

The Continent

The Africa
that 9/11
made



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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

WESTERN SAHARA

Sahrawis considered for Spanish citizenship

Spanish legislators in the country's lower house have approved a bill granting citizenship to tens of thousands of Sahrawis, amid tensions with Morocco. Spain controlled Western Sahara until 1976, but Morocco currently claims sovereignty over the territory. The bill will now move to the Senate for debate against the backdrop of the border crisis in Ceuta. In late July, more than 60,000 people crossed over from Morocco to the Spanish enclave.

UNITED NATIONS

Protect the girl child

The United Nations has designated 27 November as the international day for the elimination of child, early, and forced marriage, *Africanews* reports. The General Assembly adopted the resolution, put forward by Sierra Leone. First Lady Fatima Maada Bio championed the initiative. About 12-million girls are married before the age of 18 each year. Several children's rights organisations across the world have welcomed the resolution and Sierra Leone has applauded it as a step towards ending child marriage.



PHOTO: BADRU KATUMBA/AFP

Crown prints: King Oyo Nyimba Kabamba Iguru Rukidi IV died in the US on 27 August.

UGANDA

Surprise heir parachutes into royal succession

King Oyo Nyimba Kabamba Rukidi IV's death has sparked a succession battle in Tooro Kingdom, the *BBC* reports. Royal clan elders named popular TV news-presenter Prince Edward Rukidi Kijanangoma as his successor, but Oyo's family claims he left a will naming his son as heir. The existence of the boy was unknown until confirmed by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who said he had been briefed by the queen mother. The elders insisted they have the authority to select a successor and conducted due diligence.



Kenya's President William Ruto is up for re-election next year but his popularity is waning. His crackdown on small-scale traders might stir up grassroots support—at the expense of displaced refugees and migrants.

LESOTHO

Corrupt MP returns lots of looted loti

MP Jane Lekunya has agreed to pay back six million loti (about \$372,000), which he got from fraudulent tenders, *GroundUp* reports. Senior agriculture ministry officials bypassed competitive bidding procedures to award tenders to cronies. The prices were inflated for illicit kickbacks after the contracts were awarded. The Lesotho government provides an 80% fertiliser subsidy to farmers, which Lekunya allegedly exploited. He has promised to testify against his accomplices as Lesotho aggressively pursues asset recovery.

TUNISIA

Press rally around detained editor

Journalists in Tunisia held a demonstration over the arrest of Mohamed Yousfi, editor-in-chief of the *Alqatiba* website. He was detained on money-laundering charges and for receiving suspicious funds from abroad, which his lawyer described as unfounded, *AFP* reports. Rights groups are concerned over the spate of arrests of journalists, lawyers, and activists in recent years. They demanded Yousfi be released, claiming his health had deteriorated and that he was being tortured in detention.

SIERRA LEONE

Koroma home free

Former Sierra Leone president Ernest Bai Koroma has returned to Freetown after two years in exile. He was accompanied by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo and Nigerian Foreign Minister Bianca Odumegwu-Ojukwu and received by President Julius Maada Bio at the State House as a display of reconciliation. In 2023, Koroma was accused of a coup attempt, which he denied. He was allowed to travel to Nigeria for health reasons after an intervention by the Economic Community of West African States. All criminal and treason charges against him have been dropped.



PHOTO: MUHAMMADU BITTAYE/AFP

Let there be light: Gambians burn tyres in Brusubi in a protest over the electricity crisis.

GAMBIA

‘If we can’t have power then neither can you’

Protests erupted in the Gambian capital Banjul and neighbouring areas on Monday over constant power outages. Residents burned tyres and demanded President Adama Barrow to resign, citing his inability to manage the electricity crisis, which began in June, *AFP* reports. High temperatures have driven up energy demand. Authorities blame climate change and a disruption of fuel supply because of the war in Iran. Barrow, who is running for re-election in December, has declared the problem a national security issue and called for calm.

