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The Continent



**The omicron variant,
and other ways the west
keeps Africans out**

Photo: AFP



COVER: Barbed wire. Dog units. Friendly dictators. Lie detectors. Expensive visa regimes. Illegal pushbacks and pullbacks (as pictured on the cover, where a Libyan soldier, paid for by Europe, is forcibly returning migrants to Libya). These are some of the ways the West makes it difficult for Africans and other non-westerners to enter. To that list we can now add the omicron variant, which only seems to be a threat when it comes from African countries. It's almost as if they don't want us there at all. (p12 and p16)

Inside:

- **Hard news:** Why being a journalist is more dangerous than ever (p8)
- **Unfinished business:** The Africa Cup of Nations might not go ahead (p9)
- **Reasons to be cheerful:** African solutions to the climate crisis (p11)
- **New traditions:** What will wooden masks look like in the future? Pretty cool actually (p18)

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE FREE ONE

Don't miss the special edition of *The Continent*, also published this week, which features all the shortlisted entries from the inaugural *The Continent/ Democracy in Africa Prize for Comment Writing*. Read about the death of quiet in our cities; how the 'Prosperity Gospel' keeps us poor; how vaccines are not affecting fertility in Mombasa; and plenty more. And don't forget to vote for your favourite! For regular subscribers, this special edition will appear at the end of the edition this week.

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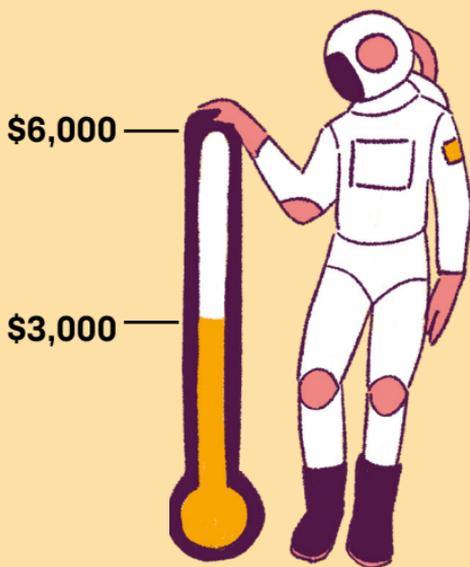
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The rot at the top

Dear Editor,

African leaders really don't comprehend the role of being a leader ("Another week, another Kabila corruption scandal", *The Continent* Issue 67). We see presidents, ministers and government bureaucrats living large by stealing from the people who mandated them to run governments. Foreign powers and businessmen have seen that African leaders' weakness is money, and they have taken advantage – and are using corrupt means to gain wealth from our beloved continent. African leaders, wake up and serve your people with pride, without selling them to China, the UK and America. We need more Sankaras, Lumumbas and Mandelas; not Kabilas, Mugabes, Zumas and Bashirs.

Molefe, South Africa



Information is power

The Continent's coverage of Kenya's plans to introduce a nationwide vaccine mandate (Issue 66) – and the pros and cons of the decision – has informed Kenyan lawyer **Karanja Matindi's** legal challenge against the move, he said on social media. "An appreciation tweet for @AmnestyKenya, @irunguhoughton, @thecontinent_, @CKyobutungi & @soila_kenya. Your opinions & views abt the justice or otherwise of the planned #NoVaccineNoService policy by the GoK helped inform my court case against the proposal. Keep up the great work."



The Zimbabwean dilemma

Dear Editor,

It's true Zimbabweans face an uncertain future in South Africa (*The Continent* Issue 67) after the decision not to renew the special permits. Hopefully it wasn't driven by hatred. As Zimbabweans in SA, we live in great fear. But I think it's a blessing in disguise: we need to go back home and rebuild our nation.

Terrence Mwedzi, a Zimbabwean in South Africa.



Got something you want to say about something you read in *The Continent*? Tell us in 100 words or less. Letters may be edited for clarity and length. Email letters@thecontinent.org



CHINA

Beijing rains on its own parade

Chinese authorities changed the weather in Beijing to ensure clear skies and limited air pollution for the centenary celebrations of the Communist Party. A study by the Tsinghua University showed how clouds were seeded, creating artificial rain before the celebrations. This in turn lowered air pollution levels from “moderate” to “good” for that short space of time. Tinkering with the weather is not unusual for the Chinese state, where short-term wins can then mask long-term pollution problems.

ISRAEL/AFRICA

Israel diplomacy's just deserts?

Algeria and Tunisia this week welcomed Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas with gifts. Tunis unveiled a new Palestinian embassy building. Both countries have ruled out establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. Neighbouring Morocco welcomed an Israeli delegation and signed their first-ever joint security agreement and agreed to normalise relations. Israel continues to seek legitimacy on the continent, despite having put a blanket ban on most of Africa after the emergence of the omicron variant, and its continuing human rights abuses of people in Palestine.

MADAGASCAR

Coup tries to replace coup

Twenty one people, including two Frenchmen, are on trial in Madagascar for allegedly planning to “eliminate or neutralise various Malagasy public figures, including the head of state”. Malagasy security say the plot was timed for the country’s June 26 independence celebrations. The current president came to power in a 2009 coup. The accused include a former advisor to the president and a central bank employee.

SPORT

No foul – just a long losing streak

South Africa's football woes continue, with Fifa dismissing its protest over a 1-0 loss to Ghana in the World Cup qualifier played in Cape Coast last month. The South Africa football association had claimed that their side was robbed when the referee awarded the Ghanaian team a penalty. South Africa robbed Senegal with a similar decision in 2017 and were forced to replay the match. The last time Bafana Bafana made it into a World Cup came through its automatic admission when South Africa hosted the tournament.

BOTSWANA

A silver star for Gaborone

Botswana is very close to eliminating transmission of HIV from mothers to their newborn babies and it's the first country with a large Aids epidemic to come this close. The WHO has awarded it the "silver tier" status, a certification that goes to countries which bring the mother-to-child HIV transmission rate to under 5 % and give Aids treatment drugs to at least 90% of pregnant women who are HIV positive. Globally, only 15 countries have achieved this milestone.



BURUNDI

Dozens die in prison fire

At least 38 people died and nearly 70 were seriously injured, by a huge fire at Gitega prison in Burundi. One prisoner told the BBC that guards refused to open inmates' sleeping quarters, even as the fire raged, claiming they didn't have orders to do so. In a tweet, Burundi's interior ministry blamed the fire on an electrical fault.

FACEBOOK

Facebook sued for \$150-billion

A lawsuit in the United States accuses Facebook of facilitating the genocide of Rohingya in Myanmar. The company has said it should have done more. The lawsuit alleges that the social media network knowingly amplified hate speech and incitements to violence.



KENYA/SOUTH AFRICA

'Go back to Africa'

South Africa and Kenya have reached an agreement in which the southern nation will deport to Nairobi a diverse set of

migrants it deems illegal. Kenya is an early point on an intra-Africa migration route that runs south through Tanzania, Malawi, and Zambia or Zimbabwe before terminating in South Africa. For taking the deportees, Kenya secured a relaxation of South African visa restrictions.

CAMEROON

Water scarcity drives conflict

At least ten people died, many more were wounded and hundreds were forced to flee into neighbouring Chad when cattle ranchers and fishers clashed over water in northern Cameroon at the start of the week. Local authorities worry that this is an emerging pattern that may escalate into ongoing armed conflict between these communities.

