

with Mail & Guardian

The Continent

Preacher, President, Pariah

The Malawi
president's fall
from grace





Cover: Lazarus Chakwera sold himself as the second coming of Malawi's democracy. He was going to clean up the mess that his predecessors had made of the presidency, and transform living standards. But halfway through his term, things are still as messy as ever – and the electorate is beginning to turn against him (p11).

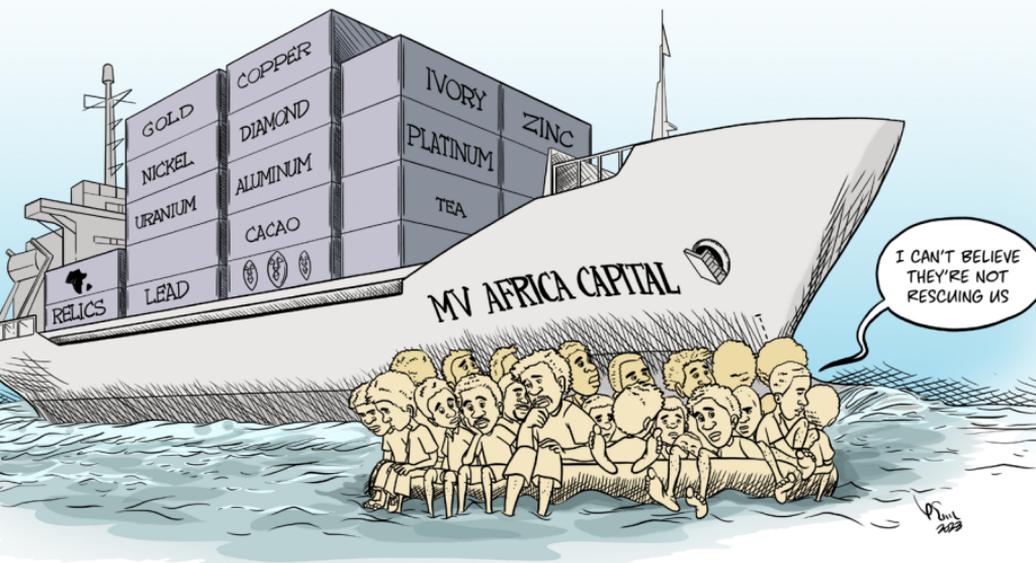
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Inside:

- **Las Anod:** The town caught between Somalia and Somaliland (p9)
- **Sahel:** Jobs, family and friendship drive terrorist recruitment (p10)
- **Nigeria:** As elections loom, the military is the problem (p14)
- **Photo essay:** Kenya and Zimbabwe get homegrown fashion shoots (p17)
- **Sundance:** World premieres and Africa's growing success (p21)

AFRICA MEDIA FESTIVAL:

We'll be in Nairobi next week for the Africa Media Festival. It's the first one, bringing storytellers from across the continent to Kenya to discuss their work. It was inspired by the reality that Africans rarely get visas to go to the rest of the world – including to global journalism conferences. So the festival will bring Africans, and the world, to Africa. Across two days, journalists and everyone working in our industry will share ideas and solutions. It'll mean more journalism – and ultimately more accountability and more stories about our home.



Cartoon: Yemi Yetneberk/The Continent

CAPITALISM

More climate chaos, more profits

As the climate crisis, largely driven by the burning of fossil fuels, extends Ghana's coastline into people's homes, drives flooding and waterborne diseases in countries like Malawi and wreaks other havoc around the world, the weather is great for the companies producing and trading the fuels that are killing us. British Petroleum this week posted profits of nearly \$28-billion and revealed that its carbon emissions will not drop by 40% by 2030, as earlier promised, but by just 25%. ExxonMobile's profits last year were \$56-billion, Shell's \$40-billion and Chevron's \$46-billion.

PRESS FREEDOM

Peeks of what looks like accountability

Cameroonian authorities are detaining a prominent media mogul, Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga, in connection to the brutal murder of popular radio journalist, Mbani Zogo Arsène Salomon. Leaked evidence suggests that several government officials conspired to murder Zogo. In Rwanda, a man was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in the traffic incident that, police said, killed journalist John Williams Ntwali, a frequent critic of President Paul Kagame. The driver was fined 1-million Rwandan francs (about \$920).

SENEGAL

Migrant workers in Qatar-like conditions

Migrant workers building a futuristic city in Diamniadio, about 40 kilometres from Senegal's capital Dakar, work as many as 13 hours a day, seven days a week, for as little as a dollar a day, according to French news agency AFP. Labourers from neighbouring countries like Sierra Leone also described being summarily dismissed without compensation when they suffered workplace injuries. Built largely by a



An architect's rendering of Diamniadio.

Chinese firm, the city will include a large office building for the government and the UN and an Olympic stadium.

ALGERIA

Ambassador recalled over opposition figure's escape

Algeria has recalled its ambassador to France over the dramatic escape of a prominent opposition figure, with what they believe was French diplomatic help. Amira Bouraoui was one of the leaders of the protests that toppled former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019. She was convicted for what the state called "offending Islam". While out of jail pending her appeal, Bouraoui was forbidden from leaving the country – but this week she turned up in Tunisia where she was briefly arrested, released and then snatched off the streets before eventually showing up in France.

