a heart attack and was buried in Dakar. This was an ignominious end for a man who had been a symbol of Cameroon's independence, revered as a national hero.

But the Biya government, despite much public pressure, has never repatriated his remains, much to the anger of his family, people from northern Cameroon, civil society groups and opposition political parties including the Social Democratic Front. These groups continue to agitate for the return of Ahidjo's body, seeing it as a way of both honouring Ahidjo and reconciling some of Cameroon's bitter internal divisions.

**Cameroon has little experience of dealing with a dead president – and it has not gone smoothly. The country's only other previous head of state, Amadou Ahidjo, died in 1989. He does not rest in peace.**

There is no public protocol for what will happen to the current president's body when he dies. Nor does the country know what to expect in his absence.

To maintain his firm grip on power, Biya wove a patronage network that would



**Hold my Biya: Cameroon's President Paul Biya hasn't shown his face in public for over a month – except on his merch, belonging to supporters who are for some reason willing to be seen wearing it in public.** Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

make transition from him difficult. To keep his allies on their toes, he has never announced a clear succession plan. That means that Cameroon's next leader may have to fight his way through a crowded chessboard of other contenders.

There are many pretenders to the throne. From Biya's inner circle, his son Franck Biya and general secretary Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh are the leading Cabinet Chief Mvondo Ayolo, Finance Minister Louis-Paul Motazé, Justice Minister Laurent Easo and Government Spokesperson and Communications Minister Emmanuel Saidi.

The public might want to see statesmen like Akere Muna and Christopher Fomunyoh have a go. And opposition

figures who sense an opportunity include Cabral Libii, Maurice Kamto, Joshua Osih and – with conspicuous support from Russia – Serge Espoir Matomba.

Whoever does end up in Yaoundé's Unity Palace – or in Biya's infamous corner suite at the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva – will have their work cut out. As Munjah Vitalis Fagha, a political scientist at the University of Buea, puts it: "We will have to start building institutions all over since we were focused on building strong men." ■

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*\*The author's identity is being kept anonymous given Cameroon's ban on debating President Paul Biya's health*

## 'The Guv' who shaped South Africa's economy

**Tito Mboweni, 1959-2024,  
was the first black leader  
of the central bank.**

**Vernon Wessels**

**F**or a decade, everyone knew the drill on the Thursday afternoon when the South African Reserve Bank was to announce its decision on interest rates.

Tito Mboweni would stroll into the room, sporting a mischievous grin. Financial markets were on the edge of their seats – and he knew it. This was his show. The Governor, as he insisted on being known, would teach, preach, engage – and entertain – his captive audience. Mboweni, executives recall, could defuse the worst tensions with a well-timed joke, or announce a steep rate hike with a smile.

For others, their memory is of the social media “chef”, who made canned pilchards famous, amusing his Twitter acolytes with his love of garlic and photos of himself sweating after too many chillies.

Mboweni, who had type-2 diabetes, died at Mediclinic Sandton Hospital in Bryanston last Saturday after returning from a trip to Ghana, according to a

family friend. He was 65.

“He left an indelible mark on our country,” said Maria Ramos, chairperson of AngloGold Ashanti. She and her husband Trevor Manuel – South Africa’s finance minister from 1996 to 2009 – became close friends with Mboweni after first meeting him in the 1980s.

Born in Tzaneen in Limpopo, Mboweni was active in the struggle against apartheid, which forced him into exile. Upon his return, he served as the deputy head of the ANC’s economic policy committee, helping to shape the party’s economic policy before it was voted into power in 1994. The new South Africa’s constitutional provisions outlining central bank independence also relied on Mboweni’s input.

In 1994, Mboweni was appointed labour minister under then president Nelson Mandela. He introduced laws



Illustration: John McCann/*Mail & Guardian*

that many businesses criticise for being too protective of workers' rights, giving them the right to strike, and establishing labour courts that make it difficult to exploit workers.