NEW ZEALAND

Never smokers

New Zealand wants to outlaw smoking by 2025. The first step is a law that means anyone now under the age of 14 will never be able to buy tobacco, regardless of their age. Smoking is one of the world's biggest killers. The tobacco industry spent decades lying about the health and social impacts of smoking, and lobbied to weaken laws, everywhere, that would protect people's health.

Africa

75 African journalists imprisoned for doing their jobs

Across Africa, 12 nations were keeping at least 75 journalists behind bars as of December 1 – not counting those who were detained and released

One in every four journalists currently in prison for their work is African. Egypt, where 25 journalists are in jail, is the worst media repressor on the continent followed by Eritrea (16) but the “biggest setback for media freedom came in Ethiopia”, says a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a US-based watchdog.

Across Africa, 12 governments sent 75 journalists to jail this year, or kept them there. That is how many were in jail on December 1, when the press freedom watchdog did the census, and does not include those who had been jailed but

were subsequently released.

In Ethiopia, where nine journalists are in jail, the repression is tied to the emergency laws imposed over the civil war in Tigray. Other countries, like Rwanda (seven) and Cameroon (six), are continuing a years-long pattern. In each of the censuses CPJ has done since 2018, Rwanda and Cameroon have had at least 11 imprisoned journalists between them.

Some cases are shocking accounts of state repression and impunity. “Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abou Zeid, known as Shawkan, for example, has spent every night in police custody since he was freed from Tora prison on March 4, 2019,” the census report says.

Zeid was arrested in 2013 while covering clashes between Egyptian security forces and supporters of former president Mohamed Morsi. He was kept in prison, without conviction, for five years. In 2018, a court said he was guilty of murder and belonging to a terrorist group and sentenced him to five years, which he had already served. He was released shortly after, but on “police observation” – an order to report to a police station every day at sunset. “Every evening so far, police order him to spend the night in the station’s cells,” the CPJ report says.

Across the world, CPJ counted 293 journalists behind bars, with China (50), being the top repressor. ■

Cameroon

Crunch time for the Africa Cup of Nations

With the main stadium unfinished and Covid-19 on the move, Africa's main football tournament has... issues. Still, the hosts insist Afcon will go ahead.

Isifu Wirfengla in Yaounde

The continent's biggest men's football tournament, the Africa Cup of Nations, is meant to kick off in Cameroon in four weeks. But the venue for the opening and closing matches, the Paul Biya Stadium in Yaounde, is not ready. And the omicron variant of Covid-19 is spreading and causing travel chaos.

The tournament was meant to be held early this year, but was delayed due to the pandemic. Despite the obstacles, a 219 member delegation from the Confederation of African Football (CAF) has started arriving in Cameroon. This is the body that oversees the nations cup.

Cameroon has invested a lot in the tournament after it was stripped of hosting rights in 2019, when it was deemed not



ready. The confederation is also under new leadership, headed by South African businessman Patrice Motsepe.

The month-long competition will be held in the 40th year of President Paul Biya's rule. His namesake 60,000 seater stadium is meant to be the centrepiece of the opening and closing ceremony. Last month, confederation secretary-general Véron Mosengo-Omba said those matches and ceremonies might have to be held at another stadium. Work is still underway across the entire complex, but anyone who reports on or otherwise documents it faces a fine of \$17,000. A final decision will be made this weekend.

CAF has remained tight-lipped about the impact of Covid-19 amid increasing calls to move the competition, including from European football teams, where some of the top African players work.

Cameroon has yet to record a case of the omicron variant, however, and despite the challenges, the organisers seem to have bet the farm on either holding it next month – or never. ■



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Reasons to be hopeful

The climate crisis will hit Africa hard. The Covid-19 crisis has shown that African states can't rely on the Global North to do the right thing. Nevertheless, there are signs that all is not lost.

Sipho Kings

The world is set to heat by 2.4°C this century. That's catastrophic. Rich countries are almost entirely to blame for that global heating. They aren't taking responsibility for this, by meaningfully dropping their carbon emissions or paying poorer countries for the damage of those emissions. And the selfishness of the West's Covid-19 response has shown how the response to the climate crisis will go.

In this context, African countries are increasingly solving their own problems:

- This continent's carbon emissions could drop by 32% by 2030, if the plans submitted by the COP26 climate conference go ahead.
- The International Renewable Energy Agency expects two thirds of the energy needs of sub-Saharan Africa will be met by 2030. A quarter of that new capacity

will be renewable. Right now, 770-million people on the continent don't have access to electricity. This will mean less pollution while also getting lights on in more homes for children to do their homework.

- More countries are committing to a total of zero carbon emissions by the middle of this century. Nigeria and Kenya recently announced plans to get there.
- All but two African states have ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, which requires countries to submit plans on how they reduce carbon emissions and help communities adapt to climate change. Submitting a plan is a herculean task and means more investment in climate science. It also means countries have a base from which they can then plan development.
- Those climate plans are turning into climate laws. Nigeria passed its law last month. Laws mean that civil society can hold governments to account in court, often the one place where this happens. In South Africa, climate legislation has seen a spate of cases enforcing climate action in the last few years.
- Where regimes don't listen to the courts or voters, climate becomes about governance and who decides what the future will look like. While this year has seen one of many military coups, in Sudan people are again risking their lives to demand a say in their own future. ■

This reporting is supported by Absa. The Continent retains full editorial control.

The West finds yet another reason to keep Africans out

Thanks to the omicron variant, it is harder than ever for Africans to travel – even though public health experts say the restrictions make no sense.

Lydia Namubiru, Simon Allison and Siph Kings

Late last month, scientists in South Africa announced that they had identified a new variant of Covid-19 – and that it was spreading fast.

Less than 48 hours later, the United Kingdom had banned travel from South Africa and its neighbours, and cancelled flights. The European Union followed suit, as did North America and some Middle Eastern nations. Almost overnight, southern Africa became a pariah, almost totally isolated from the outside world. Even some African countries have restricted travel from the region.

It was expected. Early in the pandemic, there were warnings that Western nations would swallow up vaccines and then point to Covid in Africa as a reason to lock down borders. Africa would become “the Covid Continent”, warned Africa CDC boss John Nkengasong in *The Continent*.

These new restrictions were initially justified as a necessary response to the new variant. If the variant can’t get in, it can’t spread – or so the logic went.

Except the variant was already there.

More than 40 countries have now detected cases of omicron. Some of these appeared to have no connection whatsoever to southern Africa. In at least one instance – in the Netherlands – the positive sample was collected before South Africa made its announcement, strongly suggesting that it was circulating in Europe before it got to southern Africa.

Yet the travel restrictions against southern Africa remain in place. No travel restrictions have been implemented against western countries where omicron has been detected.

African leaders are getting increasingly irate: there appears to be one rule for Africa, and another for everywhere else.

Speaking at the Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security this week, South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa was decidedly undiplomatic. He said he had received “patronising” and “paternalistic” phone calls from European leaders – none of whom was able to adequately justify the draconian restrictions. “You ask yourself, where is science? They always said to us, base your decisions on science, but when the moment comes for them to be more



Locked out of Europe: Covid has been another chance for the West to keep Africans on the outside.

scientific they are not,” he said.