SOUTH AFRICA

Spurious Tottenham Hotspur deal dead

Under pressure from its Parliament, South Africa scrapped a 915-million rand (about \$51.5-million) proposal to sponsor United Kingdom football club Tottenham Hotspur. It's probably nothing to mourn about for South Africans who, amid rolling electricity cuts, couldn't count on watching the club play anyway. But the head of South African tourism, the government department which inked the deal, might remind them that they were never the target market. "Ours is to spend money to persuade travellers to come to South Africa," Themba Khumalo told *News 24*.

RUSSIA-AFRICA

Lavrov's charm offensive continues

With visits to Mali, Mauritania and Sudan this week, Russia's top diplomat, Sergey Lavrov, continued the charm offensive in Africa that has taken him to

at least 11 other African countries in the months since his own invaded Ukraine, triggering concerted efforts by Western countries to isolate it internationally. In Mali, he promised more military aid to counter militants in the Sahel. Such aid has often included mercenaries from the Wagner Group who are accused of massacres and other war crimes.



MAURITANIA

Ex-president's trial to go ahead

Since the start of the landmark corruption trial of former president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in late January, his lawyers have argued that the country's criminal court does not have jurisdiction over him. This week, the court ruled that the trial should go ahead, saying that that question can be settled together with the main matter: whether or not he is guilty of illicitly enriching himself during his 11-year rule, when he allegedly amassed personal wealth of over \$72 million.

UGANDA

UN human rights office kicked out

Uganda's government has said it will end the mandate for a United Nations human rights office stationed in the country, ending an agreement in place since 2006. A letter from the foreign ministry said that the country's own human rights institutions and civil society organisations are now adequate for monitoring the internal human rights record. However, in recent years, state authorities have frequently raided, and in some cases closed, NGOs working on human rights.



TÜRKIYE

Earthquake deaths cross 21,000

As the death toll from Monday's massive earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria climbs to over 21,000 people, criticism of leaders is building up in Türkiye. The government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan is being accused of exempting up to 75,000 buildings in the affected areas from meeting earthquake-proofing standards. Erdogan is also being accused of spending much of the \$4.6-billion collected in an earthquake preparedness tax on road and other infrastructure projects by his cronies.

NIGERIA

Court halts chaotic cash swap

The Supreme Court in Nigeria has temporarily stopped the government from imposing its deadline on swapping old naira notes for redesigned ones. The swap, which started in October and was due to end this week, caused chaotic scenes including protests, fights at cash machines and attacks on commercial bank staff, as people tried to offload the old notes in the final weeks. Three states have sued the central bank over it and the supreme court lifted the deadline to whenever those suits are settled.

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East Africa

Bust-up in Bujumbura

Peace talks designed to calm tensions in the eastern DRC may have had the opposite effect

Mwangi Maina

Last Saturday, Burundi's capital Bujumbura hosted talks designed to bring peace to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where a conflict between the government and the M23 rebel movement has reignited.

The presidents of Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda were there, as well as the two alleged protagonists to the conflict: the DRC's Félix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame from Rwanda.

Tshisekedi and Kagame have, over the past few months, traded insults and accusations. Tshisekedi accuses Rwanda of supporting the M23 rebels, and has called Kagame a "warmaker" who should be ashamed of himself. Kagame denies these allegations, and has said that Tshisekedi's 2018 election was a fraud.

Despite these simmering tensions –

both political and personal – the East African Community's official assessment of the talks was positive. The regional body, which is leading mediation efforts, described the engagement as "cordial and friendly".

The Continent's sources describe a very different atmosphere.

"My goodness! It really was tense," said one diplomatic source based in Bujumbura.

Matters came to a head when his counterparts tried to persuade President Tshisekedi to negotiate directly with the rebels, which he vehemently rejected. It got even frostier when Jeff Nyagah, the Kenyan major-general who is leading the east African intervention force that is being deployed to the region, came to brief the leaders on the status of the force.

"Don't favour the M23. It would be a shame if the population took it out on you," an irate Tshisekedi told him.

At one point, according to one source, Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni got so fed up that they abruptly left the meeting and headed for the airport.

The failure of the Bujumbura talks brings the entire peace process into question. More talks are planned for next week, on the sidelines of the African Union summit. ■

Somalia

Bloodshed as city switches allegiance

Las Anod is caught in a tug-of-war between Somalia and Somaliland

Abdirahman Ahmed Aden
in Mogadishu

On Sunday, clan elders in the town of Las Anod made a major announcement about the future of the town and the surrounding Sool, Sanaag and Cayn regions.

After nine days of intense talks, the elders had decided to cut ties with Somaliland – a breakaway republic whose independence is not internationally recognised – and instead reunite with the federal government of Somalia.

The very next day, serious fighting broke out in the city between Somaliland forces – which have been in control of the area since 2017 – and armed militias loyal to Puntland, a semi-autonomous state within Somalia.