Four years later, Mandela moved Mboweni to the Reserve Bank, where he became the central bank's first black governor. Apartheid-era officials had left him with an almighty mess. Shortly before he'd joined, when the rand blew out in 1996 and 1998, the bank had tried in vain to defend the value of the rand by buying foreign currency and taking out forex contracts.

Mboweni not only had to close those contracts, but also rebuild the foreign exchange reserves – all at a time when many experienced hands chose to leave the Reserve Bank, many evidently not comfortable with a black governor.

But when the currency plunged in 2001, Mboweni didn't make the same mistake. His adoption of inflation-targeting as the Reserve Bank's mandate, and the fiscal management policies adopted by Manuel, built policy credibility and ensured that the rand recovered over subsequent years. Labour unions, however, objected to his use of interest rate hikes to tame inflation, believing this burdened families with higher costs, stymied growth and curbed job creation.

After a stint in the private sector from 2009 until 2018, Mboweni was appointed finance minister by President Cyril Ramaphosa. This had not been in Mboweni's life plan. He had wanted to explore academia. But Ramaphosa had other ideas, calling on him as one of the

very few with the stature needed to help clean up after the corruption-ridden years of Jacob Zuma.

Mboweni wasn't afraid to court controversy, including openly disagreeing with the ANC, which had lobbied hard for the nationalisation of the Reserve Bank.

His quirks were many. Reporters attending the monetary policy committee press conferences were expected to wear ties and jackets; and even after he left the Reserve Bank, he still preferred to be called "Governor". At one stage, he banned photographers because one had taken an unflattering picture of him wiping sweat from his brow under the searing lights.

He lived an open life on social media: frequent posts of his cooking, selfies after church, his 28-year-old shoes or photos of marijuana on his farm, where he anointed himself the "Duke of the Duchy of Magoebaskloof", spoke of an atypical central banker. Those old shoes were belied by some of Mboweni's finer indulgences, including red wine and whisky – fancies he'd curbed in the last few months of his life to focus on his health.

As Ramos puts it: "Some people work hard at being eccentric. Tito didn't have to work that hard."

What he did work hard at, however, was building South Africa's economic policies. And on this score, while he may be gone, his fingerprints will linger for decades. ■

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*This obituary first appeared in Currency, a new business publication in South Africa, and is republished with permission. Read it on [currencynews.co.za](http://currencynews.co.za)*

# Goïta appears ready to give elections a go

**But a day at the ballot boxes won't necessarily make the military just some junta that you used to know.**

**Beverly Ochieng**

**T**echnically, Colonel Assimi Goïta does not have to hold elections any time soon. In May, after what his government called a national consultation, military rule in Mali was extended to 2027.

But he has a tactical incentive to do so now: battlefield difficulties are hollowing out his promise to secure the country. A political process to consolidate power and placate external demands for legitimacy is more attractive than it ever has been in the four years since his coup d'état.

And it looks like he could soon be out canvassing. Mali's 2025 budget includes a tell-tale allocation: \$135-million for election expenses, a government report published in late September shows.

Goïta's military campaign in the north, which began in July 2023 after United Nations peacekeepers were asked to leave, has in recent months seen frontline setbacks, creating an urgency for the junta to secure its mandate by other means.

The campaign started out promisingly for the Malian army. In November 2023 it pulled off the symbolic seizure of the separatist stronghold of Kidal. Four months later, with instrumental support

from Russian Africa Corps (ex-Wagner) paramilitaries, it took control of the N'Tahaka gold mine and the government announced plans to begin mining operations there.

**Mali's 2025 budget includes a tell-tale allocation: \$135-million for election expenses, a government report published in late September shows.**

But things took a turn in late July. In a fierce battle in Tinzaouatene near the Algerian border, rebels killed dozens of Malian and allied Russian fighters; Goïta's biggest military upset so far.

Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP-DPA) separatists and al-Qaeda's Sahel affiliate, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) both claimed responsibility. Further frontline losses would eclipse the Kidal and N'Tahaka wins.