Malawi’s president said the bans were “afrophobia” in action. Botswana’s president called them “unnecessary” and “irresponsible”. Nigeria’s high commissioner to the United Kingdom described them as “travel apartheid”, while the African Union highlighted the hypocrisy by saying that “despite the widespread distribution of Omicron cases globally, the majority of border closures solely target flights to and from South Africa and neighbouring countries in southern Africa, some of which have no evidence of the omicron variant and relatively low daily Covid-19 case numbers.” Leaders are rarely so blunt.

‘It makes no sense at all’

It’s not just African leaders who are nonplussed. *The Continent* spoke to some of the most prominent public health experts in Africa to understand whether

there is any scientific rationale behind the bans. Their response was unequivocal.

“The current bans do not make sense at all from a public health perspective,” said Catherine Kyobutungi, an epidemiologist and executive director of the African Population and Health Research Centre. “Travel bans can only make sense if they are total, i.e. that a country shuts itself off completely from the rest of the world.”

This is the approach that China has taken, with a few exceptions.

Kyobutungi added: “The problem is that the countries instituting travel bans also have lousy in-country Covid-19 prevention measures and rather than deal with their failures they are using travel bans to give the impression of doing something.”

While daily cases in South Africa are in the single digit thousands, those in Germany and the United Kingdom are in the tens of thousands. Mismanagement

of the pandemic in the latter has meant the deaths of some 150,000 people.

Thierno Balde, the incident manager for the World Health Organisation's Covid-19 Emergency Response in Africa, echoed this sentiment. "Travel bans directed at southern African nations are unfair and we strongly encourage countries to reconsider these bans."

He warned that they may ultimately prove counterproductive – because, in effect, southern Africa is now being punished for the excellence and the openness of its scientists. "If any country, not just African countries, fears crippling consequences that can negatively impact the personal and professional lives of their citizens, we may not see such openness in future. This would most certainly threaten global disease control."

These consequences are already being felt. Because of the dramatic drop in flights to the region, South African scientists are running out of the chemicals necessary to do more Covid-19 sequencing. This makes it considerably more difficult for South Africa to do the kind of science that alerted the world in the first place.

Dr Mounia Amrani, the southern Africa medical coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, said the public health community has known for months that travel bans "are completely ineffective". "So what is surprising is to see them used again, particularly when we had so little information about the omicron variant."

More surprising is that "they blocked only the outside borders, while the virus is already circulating in the EU".

Inconsistent

Vigdis Beaussier, a spokesperson for the French Embassy, told *The Continent*: "The variant has indeed been detected in other countries, but epidemiological surveys suggest it is circulating much more widely in Southern Africa. According to South African scientists, it is now dominant in the country, whereas in Europe the delta variant is still dominant."

While it is true omicron has spread rapidly in South Africa, with more than 20,000 cases detected so far, this logic does not apply to, say, Botswana, which has recorded just 25 cases of the variant. On Friday, France had 25 cases, while the UK had over 800 – yet France has not imposed travel restrictions against its neighbour.

The EU's ambassador to South Africa, Dr Riina Kionka, told *The Continent* that it was "not correct to describe the temporary travel ban activated within the European Union on countries in Southern Africa as either 'racist' or as 'travel apartheid'. Notably, the EU's temporary measures are not out of sync with a wider global response to dealing with the Covid-19 omicron variant."

She said "leaders in EU member states have a public health obligation to their populations to limit potential exposure", but did not comment on why no travel restrictions have been imposed against the UK, which is not an EU member.

The UK's embassy did not respond to specific questions from *The Continent*, but said: "We took precautionary action where we judged significant numbers of this variant had been identified, and are keeping this under constant review." ■

Fortress Europe raises its drawbridge

As political analyst Nanjala Nyabola, a frequent contributor to these pages, put it on Twitter recently: “We are in a race between the virus, vaccines and variants... but as Africans we are also in a race against the racist logics of exclusion and border politics that have allowed countries to normalise unnecessary mass death at their borders.”

The travel bans are just the latest in a line of policies that make it difficult, if not impossible, for Africans and other non-westerners to travel. These policies are particularly pronounced in Europe, perhaps due to its geographic proximity as well as the growth of right-wing parties in response to immigration, and include:

- Harsh and expensive visa regimes that require Africans to hand over extensive personal information and submit to invasive questioning (notably, these visa requirements do not work the other way).
- In Italy and Greece, both EU member states, refusing to allow boats of refugees to enter, in clear violation of international law, and prosecuting individuals who assist these refugees. Greece pioneered the “pushback” policy, whereby authorities deliberately push migrant boats back into the sea. This year alone, some 1,655 migrants have died while trying to make

the crossing. France and the United Kingdom are using refugees as proxies in their own battle, with 27 people dying in the Channel in just one day last month.

- On the border between Belarus and Poland, refugees are being left to starve in icy weather as both countries dodge their responsibilities under international law.
- Increasingly militarised borders, where refugees are subject to physical assaults from European police, including attacks by police dogs and deafening noise cannons.
- Hundreds of millions of euros spent on high-tech surveillance and electronic deterrence systems, including a lie detector powered by artificial intelligence to see if refugees are hiding anything (never mind that this has been debunked as “pseudo-science” by academics).

The first step, though, is to keep Africans in Africa. The German-led “Marshall Plan” for Africa was ostensibly about companies profiting more from the continent. But the subtext is that growth in Africa will keep migrants away.

And when that doesn’t work, Europe has long relied on a system of supporting dubious leaders to keep migrants far away. In Libya, it meant looking the other way if Muammar Gaddafi could stop boats crossing the Mediterranean.

Dictators know this so well that in Sudan, after the recent coup, one military leader told Politico that Europe and the United States needed to support the junta so as to stop mass migration. ■

Mozambique



Photo: AFP

Transit to nowhere

The Cabo Delgado conflict in northern Mozambique has displaced more than 800,000 people. **Luis Nhachote** speaks to some who have found their way to the Rapale transit centre, where they are struggling to survive as foreign and local forces fight over their homelands.

Fatima Cruz somehow managed to reach the camp in Rapale, in Mozambique's province of Nampula, walking 300 kilometres with her blind husband from Mueda in Cabo Delgado. "We are ignored human beings who have suffered every day, for years; poverty,

oblivion and violence in Cabo Delgado," she told *The Continent* by phone, speaking in Emakhuwa, the main language in northern Mozambique.

The Cabo Delgado conflict, which escalated three years ago, has displaced more than 800,000 people and killed at

least 3,000. It started as an insurrection by Mozambican militants aggrieved that the state was doing too little to develop the northern region, despite extracting minerals and natural gas from it. They have since been joined by other fighters, who claim affiliation with the global Islamic State and/or al-Shabab terror groups.

A combination of soldiers from the Mozambican army, the Southern Africa Development Community and Rwanda, is fighting the militants. Rwanda's contingent of 1,000 soldiers is the biggest foreign force fighting the war.

Cruz and her husband are at what the government calls a transit centre. It is at full capacity with 6,000 residents. The more established camp for internally displaced people is 60km further south at Corane. Not being an "official camp", the centre where Cruz finds herself gets little in the way of resources.

"No NGO works there. Only the Catholic Church. People have nothing. No food. No pots. Nothing to sleep on," says Joaquim Hernan, the head of the Catholic Church in Rapale.