These clashes, which are still going, have left at least 20 people dead, according to the United Nations. Some 119 others have been injured, while more than 20,000

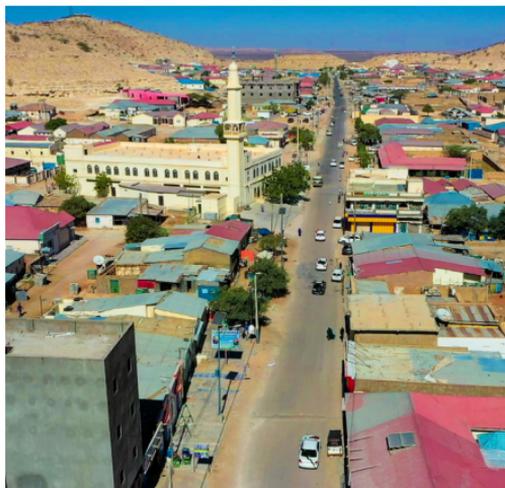
people have been displaced.

A medic in Las Anod told reporters that the death toll could be more than twice as high.

Protests against the presence of Somaliland's security forces in Las Anod have been ongoing for months, with another 20 people killed in clashes in early January.

Somaliland authorities have accused Puntland of sending in militias to incite the violence. Puntland's government has said that it is not involved in the fighting.

Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has called for urgent negotiations. "The situation in Las Anod is concerning, we need to solve the problem on the table, guns and killing is not the solution," he said. ■



Crisis point: The town of Las Anod.

World

Why people join terrorist organisations

They want job security – and they have been failed by their governments

More than 5,000 terrorist attacks happened worldwide in 2021. A quarter of those attacks were in Africa, but nearly half of the deaths were in sub-Saharan Africa. Just four countries — Somalia, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali — accounted for 34% of all the deaths from terrorism. Those numbers are why Africa is sometimes labelled as the global epicentre of terrorism.

But what pushes people to become terrorists?

United Nations researchers tried to answer this question by interviewing 2,200 people who have been associated with terrorist organisations on the continent. Interviewees were spread across eight countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan.

Their findings were published in a new report, *Journeys to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, published this week.

A quarter of respondents said that the main reason they joined a terrorist organisation is the need to find work.

A 39-year-old interviewed in Niger said they joined “because I felt frustrated with the conditions of everyday life”. They added: “I was so poor and vulnerable, with a family to take care of. I thought that in the group I would have a better status.”

Just over a fifth of respondents said they joined because someone they knew had joined. And only 17% said they joined because of the religious ideas shared by the group.

In some regions, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab have thrived by providing services where the state has failed, or is no longer trusted.

Nearly half of the people in the research said a single event was the final thing that convinced them to join a terrorist group. And just over 70% of those said it was a human rights abuse, often perpetrated by the state.

Under the two-decade banner of the “war on terror”, many countries have responded with violence. The countries most affected by terrorism are spending double the African average on their militaries, at around 3% of their GDPs.

As *The Continent* reports this week, in Nigeria the military stands accused of killing as many people as terrorist groups. ■

A photograph showing Lazarus Chakwera, the President of Malawi, and Josephine Banda, the Vice President, standing on a campaign float. They are surrounded by a large crowd of supporters waving Malawian flags. The float is decorated with banners featuring the Malawian coat of arms and the text 'PRESIDENT OF MALAWI' and 'VICE PRESIDENT OF MALAWI'. Chakwera is wearing a dark suit and tie, and Banda is wearing a red dress. They are both smiling and waving to the crowd.

Buyer's remorse: Lazarus Chakwera rode to power on a wave of popular support. Now that support is waving goodbye. Photo: AFP

Lazarus Chakwera's fall from grace

Malawi's president was elected on a wave of euphoria. But halfway through his first term, the former preacher appears to have lost his way – and his electorate is losing faith. So is the international community.

Josephine Chinele in Blantyre

Lazarus Chakwera did not win the 2019 presidential election at the first time of asking. Instead, the incumbent, Peter Mutharika, was declared the winner – despite widespread allegations of electoral fraud and corruption.

Malawians were having none of it. Six months of relentless street protests were followed by a landmark court ruling, in

which Constitutional Court judges bravely rejected bribes and intimidation to nullify the results of that poll – a win for Malawi's democracy and, ultimately, Chakwera.

When the vote was rerun in June 2020, he won in a landslide. His inauguration was greeted with scenes of euphoria. As a prominent leader in the country's influential evangelical movement, he sold himself as a clean break from the messy politics of Malawi's past, and said he would

clear away the “rubble of corruption”.

Instead, he has found himself in the centre of even more mess.

His approval ratings have plummeted, and Western donors – crucial to the functioning of the fragile economy – are publicly grumbling about his failure to tackle corruption.

The problems are not all of his own making. The economy – still heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture, and thus the fluctuating price of fertiliser – has been battered first by the pandemic and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This has left the president struggling to deliver on campaign promises, such as the provision of affordable fertiliser to farmers, who are a majority of voters in this largely agrarian society.