And that campaign has left southern Mali more vulnerable.

The country's capital Bamako was on 17 September encroached upon in a series of attacks later claimed by JNIM, which on 3 October shared images purportedly



**Out of uniform:** The leader of Mali's junta, Assimi Goïta, arrives in Saint Petersburg for a Russia-Africa summit. Photo: Peter Kovalev/TASS Host Photo Agency/AFP

showing its province in the western mining region of Kayes. Over the past two years, the rebel group has been expanding westwards, staging blockades in the Koulikoro region. Its so-called province in Kayes would be the westernmost point of that expansion.

Malian mines, mostly in the country's southwest, are unlikely to be directly attacked, but their supply routes are now under pressure from JNIM attacks while Malian security forces focus on the north.

### **If you can't beat them, play politics**

Calling an election is not an especially risky gambit for Goïta. Critics and activists have been discredited with prosecutions, suspended jail terms and exile, tilting the playing field in the event of an upcoming election.

Influential cleric Mahmoud Dicko who was the symbol of the protests that propelled Goïta in power in 2020 is now in exile. The leader of his political movement in Mali was given a suspended

jail sentence.

Members of the opposition 31 March Declaration have remained in detention since June for meeting during the three-month ban on political activities that edged the opposition out of last year's national consultation process.

A parallel transitional government formed in May and made up of figures who fled from Mali after the 2020 coup remains in exile.

Should an election happen, Colonel Goïta – who still has significant popular support despite the widespread insecurity – would be a clear frontrunner.

In the coming weeks, discussions are likely to take place about modifying the electoral law to give military officials greater leeway to seek elective posts.

An election would placate the international community including the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), which still wants some sort of election to “fix” the problem of military rule.





**Barbed Mali:**  
A soldier straps on his weapon at a state event in Mali's capital, Bamako. Photo: Florent Vergnes/AFP

Ecowas has already extended its olive branch, climbing down from its fiery post-coup threats to keeping largely mum about unilateral extensions of military rule by Mali and Burkina Faso, and negotiating with them to stay after they formed their own Alliance of Sahel State (AES). An election could be Goïta's own peace offering.

Back on side with Ecowas, Goïta's security bets would also be hedged by another option – one that Ecowas would prefer and has suggested: a regional counterterror force.

In the event of an election, political coalitions and activists aligned with the transitional government are likely to take part to give the election some credibility.

However, key positions such as the defence, foreign affairs and mining ministries will have loyalists of the junta continuing to pursue sovereignist policies.

Mali would be a template for its AES allies. Much like Chad's transitional election reinforced the military family dynasty; putschists in Burkina Faso who moved transition to 2029; and in Niger, which is yet to commit to an electoral calendar but announced plans for national consultations, Mali would show a way to preserve military rule while fulfilling external demands for transition.

But domestic stakeholders, including those exiled and harassed opposition figures, would not necessarily buy elections as a proxy for real transition, change, legitimacy or greater inclusion. So, political stability risks will continue to oscillate between high and extreme. ■

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*Beverly Ochieng is a senior associate and analyst with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS Africa) and Control Risks and is based in Dakar*

# Libya has avoided another civil war – but only just

## A bitter dispute over the central bank laid bare the country's fragilities

### Hendia Alashepy in Tripoli

**L**ate last month, United Nations negotiators announced – with much fanfare – that Libya's two warring governments had reached an agreement on who would run the central bank. The accord defused tensions that had been rising for weeks, threatening to spill over into outright violence.

Libya has heaved from bloody crisis to crisis since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, which fractured the country into militia-ruled fiefdoms and ushered in an era of seemingly-permanent instability.

But even amid wave after wave of violence, Libya's battles have always avoided the central bank, where billions of dollars in oil revenues are stashed. Oil is the backbone of the North African country's economy, making up about 90% of Libya's GDP.