CAMEROON

Police on the trail of kidnapped teachers

Five teachers were kidnapped on Tuesday from a training facility in Cameroon’s Northwest, *AFP* reports. Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique said the attackers infiltrated the centre and killed a policeman who tried to foil the attack. Security forces have launched rescue efforts. Separatist groups have been fighting government forces in the English-speaking region for about 10 years. The attack followed a lockdown these groups had announced to disrupt the academic calendar because of growing French-language influence in the region’s education system.

FOOTBALL

African ballers' aplomb nets Ballon d'Or noms

Morocco's Achraf Hakimi and Senegal's Sadio Mané made the top 30 list for the prestigious men's Ballon d'Or football award. Barbra Banda from Zambia and Malawi's Temwa Chawinga have been nominated for the women's award. Three African goalkeepers – Yassine Bounou, Édouard Mendy, and Vozinha – were nominated for the best goalkeeper award. Vozinha's nomination follows a standout performance for Cabo Verde at this year's World Cup. Liberia's George Weah remains the only African to win the award since 1995.

ALGERIA

Easy come, UAEasy go

Algeria has cut diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates for what it has described as interference in national and regional affairs, *RFI* reports. The North African country said all efforts to preserve relations had been exhausted and the Emirati ambassador had been given 48 hours to comply. According to *Al Jazeera*, the Emirates said it hoped the rupture would be temporary. Diplomatic relations between the two countries have been strained over Israel, Western Sahara, and rival influence in the Sahel.

DRC

School inferno kills two dozen children

Two schools have caught fire in Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, killing more than 24 children. The fire also destroyed about 300 wooden houses, *Reuters* reports. Pupils were in the middle of their school day when the fires started, leading to a stampede as they tried to flee. Some also jumped from higher floors in an attempt to escape the blaze. Since 2025, Bukavu and the surrounding region have been controlled by the Rwanda-backed March 23 Movement. The rebel



PHOTO: JOSEPH AMANI ALIMASI/AFP

In ashes: Residents comb through debris after a fire that ravaged a Bukavu school on Thursday.

authority promised to investigate the cause of the fire.

NEWS

DRC

Kinshasa woos Washington in Jerusalem

The DRC is betting its embassy move will persuade Trump to increase pressure on Rwanda.

PROSPER HERI NGORORA IN GOMA

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC of the Congo has reiterated plans to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move experts say is an attempt to court stronger diplomatic and military favour from the United States.

March 23 Movement, the Rwanda-backed rebel group, has controlled Goma and Bukavu since January 2025. Despite a peace framework signed by Rwanda and DRC, the situation is fragile, and the DRC has been lobbying the US to exert pressure against Rwanda.

DRC President Félix Tshisekedi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met last week, both emphasising their diplomatic friendship.

Governance activist Hervé Amani condemned the DRC's move, saying it jeopardised the country's international credibility.

"What is worrying is seeing Kinshasa



PHOTO: WESTERN WALL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Consulation prize: President Félix Tshisekedi visits Jerusalem during an earlier visit to Israel.

seek Washington's goodwill via Tel Aviv," he told *The Continent*, "as if Congolese foreign policy should be designed to win the approval of foreign powers."

Kinshasa activist Muyisa Hangi Christophe urged the DRC to reconsider the embassy move, owing to Israel's current expansionist policies in the Middle East.

Over the past year, Israel has attacked Iran and Lebanon, and has sustained what experts describe as a genocidal offensive against Palestinians. This has drawn condemnation from several countries, as well as the African Union.

Christophe warned the DRC will be crossing a line if it does not stand with other African countries, as this "risks having a negative impact on the solidarity other states should show the DRC, which is experiencing political and security instability in its eastern region." ■

KENYA



Status quo vadis: Burundians gather at their embassy to apply for border passes after Ruto's directive.

MUKANZI MUSANGA IN NAIROBI

ON MONDAY Burundians flocked to their embassy in Nairobi to secure emergency exit documents after President William Ruto declared a crackdown on foreign small traders. Some reported attacks on their businesses, including Martin Muma*.