But Chakwera has made plenty of his own mistakes. His first cabinet included several of his siblings and people with family connections, earning him the moniker “Family Man”. Appointing son-in-law Sean Kampondeni as his communications director and giving daughter Violet Chakwera a diplomatic post in the United Kingdom did little to challenge the perception of nepotism.

Rookie mistakes

But it is Chakwera’s handling of one of Malawi’s biggest-ever corruption scandals that has been the major factor in his declining popularity. The scandal centres on Zuneth Sattar, a British businessman. Although he has yet to be formally charged, authorities allege that Sattar bribed senior government officials – including vice-president Saulos Chilima

– to secure lucrative government tenders. Sattar denies these allegations. Chilima was arrested and charged with multiple corruption-related offences in November.

Although Chakwera has said publicly that he supports the ongoing investigation, his treatment of Martha Chizuma – the popular director of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, a government agency – suggests something different. She has been intimidated by police; her conversations have been illegally recorded and used against her; and the president has dismissed her as a “rookie” and her reports as “substandard”.

In December, she was arrested by armed policemen and charged with libel, in connection to comments made in the illegal recordings. It emerged in court that this indictment was driven by the secretary to the president and cabinet. When it was challenged by the Malawi Law Society, the attorney-general – another Chakwera appointee – hired private lawyers to insist on its validity.

As *The Continent* reported last year: “Chizuma remains in the job only because she is more popular and trusted by the public – and Malawi’s donors – than any other public official.”

But those donor nations are getting restless nonetheless.

In a scathing statement released this week, the embassy of the United States in Malawi described the legal action against Chizuma as “two months of harassment”, and added: “As a democratic partner, the embassy of the United States looks to the government of Malawi to actively pursue the fight against corruption and

not to wage a campaign of intimidation against anti-corruption champions. We have actively engaged senior government officials to seek renewed commitment to the fight against corruption, but those efforts have not yielded results.”

These sentiments were subsequently echoed by the British High Commissioner to Malawi.

Lilongwe responded with a statement vowing to protect “sovereignty and independence” of its institutions while simultaneously saying it will launch constructive dialogue with the donors.

The consequences for Malawi became clearer later in the week. The US, it was reported, is considering withdrawing a planned \$350-million investment in Malawi’s energy and road infrastructure, and may follow up with more targeted measures including travel bans.

Disappointing start

Lazarus Chakwera ascended to the presidency with no experience in running a government. What he did bring with him was his reputation as a prominent evangelical pastor who espoused the virtues of servant leadership. His party, the Malawi Congress Party, had spent 29 years in opposition, but as the country’s oldest political party were expected to restore some respect to the executive office.

The disappointments in both party and president have been great. So palpable is the discord with the public that a recent Afrobarometer poll predicted that if elections were to be held now, the Democratic Progressive Party – the party of disgraced former president Mutharika

– would bounce back to power.

“People elected him [Chakwera] based on the promises he made but there is nothing to show for it,” said Boniface Dulani, a political scientist and Afrobarometer researcher. “The results of the Afrobarometer study are a product of frustration, corruption has increased, and the government isn’t doing a good job in handling the economy.”

Chimwemwe Tsitsi, a political scientist at the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences, said that “the mistreatment of Anti-Corruption Bureau chief Martha Chizuma has compromised the Chakwera administration’s integrity”.

Government spokesperson Moses Kunkuyu rejects this assertion, arguing that the president has in fact been protecting Chizuma. He claims the government is fully committed to fighting corruption.

Fortunately for Chakwera, he still has two and a half years before he has to answer to the electorate again – which gives him several opportunities to answer his critics. Among the most urgent is his handling of the ongoing cholera outbreak, which has killed 1,210 in the last year. Even more politically significant, however, is whether he will be able to deliver a good harvest – something that depends on getting affordable fertiliser to the country’s farmers, which is partially in his control; and good rains, which is not.

Chakwera’s parents, after losing three babies in infancy, named him Lazarus, after the biblical figure who rose from the dead.

Can he resurrect his political career? ■

Nigeria's military is broken

The first job of any new president must be to fix it

Socrates Mbamalu

Late last week, more than a hundred people were killed in fighting between armed bandits and a vigilante group in Nigeria's northern Katsina state.

The Nigerian military, tasked with maintaining security in this part of the country, was nowhere to be seen. Instead, citizens were told to fend for themselves.

"People should learn to be courageous enough to confront the devils," said Katsina's secretary to the state government, Muntari Lawal, in the aftermath of the attack. "Don't wait for government. Before government intervenes the damage has been done. So, organise yourselves to confront them."

It is not just local government officials who have lost faith in the military's ability to execute its responsibilities. From within the military itself, there is a growing chorus of concern over the state of Nigeria's armed forces.