That was about to change. A crisis over who would lead the all-important bank had put it in the crosshairs of Libya's competing – and well-armed – militias. A ceasefire in 2020 ended six years of civil war in Libya, and this row risked plunging the country back into violence.



**Money shot: A police car stands guard outside Libya's central bank headquarters in Tripoli.** Photo: AFP

The dispute over the central bank began on 18 August, when the Tripoli-based Presidential Council unilaterally appointed a new central bank governor, Mohamed Al-Menfi, and ordered the long-standing incumbent, Sadiq Al-Kabir, to pack his bags.

But Al-Kabir fled in late August, claiming he and other bank officials were under threat by militias, which he said were abducting bank staff and their children. Legal analysts say Al-Kabir's removal was illegal because the Presidential Council, an advisory body responsible for appointing ministers

and heads of agencies, does not have the authority to remove the central bank governor, which is the domain of Parliament.

The central bank's facilities are wedged in the heart of Tripoli, beside major hotels and crowded marketplaces. Throughout the crisis, it was flanked by swarms of militiamen loyal to the Presidential Council and Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who backed Al-Kabir's ouster. The fear was that militias loyal to Al-Kabir would storm the bank's headquarters to regain control, resulting in a bloody street battle and a heavy toll.

"We've never heard before of armed militias storming the bank's headquarters because it has a strong force protecting it, and they even prevent us from passing in front of it," said Mohamed Al-Jabali, 63, who owns a clothing shop in Tripoli's Old City market, beside the central bank.

Al-Jabali, like many Libyans, welcomed the UN-brokered nomination of Naji Mohamed Issa Belqasem, the bank's director of banking and monetary control, as an interim governor who would then appoint his board of directors.

"We feared for our money and our lives because of the potential armed clashes that could've taken control of the bank headquarters, whether by the former governor or the newly-appointed one," said Al-Jabali.

### **A volatile patchwork of militias**

Politically, Libya is divided east-west into two competing administrations. In recent months Al-Kabir fell out of favour very publicly with western-based Dbeibah,

whom Al-Kabir had criticised for lavishly spending beyond the country's means. Dbeibah is head of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity, whose remit theoretically covers the west of the country, and is internationally recognised.

But Libya is also a labyrinth of militias, and even within the west, they clash and compete for control of public and private institutions. Tripoli is itself a patchwork of different armed groups. Some, like the Islamist-affiliated Al-Radaa militia, support Al-Kabir and have functions like securing cash deliveries to commercial banks. Others, like Ghnewa and the 44th Brigade, coordinate city-wide security and support Dbeibah.

### **But Libya is also a labyrinth of militias, and even within the west, they clash and compete for control of public and private institutions.**

Al-Kabir is favoured by Khalifa Haftar, the warlord who runs much of the east of the country. From Benghazi, Haftar commands Libya's oil wealth, drilled from wells in areas under his control. Under Al-Kabir's administration, the central bank allocated billions of dollars for eastern reconstruction projects, which have entrenched Haftar's power and created an alliance between the two men.

Naturally, Haftar and his allies wanted Al-Kabir to return. To apply pressure, they shut down vast quantities of oil production. About 60% of Libyan oil went offline, or about 700,000 barrels per day of the usual 1.2-million barrels per day.



**Oil's well that ends well?**  
**The Brega oil port in Masra Brega, some 270km west of Benghazi, in the eastern part of Libya ruled by Khalifa Haftar.**

Photo: AFP

That reduced exports by 81%, instantly shooting up global oil prices.

With the price of oil at stake, Western countries urgently sought a resolution. “At stake is the economic and financial stability of Libya,” said the United States embassy in Libya at the height of the crisis.

For weeks, the UN led negotiations between the Benghazi-based House of Representatives and Tripoli’s High State Council. The organisation’s mission in Libya warned that a protracted crisis “risks precipitating the country’s financial and economic collapse”.

And it did. Gas stations were shut. The ones that were open had lines that ran for several miles. With few good options, Dbeibah fired the head of the state fuel distribution company. Banks were similarly paralysed.