"I worked hard to rebuild my life here and opened a small restaurant that was broken into," he said. "I'm scared to leave my wife and children behind."

After a public outcry, Ruto issued a 90-day ultimatum for foreigners

to legitimise their residency and businesses. However, this has done little to ease tensions.

Kenya is home to nearly a million refugees, about 35,000 from Burundi. Ruto's remarks risk creating hostilities reminiscent of South Africa's xenophobic climate through scapegoating immigrants for government failures.

"The president's directive is a dangerous political ploy," said Raskin Oyugi from human-rights organisation Vocal Africa. ■

*Name changed to protect identity

NAMIBIA

No deal on our data

Washington takes away funding over Windhoek's insistence on protecting privacy.

TRACY TAFIRENYIKA IN WINDHOEK

IN RESPONSE to Namibia's refusal to share its national health data, the United States will stop funding its HIV-response programme from 2027.

The US required Namibia to provide it with full, unrestricted access to genetic data, health intelligence, and information on dangerous pathogens within 10 days of an outbreak. The US could share this information with private commercial companies and external groups without oversight from the Namibian government.

Namibia refused because such access contravenes its laws. The US responded with a phased removal of \$45-million in funding for its HIV response. This

support has been in place since 2003.

Political analyst Ndumba Kamwanyah told *The Continent* Namibia was justified in rejecting the deal in favour of its privacy and national sovereignty.

"The priority should be finding a way to protect data rights and continuity of care," he said.

Health expert and former minister Bernard Haufiku warned the withdrawal could have dire consequences on people living with HIV. He urged Namibia to adapt to a changing financial and geopolitical environment.

The US withdrew from the World Health Organisation in January and lost access to the world's primary multilateral health data. Since then, it has pursued aggressive bilateral deals to gain access to different countries' health information.

Namibia is one of several African countries that have rejected the US request for sharing biomedical data. Zambia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe have also rejected it and Kenya has temporarily suspended it, pending legal challenges.

Rwanda and Uganda are among the other African countries that have gone the other way and entered into health agreements with Washington. ■



PHOTO: NEWHIVRUGS.ORG

Bitter pill: Namibia's HIV care is in jeopardy.

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EDITORIAL

What happened when the empire struck back



PHOTO: CBS NEWS

CHRISTINE MUNGAI IN NAIROBI

WHEN 9/11 happened, I was in boarding school, two weeks into a new term. This was before smartphones, and the news reached me slowly – and in fragments – over the next few days.

My brother was in day school, however. He came home, turned on the television, and saw the first tower burning. He put down his bag and watched frozen in horror as the second plane struck, and the towers collapsed. He has told me this story so many times that my memory has become refracted through his.

Africa's memory of 9/11 is similarly mediated. About 60% of Africans alive today were born after 11 September 2001. For many of them, the attacks are inherited through other people's memories, news footage, and Hollywood movies – and understood as something

that happened far away.

But what followed was never far away. Kenya and Tanzania were already a staging ground for 9/11: al-Qaeda had bombed the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam three years earlier. Somalia became a lab for the drone warfare and low-visibility counterterrorism that would be applied elsewhere.

The war on terror choked financial networks that were a lifeline in Nigeria. Extremist factions adapted to the crackdown by shifting to profiting from localised terrorism, including kidnapping for ransom. And in Libya decisions justified by the post-9/11 security order helped to rupture an entire country.

The stories that follow examine 9/11 from Africa's viewpoint, 25 years later. The distance from New York, it turns out, is never as great as it seems. ■

ANALYSIS

KENYA

A securitised state

Osama bin Laden first gained notoriety for the US embassy bombings in East Africa three years before 9/11, putting Kenya on the front lines of America's war on terror. That legacy is evident in everyday life, especially for Somalis and Muslims, who live under constant suspicion.

OTIATO GUGUYU IN KISUMU

IN AUGUST 1998, a truck bomb detonated outside the US embassy in Nairobi, killing 213 people, mostly Kenyans, together with 12 Americans. A simultaneous blast in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania killed 11 people and injured more than 85.

Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility, marking the first time he attracted global attention and triggering what was then the FBI's largest-ever investigation.

For many Kenyans, images of the 9/11 attacks felt deeply familiar.

"The news was all over. It was like the 1998 bomb blast," recalled William Waka, a student at the time.

Then-president Daniel arap Moi led a demonstration condemning the 9/11 attacks – an action he hadn't taken when Kenya itself was the target.

In the following years, Kenya became a front-line state in the US global war on terror. By 2002, US

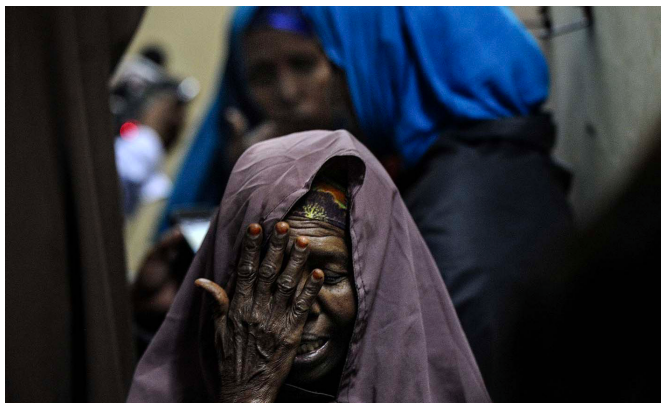
foreign military financing to Kenya had increased 15-fold, primarily targeting counterterrorism.

In 2004, Washington funded a National Counter-Terrorism Centre within Kenya's intelligence apparatus, cementing Kenya's position as Washington's principal East African security partner.

"The posturing after 9/11 was very ideological," Byron Adera, a security strategist and former Kenyan Special Forces officer, told *The Continent*.

With the US telling countries "you either stand with us or with the terrorists", Kenya "willingly integrated with US national security infrastructure and adopted its security policies, including who qualified as the enemy".

That alignment brought resources, but also put Kenya in the crosshairs of regional militant groups, primarily al-Shabaab. From 2011, al-Shabaab launched dozens of attacks in Kenya after Nairobi deployed troops to Somalia – its first foreign military intervention.



Calculus of calumny:

An elderly woman despairs after being detained and standing in a queue, while waiting to be vetted at a temporary centre in Nairobi in 2014.

PHOTO: TONY KARUMBA/AFP

A hardened posture

The deadliest attacks occurred in the 2010s: more than 60 people were killed at Nairobi's Westgate Mall in 2013 and 147 students were massacred at Garissa University in 2015.

After the Garissa massacre, the government launched a sweeping security operation, rounding up about 4,000 people – mostly from Nairobi's Somali-majority Eastleigh area – and detaining them without charge.

The operation drew sharp criticism for ethnic and religious profiling of Somalis and Muslims. Oversight bodies and human-rights groups documented widespread arbitrary detention, extortion, and abuse by police.

"The profiling happened gradually," Adera said. "As Kenya responded to attacks and became more embedded in the American security system, the personnel could make a blanket policy against everyone of Somali descent."

Muslims comprise about 11% of Kenya's population. Policies singling

out Muslims and Somalis pushed many of them to avoid public services and spaces where they risk being profiled.

"New police units were formed to target Somalis and Muslims," said a former Somali refugee who returned to Mogadishu. "People had to flee their homes. Some were sent to jail and some were lost without a trace."

Domestically, anti-terror laws have been used to intimidate civil society, journalists, and activists investigating security abuses. Mass roundups, prolonged detention, and media restrictions have become recurring features of Kenya's response to threats.

Today, intrusive searches are standard at malls and public buildings. For many people, this is a reminder of a post-9/11 bargain – one that brought foreign support, but entrenched discrimination and fear across entire communities. ■

This piece was published in collaboration with Egab

ANALYSIS

SOMALIA

Drones, invasion and endless terror

After 9/11, Mogadishu's internal political dynamics were increasingly interpreted by the US through a counterterrorism lens, casting it as a central arena in America's forever wars. It has left devastation in its wake.