One of these critics is Major General Olusegun Adeniyi, the former theatre commander of Operation Lafiya Dole, which is the military operation in north-east Nigeria aimed at flushing out Boko Haram and Islamic State militants (in Hausai, Lafiya Dole means "peace by force"). In March 2020, he appeared in a video surrounded by his soldiers. Some lay on the ground, wounded; others were

mourning the deaths of their colleagues. Speaking directly into the camera, and addressing the generals in Abuja, he gave a bleak assessment of the battlefield situation. He said that his unit could not match Boko Haram's firepower, and asked for better equipment, weaponry and intelligence.

Adeniyi did not get what he asked for. Instead, he was court-martialled and found guilty of violating the army's social media policy.

Another prominent critic is President Muhammadu Buhari's national security advisor, Babagana Monguno, a retired major-general. In a BBC Hausa interview in March 2021, Monguno raised the alarm about corruption within the military. He said that money meant for the procurement of weapons – weapons that could have helped Adeniyi and his troops on the front lines – was unaccounted for by former defence chiefs (some of whom now enjoy cushy ambassadorial roles).

"Corruption is one of those deeper problems because it erodes the capacity and capability of the troops," said Matthew Page, a specialist on Nigeria with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "It also is a distraction because it becomes a purpose for perpetuating the conflict and an end for some of these corrupt senior officials and top military officers. Instead of their choices



Tanks for nothing: Critics say Nigeria's military prefers self-enrichment to security

and strategies being structured around peace and the rule of law and fighting the conflict in a sustainable and constructive way, they're looking for short-term gains, especially as some of these senior officers are in a position for a year or two.”

According to a 2020 Transparency International report, the ministry of defence's finance directorate and the supreme audit office, which is supposed to enforce financial transparency, is too weak to do so effectively.

False sense of security

The influence of the military on the institutions, psyche and politics of the country can't be overstated. Out of 14 heads of state, eight were in the military.

All told, for nearly three decades of its post-independence, the country was a de facto military dictatorship. Indeed, its current president was once himself a military dictator, from 1983 to 1985, before reinventing himself as a democrat.

It is also one of the country's largest employers, with 223,000 personnel as of 2018, according to the World Bank.

But its undeniable influence is not necessarily matched by its effectiveness. “What the military is suffering from is corruption, policy misdirection, and a lack of commensurate training for modern purposes and indiscipline,” said Confidence MacHarry, an analyst at SBM Intelligence.

These problems have been starkly

highlighted during the years-long prosecution of its war in the North-East, which has failed to eliminate the threat from the various militant groups operating in the area.

The military campaign has been accompanied by a litany of well-documented human rights abuses in which the armed forces have been implicated, including: aerial bombings of refugee camps; massacres of civilians; rape and torture as weapons of war; illegal detentions, including of minors; and, most recently, an illegal mass abortion programme in which at least 10,000 pregnancies were forcibly terminated in an effort to prevent the birth of future “terrorists”.

In the decade between 2006 and 2016, the Nigeria Watch research group found that roughly the same number of people were killed by Boko Haram (16,666) as by the country’s security forces (16,182), calling the military’s role as protectors into question.

All this comes at a hefty cost to the Nigerian taxpayer, with the budget allocated to defence spending increasing rapidly in recent years. In 2021, the federal government spent \$4.5-billion on the armed forces, according to *Business Day*, which is 56% more than in 2020.

Litmus test

On 25 February, Nigerians will vote for a new president. Amid stiff competition, the most pressing challenge for the successful candidate will be how to reform the military.

The leading presidential candidates

have each proffered different solutions to the country’s insecurity challenge. Not one, however, has addressed how he would handle the foundational issues plaguing the military.

The ruling All Progressives Congress candidate Bola Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State, has repeatedly mentioned recruiting more soldiers into the army – as if that would solve the problems. He wants to create anti-terrorist battalions, upgrade tactical communications and transport, upgrade weapons systems, and improve salaries and troop welfare.

Former vice president Atiku Abubakar, who is contesting under the People’s Democratic Party banner, traced many of the country’s current problems to the military in his manifesto. He wants to increase transparency and accountability around the spending of the defence budget, and improve the welfare of personnel in the armed forces. He also wants more soldiers.

Peter Obi, the Labour Party presidential candidate whose popularity among young Nigerians has made him a surprise contender, said that he would refocus the military to handle external threats and border protection, and let the police deal with internal security threats.

He has also promised to reorganise the country’s security architecture, which may offer scope for serious reform – although it is not clear exactly what that reform might look like.

Whoever wins, it is clear that their success or failure in dealing with Nigeria’s military will determine the success or failure of their time in office. ■



PHOTO ESSAY

Local rags

**Leading designers
have found global
success by staying
true to their roots**

Dingani Masuku

A railway cuts through Kibera, a low-income suburb in Nairobi. Periodically, the vendors who crowd the tracks scatter to make way for a diesel-powered train belching thick black smoke.

An unlikely setting for a fashion show. Yet this is where designer David Ochieng, born and raised here, chose to display his creations during last year's inaugural Kibera Fashion Week,



which he also helped to organise. At night, lit up by welding sparks, a parade of beautiful young people sashayed along the railway line, now an improvised catwalk.