Speaking to *Reuters* from Istanbul, Al-Kabir said that the central bank had been cut off from the international banking system: “All international banks that we deal with, more than 30 major international institutions, have suspended

all transactions,” said Al-Kabir.

If true, that would mean commercial banks in Libya could not issue letters of credit or obtain the foreign currency needed to import critical items like wheat and cooking oil. It would make shortages a near certainty given that Libya is highly dependent on imports.

Libya’s banks have faced liquidity shortages for years, but since June the crunch has been particularly severe. Since then, public sector employees have not received their salaries. Long queues and low caps on withdrawals have been the norm. Many families worry they won’t be able to access funds, especially with the school starting and winter approaching.

Still, no one can afford a war that directly hits the central bank. Not even Libya’s militias, which – like everyone else – get their money from it. That calculation may be all that saved the country from another civil war. ■

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*This feature is published in collaboration with Egab*

## PHOTO ESSAY

# Go jump

## The daredevils who leap off skyscrapers for fun.

**I**t's a Sunday morning in Berea, Johannesburg, outside the iconic Ponte Towers – the circular, hollow skyscraper that is so integral to the city's skyline. Kids are playing in a nearby park, people are milling at a street corner. Suddenly, the calm is broken by the crack of a canopy opening overhead.

A person falls slowly from the sky.

It's Rudi Serfontein, a base jumper. Unlike skydivers who leap from moving

aircraft, base jumpers jump from fixed objects: buildings, antennas, spans, and earth – hence the acronym.

Although base jumps are from a lower height than skydiving, they are considered to be significantly more dangerous than skydives. Two people have died doing it in South Africa, with 496 deaths around the world since April 1981.

“Base jumping is probably the most dangerous sport a person

All photos: Shiraz Mohamed



Base jumpers at the top of Ponte Tower moments before making their jump.



can do,” says Rudi, who is also an experienced skydiver. He has done more than 700 jumps in 10 years. The jumpers leap with a highly specialised parachute strapped to their backs, and occasionally wear a wingsuit.

Unlike skydivers, who have a reserve chute in case the primary does not deploy, base jumpers have no backup. Once they jump, it’s between them, the gods and that single, highly-specialised parachute.

Why jump, then?

“Even though most people would think base jumpers are reckless, we are in fact very professional in what we do,” says Rudi. When he jumps, he says he feels free, invincible and accomplished.



**Top: Rudi performs a static line jump from the rooftop of Ponte Tower.**

**Bottom: A base jumper swoops through the air against the Hillbrow and Braamfontein skyline.**

The South African base jumping community is small, with around 30 jumpers. One of their favourite jump-



**Above: Rudi stows his lines as he packs away his canopy ahead of his next jump.**



**Left: The base jumpers pack away their canopies before driving to their next jump.**

off points is Ponte, but they travel the country and globe to get their adrenaline fix.

“We jump from anything that is high enough and that we can gain access to. Too many places to mention,” says Rudi. He has travelled as far as Italy and Switzerland to jump. Foreign jumpers

are also attracted to South Africa to jump Table Mountain.

In most places, base jumping is not illegal, but jumpers can be charged with trespassing for covertly jumping off buildings and antennas without the permission of owners. Ponte Tower permits base jumps, but only

after the jumper signs an indemnity form.

The sport is growing fast globally with events like the World Wingsuit League in China, Bridge Day at New River Gorge bridge in the US and the KL Tower Boogie in Malaysia.

While it is unregulated in South Africa, regulatory bodies are starting to form elsewhere. The Swiss Base Association, for example, works with authorities, locals and other air sport parties such as paragliders to keep the sport safe for everyone involved. ■



**Above: Rudi (C), Chris (L) and Stephen (R) squeeze through a gap in a gate after completing their jumps at Ponte Tower.**

**Right: Rudi Serfontein showing off his base tattoo. Each quadrant of the the tattoo symbolise the object in which base jumpers jump from.**





# A lot of governments are doing poorly on poverty

**F**or International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October), let's see how we're doing on the task at hand. In a word: not so hot, at least measured against the expectations of ordinary Africans.