There is no electricity at the camp, and people are sleeping on the ground. The state's own National Institute of Disaster Management had yet to arrive in Rapale when *The Continent* spoke to people there.

With her husband, sister and children, Cruz left her home after the latest massacres in Muidumbe, near her home. "Only God knows how we walked and arrived safely."

Her neighbour, Anastacia Godinho,

arrived a few days ago from another refugee camp further north. She shares her hut with her sister and six other relatives. After arriving, they didn't eat for two days.

Godinho is from the village of Xitaxi, where in April 2020 terrorists called the local men to a meeting and massacred them. The rest of the terrified villagers fled, and the village is now deserted. "The bodies of our relatives were abandoned and some were eaten by dogs," she tells *The Continent*. Now she has to restart "with nothing. We left everything behind."

People 'can't complain'

Rapale is located in Nampula province, which is governed by Mety Gondola, a government-appointed. He told *The Continent* that the provincial government is "concerned" about the situation and has instructed the local leaders to give all displaced people parcels of land.

But, the larger government appears weary of helping. Speaking about similar destitution in the main camp at Corane, Armindo Ngunga, the head of the Northern Integrated Development Agency, a government body set up last year to accelerate development in Mozambique's northern provinces, said a week ago, "people cannot spend the rest of their lives receiving food support and complaining that it is insufficient."

Yet without meaningful action from his agency and others in government, there can be little optimism among those living at the 'transit camp', which threatens to remain their home for months if not years to come. ■



ART

Unmasking the future

Masks, usually wooden and intricately carved, are found in many African cultures. They serve important spiritual and ceremonial functions – and they look pretty cool, too. **Fanuel Luel**, an Addis Ababa-based artist, is reimagining what these masks might look like; and, at the same time, reclaiming our collective future.



"African masks used in African culture are about more than just functionality and aesthetics. Each mask is a reflection of its society, and it represents our ancestors, the history of the area. Some masks are used for connecting with the spiritual world. Some others are used by people for good luck. There are so many and that's what's so great about Afro-masks. They show the diversity of Africa ... Too much of the future is seen through the western lens, and I wanted to look at the future through an African lens."





"African problems need African solutions. There have been a lot of external parties trying to offer help, but in the long run they mostly end up causing more harm. No one else can truly understand us but us, and we need to explore our imaginations to find the solutions. Imagination is a lifeline, and an extension of your spirit. People who can't imagine are people whose spirits are weakened. A lot of circumstances in the continent has led to people having weakened spirits. But things are changing now."

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

"Unlike Paul Biya, I'm always ready"



1_ Abdalla Hamdok is the prime minister of which country?

2_ In which city is the Paul Biya Stadium?

3_ Angela Merkel was chancellor of Germany for how many years?

4_ The demonym 'Malagasy' refers to people from which country?

5_ A new Palestinian embassy was opened this week in which city?

6_ Name the father and son who were consecutive presidents of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

7_ The United States has imposed visa restrictions on Africa's richest

woman. Who is she?

8_ Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari inaugurated several new warships this week, including the NNS Lana (pictured). What does NNS stand for?

9_ Approximately how many languages are spoken in Africa? Is it 200, 2,000 or 20,000?

10_ The Omicron variant was first detected by scientists in which South African city?

HOW DID I DO?

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To win in 2023, Zimbabwe's opposition will have to court the military

Chipo Dendere

In 2023, Zimbabweans will vote in yet another critical election amidst an ongoing economic crisis. While 2023 might seem a long way off, Zimbabwe is already in campaign mode because parties, civil society groups and the government all know that elections can be won, lost and rigged well in advance.

The Nelson Chamisa-led opposition has been galvanised by the recent Zambian election that resulted in the ouster of an authoritarian ruling party. But is there hope for an opposition victory in a country in which the ruling Zanu-PF has won every election since 1980?

It all depends on the security forces.

Unlike in the past, when the military lurked in the shadows of politics, in the “post-coup” era the Zimbabwean Defence Forces (ZDF) are now openly involved in all aspects of politics. One reason for this is that the army’s financial interests are directly tied to Zanu-PF’s political survival. Security sectors often depend on national budgets for the allocation of

resources. But the Zimbabwean military has also accumulated vast – often hidden and untaxed – interests in mining, health, telecommunications and the media.

An independent media plays a crucial role in elections, but Zimbabwe does not have an independent media. The situation will get even worse now that ZDF has acquired a television station, NRTV. Military figures will also be used to run the elections through the secondment of retired ZDF personnel to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

In 2018, the ZEC chairperson told parliament that at least 15% of their staff were former military officials.

Free and fair polls cannot take place under these conditions.

So how can Zimbabwe get out of this mess? The military is too strong to be defeated through force. This means that the opposition will have to persuade the military rank-and-file they will be better off in a better-performing economy under Chamisa, while assuring the top brass that their interests – economic and all – will be secure in a post Zanu-PF world.

This may be distasteful, but it is also likely to be necessary to realise political change. ■

Chipo Dendere is a political science professor in the Africana Studies

department at Wellesley College in the United States. This article is published in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.



Partying is such sweet sorrow



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Reader dearest, we at *The Continent* have decided to have a Christmas and end of year party, and you are invited.

There is just one condition though, please do not tell anyone about it. After all, we are in the middle of a pandemic, in some places healthcare workers are overstretched in severely underfunded healthcare systems, unemployment has risen, cost of living has gone up and people have lost loved ones.

But does that mean we should not hold our party? This was the dilemma we found ourselves in, so we decided to consult no less an esteemed personage than the prime minister of the United Kingdom himself, Boris Johnson! Prime minister at the time of going to press, anyway.

He promptly asked if he could come along too, but we sadly reminded him about that red list of his, which includes a whole host of African countries despite the fact that a huge number of western countries have reported the omicron variant too. Including his own!

Of course this means that should he attend our party, upon return to the UK he would have to pay over £2,000 to

quarantine at a hotel owned by one of his wealthy friends! He was a little dismayed by this but no doubt has cheered up following the birth of his latest (we aren't sure about the exact number!) child. Strangely Prince William has been silent about this.

Anyhow, our party is going ahead and we've decided to invite some of our favourite leaders. We're thinking a military-chic dress code, so that colonels Doumbouya and Goïta feel included in the festivities (all that pressure from Ecowas regarding transitioning to civilian rule has probably done little to make them feel welcome).

We hope Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed holds on to his uniform for the party now that he has returned to his office following his time on the front line. We were informed Abiy is "momentarily back following successful completion of the first phase of Operation for National Unity in Diversity".

While those battles rage on, the World Food Programme announced suspension of food aid in the towns of Kombolcha and Dessie saying their warehouses in the region had been looted, reportedly by members of the Tigrayan forces, who also harassed and intimidated WFP staff.

Unfortunately those likely to suffer the consequences of this are members of the local population who continue to face food insecurity.



Festive spirit: Adama Barrow's Christmas card to himself. Photo: Gambian presidency

The Gambia's President Adama Barrow was also invited, but will probably be too busy celebrating winning another term in office. He's promised to do all he can to "make The Gambia a better place for us all". The day after Barrow's win was announced, supporters of opposition candidate Ousainou Darboe took to the streets in protest and predictably authorities joined in the festivities, and even brought out the tear gas. But then is it really even Christmas without it?