“I want to be here,” said Ochieng, the creator of the Looks Like Avido fashion house. “I want to create opportunities for the people around me. These are the people that were with me, who showed me the light when I was in darkness.”

His clothes lend dignity to an area that has long been marginalised. “I dress the shame; I hide the filth and clothe the community with beautiful apparel.”





Quality and passion: South African model Sithembiso 'John Reed' Mhlanga (left), and Zimbabwean designer Blessing Munjeri of Afro-Phoenix.

The creations of Zimbabwean designer Blessing Munjeri, showcased under his Afro-Phoenix brand, also draw inspiration from his origins. “My designs tell a story,” he says. “They tell my African story. They express my culture.” Nonetheless, the harsh economic realities of Zimbabwe mean his story has not always been straightforward.

“In Zimbabwe, the few organisations that support the industry do not have the money. There are also exorbitant fees to register fashion businesses,” he says. “How can up-and-coming people make it? But when you make it international, the

government wants to be part of your success.”

Sithembiso Mhlanga, a South African model and Mr Mpumalanga 2023 semi-finalist, said that there is just something different about modelling African designs – including designs by Blessing Munjeri, which he showcased at the Limpopo Fashion Week last year.

“It is an essentially beautiful thing to represent African designers, you get to experience first-hand the brand they create, the quality and the passion,” says Mhlanga, who models under the name John Reed. “There is a future in marketing African fashion.” ■

Put our money where our youth is

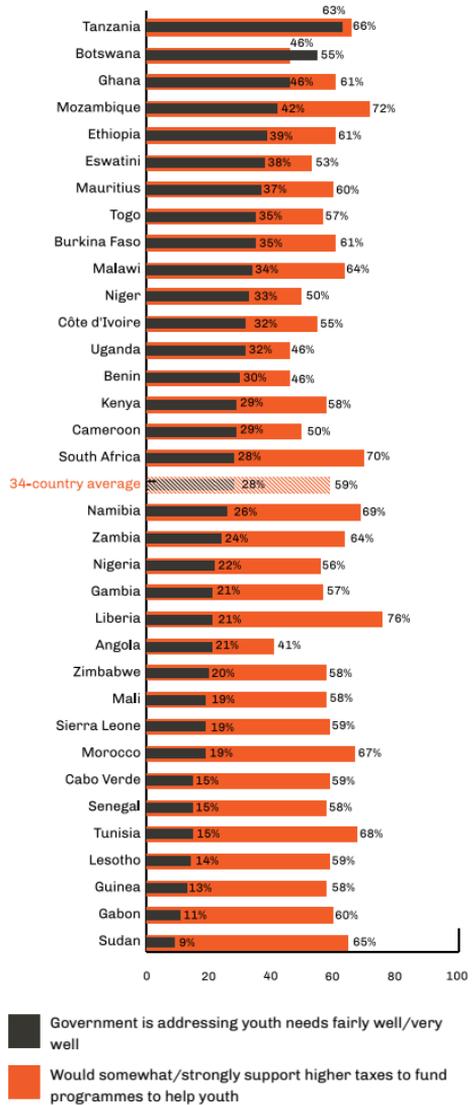
If youth are the future, nowhere is that truer than in Africa, the world's youngest continent. But considering youth unemployment rates, are we doing enough to make that future bright?

On average across 34 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2019/2021, only 28% of citizens think their governments are doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of meeting the needs of their youth. Just one in 10 Sudanese (9%) and Gabonese (11%) think so. Tanzania (63%) and Botswana (55%) are the only surveyed countries where majorities think they're doing okay by young people.

But a solid majority (59%) of Africans say they would pay higher taxes to support programmes to help young people. That includes half or more of citizens in 30 countries, led by Liberia (76%), Mozambique (72%), and South Africa (70%). Opponents outnumber supporters only in Benin (51% vs. 46%), while views are about evenly divided in Angola, Botswana, and Uganda.

Africans' top priority for additional investment in youth would be job creation (cited by 50% of respondents). Education ranks a distant second (18%), followed by other work-related programmes – job training (12%) and business loans (12%).

Are we doing enough to help youth? | 34 African countries | 2019/2021



Source: Afrobarometer, 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.



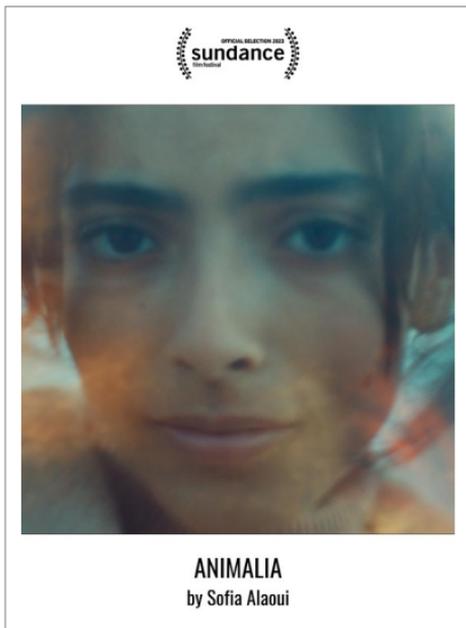
African filmmakers shine at Sundance

The continent's offerings appear to be growing in strength and tangible appreciation

Wilfred Okiche

The world premiere of *Mami Wata* took place at this year's Sundance Festival at the end of January. "It is a dream," Nigerian filmmaker CJ Obasi tells *The Continent*. The same might be said of the film itself: shot in dreamy black and white, *Mami Wata* is Obasi's take on the myth of the mermaid goddess, a figure that has its basis in popular West African folklore. According to legend, Mami Wata is a powerful marine deity who can be just as benevolent or terrifying as the oceans.