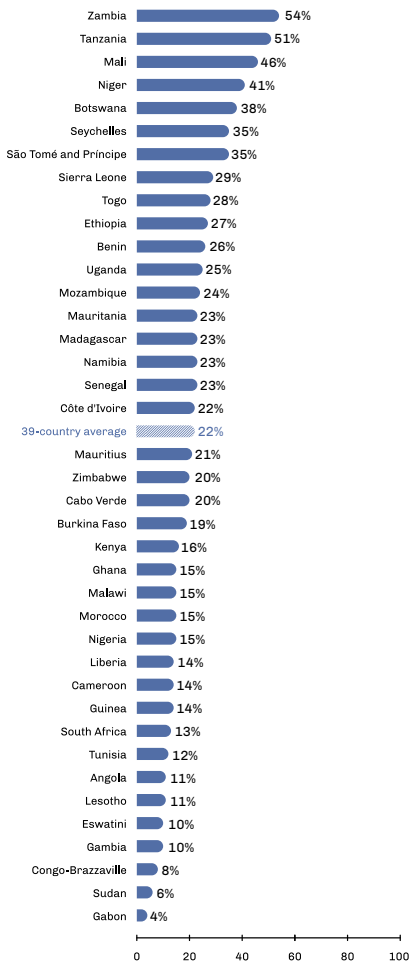
On average across 39 countries surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, only about one in five adults (22%) say their governments are doing "fairly well" or "very well" in efforts to improve the living standards of the poor.

Only two countries register majorities – albeit slim majorities – who think their government is lifting people out of poverty: Zambia (54%) and Tanzania (51%).

In 27 countries, fewer than one in four adults say their governments are doing an acceptable job of making life better for poor people. And approval drops below one in 10 in Congo-Brazzaville (8%), Sudan (6%), and Gabon (4%).

As we might expect, poor people see their governments' failure most clearly: While 30% of well-off respondents are satisfied with their governments' anti-poverty efforts, only half as many poor people (16%) agree.

## Government doing fairly well or very well on fighting poverty | 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.



Legends: Chike Nwoffiah, John Kani, Souleymane Cissé and his translator.  
Photo: Wilfred Okiche

## Community is everywhere – even in Silicon Valley

Hobnobbing with African cinematic legends in the home of American tech capitalism.

### Wilfred Okiche in San Jose

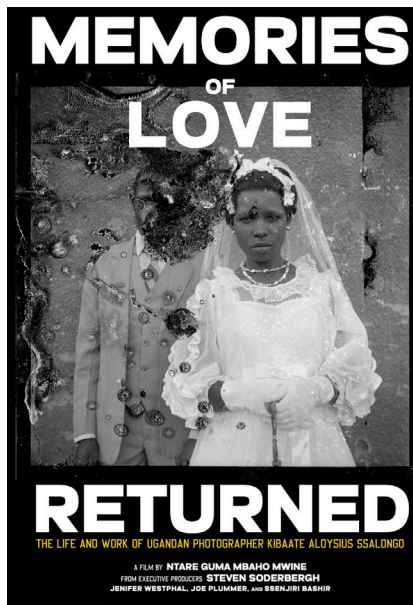
San Jose, where black people make up only 2.9% of the residents, is an unlikely place for an African film festival. Yet, from 10 to 13 October, San Jose’s Historic Hoover Theatre is where we were able to pal around with icons like Souleymane Cissé, the Malian who is hailed as Africa’s greatest living filmmaker, and King T’Chaka himself, John Kani (*Black Panther*).

When the Silicon Valley African Film Festival (Svaff) started, it was a single-day

screening of a handful of films by African filmmakers. This year – its 15th year – it served up 85 films from 38 countries.