Terminated too

This week Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré "terminated" the current prime minister, Joseph Marie Dabire, who resigned from the role, thus leading the whole government to be dissolved. Protests have been taking place demanding that Kabore himself resign in light of rising insecurity, particularly following an attack in Inata last month which saw 49 soldiers and 4 civilians

killed. So maybe Kabore won't be at the party, either – although we aren't sure if that's out of consideration for his people, or because the lack of a government means he won't be able to rustle up a designated driver for the trip home.

Safety is everything, after all. Which is why we were thinking about asking guests to make sure they've been vaccinated, although that might be unfair, considering how long it has taken for some countries to get vaccines due to stockpiling by wealthier nations.

Take Nigeria, for example. This week Reuters reported that up to a million vaccines in the country had expired.

The government then pointed out that actually the vaccines had been donated by western countries and were already close to their expiry dates when they arrived.

It's worth remembering that African countries never asked for donations; all they wanted was to be able to buy vaccines at the same time as everyone else. Meanwhile the West has been patting itself on the back for being beacons of kindness by donating doses at the last minute, which then can't be used.

Finally, the Committee to Protect Journalists said this week that 293 journalists are currently jailed worldwide, – a record number. Among the biggest offenders on the continent are Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Whether you can attend our party or not, we hope you will join us in raising a glass to all the brilliant journalists across our continent who are *not* in jail.

But to those who *are* ... we promise to keep raising the alarm. ■

THE BIG PICTURE

Safe Arbour: Children stand under a tree on the site of a future camp for Eritrean refugees, in a rural area near the village of Dabat, 70km northeast of the city of Gondar, Ethiopia. The refugee population has grown as a result of Ethiopia's war against its own Tigray region, with tens of thousands forced to flee after repeated mass killings on all sides of the conflict.

Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP



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The Continent

DECEMBER 11 2021 | ISSUE 69

THE
Argumentative
EDITION



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Nairobi and the death of quiet

It can be hard to pay attention to pressing global issues above the city's din

Caroline Warui

At the recently-concluded global climate change conference in Glasgow, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta made a lot of promises. Among them was a pledge to increase forest cover to 10% of Kenya's landmass.

This is ironic because the capital city, from which he presides over the state, is being rapidly covered in concrete.

Nairobi used to be known as the "green city in the sun". That green city of yore had a certain sense of quiet. There were vast green spaces and the scent of blooming jacaranda trees. Our younger selves fished in the Nairobi River, a feat that would be foolhardy today. The city was tranquil, even. But rapid urbanisation of the country is changing the city's tune to a more jarring note.

A manic construction phase has gripped Nairobi. Roads are being expanded and bypasses constructed, even though 40% of the residents generally walk, while 26% use bicycles, motorcycles and other non-motorised transport. Who, exactly, is today's Nairobi being built for?

Kenya has decried the lack of commitment by global leaders to avail funding to developing countries to allow

them deal with the effects of climate change. But Kenya's commitment to this goal is also questionable, as Nairobi's rising skyline proves.

For those of us who live in the city, the changes are not just about infrastructure. I feel them most when I listen to the city.

Starting at the calm, green Ooloolua Forest, where even a monk would feel at home, I venture into the limited traffic. The shopping centre is quiet, with the occasional matatu tooting its horn and touting at the bus stop.

Heading to Nairobi City from this juncture, I am fortunate to encounter only the rattling of the public service vehicle (PSV) until my destination. The PSVs in this area are usually held together by scotch tape and prayers. The lack of adequate suspension is painful to the backbone, but at least tolerably muffled.

However, when branching off from Karen shopping centre into Bomas and then to Rongai, the difference is as night is to day. At Rongai, I first encounter immovable traffic, and then booming everywhere. The PSVs in that area install massive sound systems and specialty horns, which can at best be annoying and at worst terrifying, especially when the bulky vehicle is bearing down on you,



Noise will be noise. As soon as curfew lifted, Nairobi's hustle got its voice back.
Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP

covered in graffiti and trumpeting as it advances. On boarding the matatu, the music from poorly tuned speakers hits me, usually at high decibels. The crew, despite the fact that I am a fare-paying passenger, meets any attempt to request turning down the volume with hostility.

On this occasion, I am not headed to Rongai but speeding past Langata, where the entertainment joints rarely sleep. When I alight, thankfully, from the noisy conveyance in downtown Nairobi, I find the shops are blaring their music as well. Getting away from the din seems impossible.

For many residents of the city, even their homes provide little respite. If you reside next to a church, the backdrop to your weekend will be booming preachers, their voices are amplified by huge sound systems. For residents near mosques, an alarm clock is unnecessary, as the call to prayer is as regular as clockwork. A 2015 study of noise pollution in the

capital indicated that the noise tended to 85 decibels. Constant exposure to 90 decibels and above is known to cause hearing loss.

The result of all this noise? There is little space for introspection and a sense of detachment. We know mental illness is at an all time high in the city, as is gender-based violence, and it is hard not to wonder if this is in some way connected to this constant auditory overload.

This cacophony is also why it can be hard to persuade hassled Nairobians that, in fact, the world is in peril and that we need our president to keep his promises. We are living in a boom box. Someone needs to turn down the volume, because we can't hear you. ■

Caroline Warui is a Nairobi-based accountant who likes to write interesting memos, which hopefully one day will add up to a novel.

Is Ghana tired of democracy?

The push to criminalise Ghana's LGBTQI+ community flouts the country's constitutional principles

Victor Nsoh Azure

A lot is at stake as Ghana's parliament opens public deliberations on the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021, more commonly known as the Anti-LGBTQI+ Bill. The proposed law strikes at the heart of equality and liberty in Ghana. How parliament responds to it will be pivotal for the future of Ghanaian democracy.

The bill is popular. A 2019 Afrobarometer survey on social tolerance revealed that 93% of Ghanaians dislike homosexuals. The bill's sponsors have played the violin with that number in their bid to stop "western decadence", real or imagined, in Ghanaian society. But their bill will do far more than that.

If passed, it will not only make non-cisgender orientations and identities criminal. It will also, directly and indirectly, curtail a range of rights, including speech, thought, association, and privacy for queer Ghanaians and

their allies. It recalls the Dark Ages in the false choice it gives those accused under it between "recanting" and submitting to conversion therapy under non-state actors, or facing state prosecution, as noted by some eminent Ghanaians in a memo to the house.

In essence, the bill will chill free expression across national life, make queer Ghanaians second-class citizens, and legalise cruelty towards them.

It is also an attempt to topple Ghana's constitutional rights framework.

Ghanaians have traditionally fought back against legislation that accumulates unnecessary power in the government and undercuts due process. The Preventive Detention Act of 1958, the "Spy Bill" of 2015, the Public Universities Bill of 2019, and the Imposition of Restrictions Act of 2020 met public resistance.

But a religious framing and ahistorical claims about the country's culture have swayed public opinion this time in favour



Tyranny: When human rights are cast aside, democracy has failed. Photo: AFP

of a bill that will ruin the foundation of democracy in Ghana: the constitutional guarantees of equality and individual liberty.

Constitutional democracy, by design, is fragile. Equality, liberty, and justice anchored on the rule of law rely on people's willingness to accept limitations for the sake of others. It crumbles when some realise they can afford to be intolerant or uncompromising.