Obasi's feminist fable stars Ivorian actress Evelyne Ily Juhen and Nollywood veteran Rita Edochie as devotees of the marine goddess who reckon with a crisis of faith and identity in their waterside community when a stranger washes ashore. It carries a timeless look and feel, courtesy of Brazilian Lílís Soares' breathtaking cinematography, which won the festival's special jury prize in the



international dramatic competition.

French Moroccan filmmaker Sophia Alaoui, winner of the grand jury prize for her short film *So What If the Goats Die* in 2020, returned to the festival this time with her debut feature *Animalia*. A puzzling fever dream that also encroaches into metaphysical territory, *Animalia* uses the backdrop of an extraterrestrial invasion of earth to explore themes of gender equality and female agency while criticising the grip of dogma and organised religion on people and the societies they hail from.

"I was thinking of how to question my society but in a way that can be accepted in my country. Because I want to make films from my society and not from Europe as an outsider," Alaoui tells *The Continent*

Still from *Girl*

from Paris. For her efforts, Alaoui won the special jury award for creative vision, also in the international dramatic competition.

Changing focus

These modest wins reflect a growing appreciation of African cinema at Sundance, a festival that is particularly famous for its America-centric vibe. In an environment that is designed to discover and cultivate the newest voices in independent cinema, African films more than held their own.

Emerging as one of the most indelible experiences of the festival was *Milisuthando*, the debut feature documentary by South African writer-turned-filmmaker Milisuthando Bongela. It is near impossible to leave a viewing of *Milisuthando* unmoved. The director reconsiders the very idea of the personal documentary as she upends form and structure to emerge with a

compelling inquiry into personhood and its relationship with nationality.

Bongela grew up in the Transkei, a nominally independent but internationally unrecognised homeland for the Xhosa people designated by the apartheid state. Transkei was ultimately an illusion, a strange experiment to advance the legitimacy of racial inequality. But to a child growing up, absent the spectre and trauma of apartheid, it seemed like a wholesome ideal. "I have to be very careful about remembering my memories," Bongela says in the film.

It wasn't until the programme was dissolved and her family integrated that Bongela would encounter racial disparities for the first time. *Milisuthando* is thematically ambitious with the director deploying intimate family recordings, remarkable archival footage and a potent soundtrack to put together a searching and searing dive into the legacy of apartheid and its endless aftershocks.

The African diaspora has always been represented at Sundance with names like Chinonye Chukwu, Nikyatu Jusu and Akinola Davies winning top prizes of late. This year, Adura Onashile and Walé Oyéjidé, both of Nigerian ancestry were at the festival with their debut features.

Onashile's *Girl* is a gorgeously lit consideration of trauma and displacement by way of Glasgow. Oyéjidé's *Bravo, Burkina* made in collaboration with the Ethical Fashion Initiative and filmed in Burkina Faso and Italy is a transcontinental meditation on the beauty and pain that migrants carry across borders. ■

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

"If my name was on the ballot, I'd probably win it."



- 1_ What is Equatorial Guinea's capital city?
- 2_ Newly minted Grammy Award winner Zakes Bantwini is from which country?
- 3_ Hargeisa (pictured) is which territory's capital city?
- 4_ What other name is given to Lake Nyasa?
- 5_ What currency is used in Rwanda?
- 6_ Name the country bordered by Mauritania, Mali, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau.
- 7_ Which West African country holds presidential elections on 25 February?
- 8_ True or false: Kenya's largest aviation facility is named after Uhuru Kenyatta.
- 9_ Hassan Sheikh Mohamud is which country's president?
- 10_ What country does football club Al Ahly come from?

HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Roses are red, this column's for you



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Dearest reader, please accept this as your personal valentine. Let it not be said that 14 February was just another day for you, for this column is proof that you are loved, adored and valued.

Tell your colleagues that despite what they think, your Valentine's Day will not be spent in front of the TV eating a meal for one – for there is a special someone in your life. It is us.

How much do we love you, you ask? We take inspiration from our leaders to answer: We would serve a thousand terms if you asked – or even if you didn't! Our devotion to you would bring a tear to the eye of our most cynical critics (tear gas supplies allowing). And instead of finishing each other's sentences we would change the Constitution so that neither of us even faces charges.

We would treat you to candlelit dinners – not just on special occasions but every single night of stage 6 loadshedding.