Festival director and founder, Chike Nwoffiah insists on creating a communal environment, and that is what sets the Svaff apart. Without regard to hierarchies, guests settled into a group dynamic that empowered all voices. Even the big names honoured this spirit. Cissé and Kani attended all the events and mingled freely with the other guests.

“It is an opportunity to talk to each other, know each other, and to ask the



elders questions,” said Kani, who – like Cissé – is now in his 80s.

Svaff honoured the icons back, presenting “Cultural Icon” awards to Cissé, whose 1987 masterpiece *Yeelen* was the first African film to win a jury prize at Cannes; the Tony award-winning Kani; Julie Dash, whose 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* remains a landmark of Black cinema; and Nigerian actor Richard Mofe-Damijo.

The films screened ranged from the extremely accomplished to the amateurish. Uganda was well represented: the patchy domestic drama *Makula*, directed by the duo of Nisha Kalema and Dan Mugisha opened the festival; and *Memories of Love Returned*, directed by Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine, won the best documentary prize. Mwine’s

film is several things at once: a personal documentary, a celebration of the work of a fascinating artist, and a gentle probe of Uganda’s socio-cultural dynamic.

Beyond the shop talk – panels on topics like African cinema in film studies curricula, the business of film distribution, etc – festival guests were fêted at lavish receptions hosted by Black employee groups at Adobe and YouTube.

Improbably, perhaps, a good African time was had at the epicentre of the West’s techbro heartland. ■

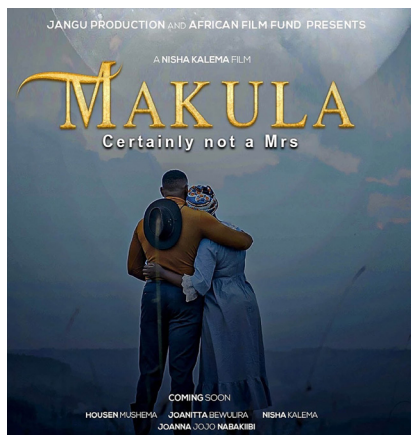


Photo: *Makula* film still

# 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**

"Okay but why isn't there a men's football team called the Super Ostriches?"

Photo: Getty Images



- 1\_** What was Kinshasa called before independence?
- 2\_** True or false: Jerry Rawlings served two terms as Liberia's president.
- 3\_** The ariary is the currency of which country?
- 4\_** The Super Eagles are which country's men's national football team?
- 5\_** The Super Falcons are which country's men's national football team?
- 6\_** The Tundavala Gap, or Fenda da Tundavala, (pictured) is a geoheritage site in which country?
- 7\_** What is the name of the largest metropolis in Zambia?
- 8\_** Togoland was which European country's protectorate?
- 9\_** Benghazi is Libya's capital city. True or false?
- 10\_** Ahmadou Ahidjo was which country's first president?

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

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# A new Dark Age is here

*We should welcome it.*

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Patrick Gathara

Sixteen years ago in the heady days of Barack Obama's campaign to become the first mixed-race president of the US, prominent American journalist, political commentator, and author, Fareed Zakaria wrote to reassure Americans about a global reconfiguration that was causing them much consternation. Jittery Americans wondered if the US, and by extension Western, pre-eminence would be displaced by other "indispensable" nations. Zakaria assured them that the reconfigurations in the news were less about the decline of the West, and more about the rise of the rest.

It was a shaky opinion to hold even then. The rest may be rising but the West is surely declining.

The West's demise as an industrial and economic power was already underway in 2008 when Zakaria wrote that essay. The worst financial crisis since the Great Depression was ravaging Western economies. But Zakaria was still insistent that "at the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world".

That, of course, was before Brexit, Trump, Covid, Biden's support of the Gaza genocide or his ignominious retreat from Afghanistan, shattered Western

pretensions to global leadership. Today, to claim that the global reconfigurations have little to do with Western decline, would seem like quite a stretch.