In Plato's dialogues, the legendary Socrates is skeptical about democracy for that reason. Governance by majority consent is betting that most people will make better choices. But majorities can be, misguided as former US president Theodore Roosevelt notably quipped: "It may be that the 'voice of the people is the voice of God' in 51 cases out of a hundred; but in the remaining 49 it is quite as likely to be the voice of the devil or, what is still worse, the fool."

And majorities are susceptible to demagogues, too. What Socrates feared about democracy ultimately ended his life. Like Jesus Christ, he was tried and executed for holding views contrary to powerful interests and public opinion.

Similarly, the Anti-LGBTQI+ Bill places Ghana's civic commitments to equality and liberty in the crosshairs of popular opinion backed by a strong religious and political coalition.

If the bill prevails, it will empower the government and license busybodies to invade the private lives of Ghanaians in a way that harks back to the country's authoritarian past. But instead of rolling back progress in Ghana's democracy,

parliament can reaffirm that by design, informed by experience, the human rights protections under the constitution protect everyone, even those on the margins of society.

A bill of rights for all

Ghana's constitution shares a common premise with democracies everywhere: that, owing to our inability to pronounce on the nature and content of justice for all time, and our skepticism that government actors will always do justice, they must be bound by an objectively discernible predetermined set of restraints.

Without a bill of rights to protect the individual from the state and mobs, there can be no democracy. That is why the bill of rights itself is protected from the majority in Ghana's constitution.

After Socrates was killed in 399 BC, his student, Plato, became even more cynical about democracy. He writes in *The Republic* about how democracy often leads back to tyranny. He notes that it is not only because the people sometimes miscalculate what is best for them. It is also because gatekeepers of democratic institutions sacrifice institutional integrity to aid them.

As parliament considers whether to honour the wishes of the majority, even though that would undermine the promise of democracy in Ghana, the message from dead democracies across millennia is loud and clear: Don't do it. ■

Victor Nsoh Azure is a legal and policy analyst from Ghana, and a member of the African Liberty Project

I am not my ancestors' wildest dreams. I am their reality.

There have always been transgender Africans, no matter how much homophobes try to rewrite history.

Billy Hani

Ghana's parliament is currently considering a bill that would criminalise sexual and gender minorities in the country. Public discourse, such as on platforms like Twitter, has described sexual and gender minorities' identities and expressions as un-African.

But what really is African?

If the [Christian] God created both men and women in "His" likeness, then I am (like) God. I embody both aspects of "His" likeness. I live as both. I am God in "His" likeness. You see, on the off chance that the Christian creation story was/is true, and that God did create us in "His" image and likeness, then "His" likeness is that of both a man and a woman. What does that make God's gender? Both a man and a woman? Fluid gender? Fluid spirit? Neither of those genders?

What do we call someone who is both a man and a woman? What do we call someone who is neither a man nor a woman? What pronouns would we use for someone who is neither a man nor a woman, or someone who is both? "God cannot be gendered" some people have said to me, and yet we are consistently told that "He" created "us" in "His" image and likeness – and "us" must refer to both men and women.

Can this argument be used to justify transgender identities in Africa? Some would argue no, on the basis that Christianity did not originate from the continent. It can therefore be claimed that it is un-African to legitimate gender fluidity using Christian arguments. So, what really is African? What were our ancestors like before colonisation and religious indoctrination?

Some African communities view(ed) God as both male and female. The Fon from Benin believe in the duality of God, Mawu-Lisa. Mawu refers to the female aspect while Lisa refers to the male. In Ghana, the Ga call God Ataa-Naa-Nyomo. The name depicts a balanced gender of God as grandfather/grandmother.

If our ancestors believed in Gods that were both male and female, masculine and feminine, why do we find people who embody both, or who transcend the binary genders, as being ungodly and un-African?

History is on our side. Gender fluidity in expression and identity has been documented in different African communities, pre-colonialism. There



Spotlight: There have been queer and transgender Africans for as long as there have been Africans.

Photo: Stuart Tibaweswa

are several communities in which people dressed, behaved as, and carried out roles traditionally assigned to another gender.

The Mudoko Dako of the Langi community in Northern Uganda were effeminate males who presented as, and were treated as women. In the Meru community in Kenya, there was a religious leadership role of men who were referred to as “Mugawe”. Mugawe wore women’s clothes and hairstyles.

King Njinga (Nzinga) Mbande of the Mbundu people in present-day Angola was female but dressed in both men and women’s clothes, and was referred to as “king” as opposed to “queen”. She also had a harem of males who dressed as women. Similarly, female King Hatshepsut, an Egyptian Pharaoh, dressed in male kings’ attires, sometimes with a fake beard.

Transgender experiences and identities as captured in Western terminology do not completely reflect African experiences of the same. The absence of direct translations of “transgender” in African communities does not mean the absence of transgender people and identities in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa.

The hostility towards people who identify and/or express their gender differently from the “Westernised” binary of man and woman is colonial. In the absence of colonialism, there would be more respect for transgender (and LGBTQI+) people’s rights.

Our ancestors respected the Mudoko Dakos and the Mugawes. They were ruled by kings like Njinga/Nzinga and Pharaoh Hatshepsut.

In fact, it is un-African and disingenuous to deny transgender people their human rights, and justify violence against them by claiming it is a “Western agenda”. Think about it this way: If there was no homosexuality and genderfluidity in the continent pre-colonialism, why would colonialists introduce laws in the penal code criminalising such?

The only Western agenda in this case is the hostility embedded in constitutions, Western religious beliefs and institutions that keep propagating hate against transgender people. ■

Billy Hani is a queer trans artist and activist in Kenya. They use writing and photography to explore African queerness, sexuality, gender identity and expression, bodies, and mental health.



How the pandemic can shake up African airlines for the better

By embracing a single African air transport market, the continent could grow the aviation industry, create more jobs and allow people to travel regionally

Daniel Odido

Co-operation in Africa's air travel could create at least 155,000 jobs and \$1.3-billion more in economic growth. It could also stop the situation where travelling to Europe is cheaper than travelling around the continent.

And the opportunity exists right now, as a result of Covid-19. Many airlines are grounded. Some permanently. But, just as the wind that blows out a candle can also fan a fire, this could be an opportunity, giving the surviving airlines

a fighting chance to rebound and thrive as air travel re-opens. It could provide consumers with lower fares, higher connectivity and greater choice.

Economies would also benefit.

The first step is to free up the physical airspace above countries. That space, and the aviation industry, is governed by the Chicago Convention. This recognises the sovereignty of states to the airspace above their territory. They are mandated to provide air navigation infrastructure to guide flights in that airspace. In return, they can charge modest fees to recover

their costs, like toll stations in the sky.

But the fees vary wildly from country to country.

The flight of a typical regional aircraft, a Boeing 737, over a distance of 925km, attracts overflight fees as high as \$1,265 in Sudan and as low as \$50 in the Seychelles. This is according to calculations by the African Airlines Association.

Many countries consider aviation as a cash cow and milk it for what it is worth. In West Africa, countries work together and manage their airspace as one. Europe does the same. Other African countries should follow suit: this avoids the duplication of equipment and costs, resulting in lower overflight fees and hence lower operational costs for airlines and cheaper tickets.