And we wouldn't seal our love with a kiss like some sort of amateur, but with a clandestine treaty to supply arms and ammunition for your next coup.

The French connection

Yes reader, love is in the air, unless you are Algeria and France, in which case there's nothing in the air at all, after Algiers announced that it had recalled its ambassador to Paris, all because of the wanted Algerian activist, Amira Bouraoui.

Bouraoui, a journalist who in 2019 helped lead protests that eventually toppled president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and who continued to be a thorn in the side of the establishment, had crossed over to Tunisia where she was detained while trying to board a flight to France.

She was expected to be extradited to Algeria where she faces charges of insulting President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and “offending Islam”, but was somehow able to escape Tunis – apparently with help from the French Embassy – and is now safely in Lyon.

This broke so many hearts in Algeria that authorities there are now accusing “personnel belonging to the French state” of “violating national sovereignty” and being involved in a “clandestine and illegal operation”.

They say all is fair in love and war, but even so we'd advise Manny Macron to hold off on that box of Valentine macarons he might have been planning to send to Tebboune.

Heartbreakers

In the latest episode of *Keeping Up With The Coupdashions* the flourishing romance between our babes in Bamako and Russia is getting serious.

This week Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Bamako where he promised that Russia would continue to support Mali in its fight against terrorism (military equipment makes quite the Valentine's Day gift!), while Mali's foreign minister Abdoulaye Diop announced that Mali was not going to justify its choice of partners. That's us told, then!

Bamako this week also expelled the human rights chief of the United Nations Mission to Mali, Guillaume Ngefa, declaring him persona non grata.

Poor UN. It can't seem to catch a break this week. From the country of our favourite hat model, personal trainer and president, Yoweri Museveni, comes the news that Uganda will not be renewing the mandate of the office of the UN high commissioner for human rights, because, thanks to the government's commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, alongside a vibrant civil society, M7's crew has things covered, so OHCHR might as well go home now.

If you say so!

The question of which African country is the most romantic of all is one we'd love your opinion on, but when it comes to which one takes the trophy for make-ups and break-ups, we think Kenya must be right up there, thanks to the broken bromance between former numero uno Uhuru Kenyatta and current president William Ruto – and the latter's stormy



We got this: Yoweri Museveni's crew says Uganda doesn't need the OHCHR.

relationship with opposition stalwart Raila Odinga.

The latest chapter in their story involves former interior cabinet secretary Dr Fred Matiang'i, whose home was surrounded by police on Wednesday, for ... *checks notes ... reasons?

This then prompted his lawyers to rock up – along with Odinga himself, who said he was shocked that this had happened and that “We will not allow the dark days of repression to return”.

And yet the next day authorities said no one had been sent to Dr Matiangi's house! So maybe it was just individual police who stopped by to drop off some Valentine's cards? Ah, the mysteries of love and life.

We end today's love letter on a sombre note, this week saw earthquakes hit Turkey and Syria, causing loss, death and damage on an unimaginable scale.

We pay tribute to all those affected, the rescue services, the journalists bringing us regular updates and the people of both countries.

Our hearts are with you. ■

'Corruption fights back' in Malawi

An anti-graft boss's foes have turned the president against her, but the public appears not to be fooled

Kelly Napolo

The controversy surrounding the director general of Malawi's Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB), Martha Chizuma, continues to deepen.

After taking up her position to great fanfare, Chizuma set about exposing graft in a government widely seen to be corrupt. But those she intended to expose hit back in a series of elaborate efforts to undermine her, reminding us that, as Nuhu Ribadu, former chairman of Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission put it, "when you fight corruption, it fights you back".

In the latest media revelations, journalist Golden Matonga explained how Chizuma's enemies schemed to ensure that President Lazarus Chakwera would move against her.

As part of this, they "picked on a false rumour that the ACB had launched an investigation against the president's son. They further exaggerated the report to the president that the first lady, too, was under

investigation."

This was only one of the strategies used to mobilise against her. On 31 January Chizuma received an interdiction order from the secretary to the president, Colleen Zamba, who claimed to be suspending her in line with the Malawi Public Service Regulations on the basis that she faces criminal defamation charges in court. This refers to a leaked recording in which she is heard disclosing private information, which led to her arrest on 6 December 2022.

The Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace said that her arrest raised questions about whether President Chakwera really supports "the battle against corruption in the country".

The interdiction was also widely criticised, in part because Chizuma's case has yet to be heard and she has not been found guilty.

While the United States Embassy released an unusually critical message over social media, the high court suspended the implementation of the interdiction, allowing Chizuma to continue to discharge her duties.

Expect her enemies to have launched a new strategy to keep her down by the time you read this. ■

Kelly Napolo is a fourth year Journalism Student at Malawi University of Business and Applied Science. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa



The Big Picture

Photo: John Wessels/AFP

Sift shift: A man pans for gold at Karakaene, one of the largest artisanal mining sites in southeastern Senegal, close to the border of Mali. The town has more than doubled in size in recent years, with the recent gold rush attracting migrant workers from 19 different African countries. Most of the gold is extracted and sold in Mali where the price is higher.



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