Sure, the US is still the premier military power on the planet and has demonstrated that it can hold the UN Security Council hostage on votes over Gaza. But politically, the US has probably never been more isolated and derided than it is today. And it only has itself, not the rest, to blame. Its behaviour domestically and on the global stage has seen its prestige decline.

**... while the US is viewed positively around the world, such sentiments have decreased in most countries since the start of the Gaza war.**

The US still enjoys a better reputation than rivals such as China and Russia – and has even seen rises in popularity in some countries, including in my own, Kenya, according to a poll by the Pew Research Centre. However, the 2024 Democracy Perception Index – billed as "the world's largest annual study on how people perceive democracy" – indicates that while the US is viewed positively



around the world, such sentiments have decreased in most countries since the start of the Gaza war.

Western hypocrisy in the ongoing genocide makes the supposed primacy of Western values – you know, the lectures on democracy and human rights the rest were forced to endure as the price of aid – seem like a joke.

Even the undisputed military supremacy of the US might not be much of a consolation. After all, even with 50,000 tons of American arms and seeming carte blanche to bomb whatever it wants, Israel has been unable to eliminate Hamas, who, despite the loss of their leaders, including Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, continue to make a stand.

For all their might, there appear to be limits on the West's ability to cow adversaries like Iran, the Houthis, Hezbollah or Hamas into submission.

But in one way, Zakaria's sentiments ring true: the rise of the rest will birth a better world. The demise of the Western Roman Empire 1,500 years ago is said to have inaugurated the Dark Ages: an era of economic, intellectual, and cultural decline across Western Europe.

The West clearly is not going the way of Rome any time soon, but a new and more prosperous Dark Age is already emerging with the economic emancipation of billions in China, India and elsewhere literally changing the complexion of global power and influence.

And the future will only get darker as the Western linchpins, the US and the UK, continue to pretend at global influence while actually marginalising themselves, and the rest continue to march forward. ■

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*Patrick Gathara is a journalist, cartoonist and author*

# Little big men's fiefdom woes

## Nigeria's never-ending struggle over local government freedom continues in the current presidency.

Toheeb Babalola

Competition between its different levels of governments is a long-standing feature of Nigerian governance.

In 2020, president Muhammadu Buhari empowered the country's 774 local governments with an executive order giving financial autonomy to local government areas (LGAs), including the legislature and judiciary.

This should have ended their subservience to state governors, who are often accused of embezzling funds and undermining local authorities. The country's 36 state governors responded by taking the federal government to the Supreme Court. This proved unsuccessful, but the 2023 elections put a Senate Bill granting LGAs financial administrative authority on hold.

In the interim, Seyi Makinde, a governor from the southwest and vice chairman of the Governors' Forum, refused to implement the changes of the Buhari executive order for the 33 local councils in his state, claiming that LGAs are fraudulent arrangements. Other governors supported his stance, leading to a political standoff.

Following President Bola Tinubu's election, the federal government turned

the tables, taking the governors to the Supreme Court in May 2024. There was widespread public approval when the seven justices issued a judgement granting LGAs financial autonomy but Makinde told the media that the ruling was a "distraction" that should be ignored.

Social activists then mobilised in July to urge the federal government and the Senate to address the issue by revising section 162(6) of the Constitution. One key demand is for governors and LGAs to have separate bank accounts to prevent the diversion of LGA resources.

This appears to have had some traction, with the Senate announcing plans to amend constitutional provisions that are in tension with the Supreme Court's ruling.

The battle is now moving to the polls, however, as state governors seek to ensure the election of loyalists to local councils to retain their dominance no matter what happens to the law.

In Nigeria, sometimes winning the legal battle is only half the struggle. ■



Toheeb Babalola is a freelance journalist. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa

# THE BIG PICTURE

Two cute: Twins and their mum in Igbo-Ora, Nigeria, where twin birth rates are double the world average. Legends tell of a prince who made dual offerings to the gods here. In return the village was blessed with twins.

Photo: Olympia De Maismont/AFP



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