The second step concerns access to markets. Africa has a structural weakness where there is poor travel between countries, and a reliance on overseas airlines. During the phase of Covid-19 lockdowns, this meant many Africans were marooned in other countries.

With fewer flights, offering little intra-African travel, the airline industry has not reached its potential. This means airports and airlines need to charge more per user. It means inadequate airport infrastructure and a skills gap for both technical and management expertise.

All these are symptoms of a more malignant malaise. South African Airways has restarted operations after a hiatus of 17 months triggered by bankruptcy protection. Kenya Airways is heading back to nationalisation after

a privatisation that was initially hailed as a great success. Doing the same thing repeatedly does not lead to different outcomes.

And the market is there. Africa has 16% of the world's population but accounts for less than 4% of the aviation service market.

The proposed Single African Air Transport Market seeks to cure this by introducing a single aviation market across the continent. This removes restrictions to market access as well as those on airline ownership.

But it has run into headwinds. Ethiopia has been accused of protectionism. Uganda has expressed disquiet over potential domination of its fledgling air industry by more entrenched airlines. Other governments are also loath to set their flag carriers free because they are a source of national pride. They are also important diplomatic tools - Ethiopia used its carrier to transport tens of millions of doses of Covid-19 vaccines when other airlines were in hibernation.

Working together and freeing up the air travel industry to reach its potential should be likened to the proverbial rising tide that lifts all boats: some airlines may initially experience a drop in market share, but the great benefits to the industry will ensure growth of air travel across all states. A vibrant industry provides more jobs. ■

Daniel Odido (@aerospaceKenya) lectures at Moi University's School of Sciences & Aerospace Studies in Kenya.

The church must stop protecting pastors who rape

All too often, religious leaders – who should be leading in the protection of women and girls – have been implicated in sexual harassment and abuse. It must stop. And the church must stop it.

Clariss Rufaro Masiya

There is an endless stream of stories about the sexual abuse of girls and women. It appears to have reached epidemic proportions in a number of African countries. But much less has been said about the connection of these abuses to religious organisations.

In Nigeria, sexual abuse complainants against the late evangelical pastor TB Joshua have been public at least since 2008. Joshua was the spiritual father to Zimbabwe's own controversial prophet Walter Magaya, a well-known pastor who perhaps best illustrates how unscrupulous church leaders can pervert Christianity.

Magaya, founder of the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, claims to have a special connection to God. But over the past five years, a growing number of personal testimonies have alleged that he takes advantage of his female congregants during so called "one-on-one deliverance" sessions. In some cases the victims are allegedly recruited for him by other "church ladies".

In 2019, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission issued a notice to investigate these allegations against Magaya. He made an unsuccessful bid in the high court to stop the investigations; his appeal in the Supreme Court was also dismissed.

Magaya claims to have a special connection to God. But over the past five years, a growing number of personal testimonies have alleged that he takes advantage of his female congregants during so called "one-on-one deliverance" sessions.

What is perhaps most disappointing about this situation is the undoubted support that Magaya gets from some of his congregants who are very adamant that their "father", their prophet, could never violate a woman; and who claim that the women just want to tarnish the pastor's image.

Magaya's case is one of the most

shocking, but in reality it is not unique. In Kenya, Pastor John Gichini was convicted for raping and impregnating his own underage daughters. In South Africa, Bafomba Willy Emeka, a trusted pastor from Bronkhorstspuit was sentenced to 37 years in prison for the rape of five women he claimed he was blessing through their private parts.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a hugely popular gospel singer and televangelist was in 2020 accused of rape by a former follower and assistant but has found ardent defenders in his congregation.

In Kenya, Pastor John Gichini was convicted for raping and impregnating his own underage daughters. In South Africa, Bafomba Willy Emeka, a trusted pastor from Bronkhorstspuit was sentenced to 37 years in prison for the rape of five women.

The church has no business protecting hooligans disguised as church leaders. They are no different from any criminals. If anything, the church, because of its supposed high moral standing, should lead in the protection of women and girls. Yet it does not and, all too often, the state does not dare to cross the church.

Within Zimbabwe's apostolic sect, bodies such as the Johanne Marange

Church (JMC) have been accused of promoting child marriage (which, more accurately, we must call child sexual abuse, because children cannot consent to marriage).

The allegation is that within the JMC, elders distort religion to sexually groom, indoctrinate, manipulate and coerce young female parishioners into marriage.

Recently, a 14-year-old girl, Memory Machaya, died while giving birth at the JMC shrine. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches issued a press statement saying it condemns child marriages, but there is no other record indicating it did anything more.

The case seems to have lost traction, in part because Zimbabweans understand that dealing with the Memory Machaya case in isolation is not a solution.

There are political dynamics at play: the apostolic churches represent a "captured" constituency for the ruling party when it comes to elections, according to journalist Veneranda Langa. It then becomes difficult for the government to implement laws against child marriages as it relies on the members' votes to remain in power.

This, however, is no excuse.

Governments need to act to protect women and children, and churches must get serious about preventing sexual abuse within their congregations. ■

Clariss Rufaro Masiya is passionate about gender and social inclusion training, mentorship and coaching.

The 'prosperity gospel' excuses poverty and its true causes

You can't tackle issues like poverty until you understand their root causes. Pastors who focus on self-enrichment are misleading their congregations by misdiagnosing these causes. That's dangerous.

Andile Zulu

In a continent abundant with resources, why does the lavish wealth of a few exist alongside the poverty of millions? Pastor Chris Oyikhalome, leader of Christ Embassy, could answer by telling us that poverty is an affliction of those lacking faith. Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, of the Enlightened Christian Gathering, might beg us to remember that poverty is a demonic force that can only be wrestled into submission through spiritual warfare.

These self-proclaimed men of God sever poverty from the economic systems and political orders which produce it. Instead, like many of the first European missionaries who brought the Bible to Africa, they skillfully manipulate religion in the pursuit and service of oppressive power.

Their followers acclimatise to the inequities cultivated by capitalism, as the multimillionaire preachers nefariously chase self-enrichment.

Their tool is the prosperity gospel, a branch of Protestant Christianity that conceives of the salvation of humanity as a contractual agreement with God. Belief and surrender to Christ delivers not only atonement for one's sins but also exceptional health and extraordinary wealth. Through potent prayer, positive confessions and generous church offerings, one can access God's ancient promise of prosperity.

An outsider to the theology may view it as irrational but ultimately harmless dogma. This would be a naive mistake. Our ability to solve social plagues such as poverty or inequality partly depends on how we define these problems. In understanding the fundamental causes of poverty, we move closer to effective solutions to them. By relegating poverty to the realm of the supernatural, prosperity preachers disguise the true and tangible conditions that cause their congregants' suffering and pacify their political consciousness.

The prosperity gospel succeeds

by exploiting desperation caused by economic dysfunction and social instability.

In South Africa, where pastors like Chris Oyikhalome attract large crowds in stadiums, 44% of the working age population are unemployed, more than half of citizens live in poverty and the country stands as the most unequal society in the world. There is a pervasive sense of despair, desperation and disempowerment amongst ordinary people. Disempowerment drives citizens to disengage from political action which could alleviate their suffering.

All these converge to render many vulnerable to abuse by prosperity preachers. Attuned to the desperation of their followers and by framing themselves as authentic prophets in a deeply religious continent, such pastors amass reverence, which then allows them to exploit their congregants.

Pastor Tim Oluseun Omotoso, of Jesus Dominion International, currently sits in SA prison on trial for 63 charges of rape, human trafficking and racketeering. Prophet Bushiri, estimated to be worth \$100-million, faces charges of theft, fraud and money laundering.

The prosperity gospel promises power to those who feel helpless and submerged in the storms of socioeconomic crisis. But it is ultimately a hollow call because it masks the true nature of poverty, and so leads societies away from tackling it. Instead of questioning the inefficient or self-serving economic policies of politicians, prosperity preachers shame congregants for lacking the



See no evil: Support for Pastor Timothy Omotoso, accused of human trafficking and rape. Photo: Eugene Coetzee/Herald

faith to banish poverty from their lives. Rather than critiquing the monopolies multinational corporations have over resources, sermons encourage people to seek individual financial upliftment through offerings, even though the greatest victories against poverty were gained through collective political action and the redesigning of economic structures.

The prosperity gospel elevates the myth that individuals with endless supplies of willpower can rise from destitution – the religious way of condescendingly telling the poor to lift themselves up by their bootstraps.

At best, it is a sedative respite from reality, lulling followers into slumber while we all continue to be ruled by elites who prioritise profits and power over people. ■

Andile Zulu is a political essayist who runs the Born Free Blues blog

Lesotho needs a clear line on legal and illegal abortion practices

A dangerous black market for abortion pills is flourishing in Lesotho because the issue of terminating pregnancies has been left ambiguous



Same old story: This illustration by Nathalie Lees accompanied a CNN investigation into illegal abortions in Lesotho

Ramorara Joyce

Abortion is a criminal offence in Lesotho and anyone who willingly terminates a pregnancy can face up to three years' imprisonment. Yet it seems that anyone can freely sell abortion pills.

Health providers in the country cannot render safe abortion services to women and young girls who may find

themselves needing such rescue, but the streets are full of unlicensed people who are not professionally trained to be health practitioners or run pharmacies, selling the pills anyway. Black market operators rule the streets and abortions still take place.

These black market operators are usually only in it for the money and may

not take into consideration factors such as the term of pregnancy or one's other health issues. They just sell the pills to people and leave them to carry it out by themselves, without follow up options, with potentially fatal consequences.

The minister of health, according to the *Lesotho Times*, said in 2018 that the number of young women being admitted in various hospitals in the country due to backstreet abortions gone wrong is increasing at an alarming rate and ranges from five to 15 people a day.

Those may only be the numbers they could record. What about those who decide to take care of themselves when they face complications, in fear of being arrested if they go to hospital?

Even knowing such alarming statistics, no measures have been taken to rid the streets of the illegal practitioners, and many lives are being lost as a result.

Many lives would be saved if Lesotho were to make abortion legal, so that women could terminate pregnancies safely, in a medical facility. And if it were to then legislate strong measures against black market operators.

That is the clear line that is required. Currently there is just ambiguity: it is known to be illegal but it is not treated accordingly. People get backstreet abortions and inevitably face health complications.

The Penal Code Act, 2012 enables the courts to impose penalties, such as a fine up to \$620 or imprisonment of up to three years, on people who get abortions in Lesotho – but there are no consequences for selling unlicensed

medication intended to terminate pregnancies. In that grey area, illegal and unsafe abortions will continue to flourish, spurred on by desperation and word of mouth. One person whispers to another, “I know a person who did this and that and did not get arrested so they can just take me to the person that helped them; I will also be fine.”

In order to save a lot of lives, Lesotho should make abortion legal so that women can access abortion safely in a medical facility and then must legislate strong measures against black market operators.

Right now, health workers in the country can only perform an abortion if the mother's life is in danger or if the court rules the pregnancy to be the result of rape or incest, and grants an order.

But court cases tend to take long. Many will not get resolved within the time-frame a woman is still eligible for abortion. Hence, a lot of vulnerable women will opt for illegal abortions so they can be helped.

This needs to change. Legalising abortion in Lesotho will allow women to access the healthcare they need in a safe, professional environment. ■

Ramorara Joyce is an upcoming and enthusiastic journalist, and a student at the Limkokwing University of Creative Technology in Lesotho

Kenya's dangerous erectile dysfunction myths

With government focused on big population areas, men in many other areas are being fed false and dangerous information about the effects of Covid-19 vaccines

Athuman Luchi

In Kenya, even with a shortage of vaccines for Covid-19, many people are rejecting what opportunities there are for their dose. There are a wide range of reasons for this. One is misinformation and myths about the danger of vaccines. A favourite topic is the link between vaccination and erectile dysfunction – except there isn't one.

These myths spread as rumours, first whispered and then shouted at public gatherings, as well as being shared online.

One such message, written in Digo and shared via text, claims: “Msidunge chanjo ya corona, inaabandanga nguvu za chizazi, mtu kanaimywa vizuri. [Don't take the covid-19 vaccines. They cause

erectile dysfunction and affect male reproductivity]”.

Kenya's health department, and the World Health Organisation, have said there is no medical evidence for this.

A study by the University of Miami looked specifically at the semen of healthy men before and after vaccination, with either the Pfizer or Moderna mRNA vaccine. They found no impact on sperm count or motility (the ability of sperm to move efficiently).

But this information is often shared by official sources in English. Misinformation is being spread in vernacular, among people who cannot necessarily read in English.

Without good sources of information in language they understand, people take misinformation as fact.

In an attempt to tackle this, those wanting more people to get vaccinated have taken to speaking in person about the importance of vaccines.

They also bring in their personal experience. Kombo Nyawa, a resident of Lunga Lunga in the country's south, tells people that he got vaccinated and now his wife is pregnant, proof that “my erectile status is intact”.

This gives the information a personal endorsement.

In Kenya, where just 8.8% of its 54-million population have been vaccinated, such personal endorsements are important in getting more people to get vaccinated.

And there is a history of mis- and dis-information around vaccines. In 2019 it was rife after the government



Sleeves up: Elders are leading by example, but it's time for the youth to show up too.

pushed the rollout of vaccines for human papillomavirus (HPV). This is the primary cause of almost all cervical cancer cases, and the vaccine has been shown to have a dramatic effect. The earlier a person is vaccinated, the better it is in protecting them. The government said it would be administered to all schoolgirls over the age of 10.

The Kenya Catholic Doctors Association objected, saying that: "HPV is a sexually transmitted infection and disease and therefore children who are chaste and faithful adults are not at risk."

With such a prominent body, ostensibly staffed by scientists, fighting the rollout, the government had to fight a proliferation of mis- and disinformation.

The Kenyan government, it seems, has not learnt from this.

One simple step in convincing people that the Covid vaccine does not result in erectile dysfunction would be to recruit youth leaders in rural areas.

These are people who hold great sway, especially where people do not read in English or Kiswahili so look to other sources of information.

This has not happened.

The government has also run the majority of its Covid information adverts on national television, forgetting local stations and community radio stations.

It's high time the government started putting information here to reach a larger audience, particularly on radio in a country where television ownership isn't widespread.

It is now time for the government and other stakeholders to start making programs to inform society about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation so that more people will become aware of the misinformation and fake news spread daily in the country. ■

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