PHOTO: MOHAMED ABDIWAHAB/AFP

Bilateral damage: Successive foreign military interventions have, instead of quelling terrorist activity, fuelled a new generation of armed insurgency, war crimes, and civilian suffering in Somalia.

FAISAL ALI IN MOGADISHU

AFTER THE collapse of Siad Barré's military dictatorship in 1991, Somalia lost its central authority. It became a byword for anarchy as clan authorities, local administrations, and armed factions filled the vacuum.

The United States paid little attention

– particularly after the 1993 killing of 18 American soldiers in a botched mission in the capital, Mogadishu, which led to the full withdrawal of American troops.

But that changed abruptly after 9/11. Washington began to see Somalia's chaos not primarily as failure in nation-building or as a humanitarian crisis, but as a potential "haven" for al-Qaeda and

affiliated groups.

At the time, the Islamic Courts Union – an alliance of religious leaders and businessmen – had pacified Mogadishu after years of warlord rule. But the union's religious orientation and alleged links to extremist figures alarmed the US.

Neighbouring Ethiopia was also worried the group could revive a claim to annex the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia, which is populated mostly by ethnic Somalis. The two states had fought a war in 1977 over the claim.

In December 2006, Ethiopia, backed by US diplomacy, air support and intelligence, invaded Somalia to oust the union and install a government of its choosing. The war on terror was now playing out in the Horn of Africa.

That war reached Hussein Abdi's* street one Friday in 2007. It never left.

Amid Ethiopia's shelling of

Mogadishu, a mortar struck the home of Hawo Cagoole, a neighbour whom he had fallen in love with. Abdi rushed to her house when he heard the explosion. He found Cagoole dead on the ground, her hijab soaked in blood. Her mother and a younger relative had also been killed. Her father was wounded, crying for help.

"I felt helpless... unable to speak for hours," Abdi, now a security consultant, told *The Continent*. "That trauma still haunts me."

'Frozen in that moment'

Ethiopia's invasion shattered the union but also helped to radicalise and militarise al-Shabaab, then a fringe faction within the movement. It grew into a powerful armed insurgency by channelling Somali anger at foreign occupation and a government widely



Ruins: Displaced Somalis seek shelter amid heavy fighting in Mogadishu in 2007. PHOTO: JOSE CENDON/AFP

viewed as externally imposed.

At the time, Human Rights Watch described the fighting as a devastating episode for civilians, documenting “rampant violations of the laws of war” and “massive suffering” in Mogadishu.

“We’re frozen in that post-9/11 moment in Somalia,” Afyare Elmi, a Somali academic, told *The Continent*. “The war on terror produced more of what it was fighting against in Somalia. Al-Shabaab is now bigger.”

Bashir Maalim, a former deputy director of Somalia’s intelligence agency, said the fight against al-Shabaab has become a cycle of advances and retreats. Military gains are rarely translated into lasting government control. Battle lines haven’t changed much, despite years of active hostilities.

“An offensive is launched, territory is captured, and government forces subsequently withdraw, allowing the group to return,” Maalim said.

Although Mogadishu is far safer than it used to be, al-Shabaab continues to be a formidable presence in much of the rest of the country. It is the strongest armed actor to emerge since 1991 and acts as a shadow government in many places, taxing locals and controlling territory.

Endless drone war

The US designated al-Shabaab a foreign terrorist organisation in 2008. In June 2011, it conducted its first confirmed drone strike in Africa, hitting a convoy carrying two senior al-Shabaab leaders near the port of Kismayo, Somalia.

Together with Libya, Somalia has

since then been the country most hit by US drones in Africa. There have been more than 535 air and drone strikes in the country, according to the New American Foundation. The most recent strikes took place just last week, west of Mogadishu, near Kismayo.

Unlike its short-term operations in Libya, the US has conducted continuous, decades-long drone strikes in Somalia. Research by the International Crisis Group indicates Somalia became a testing ground for low-visibility, high-tech drone warfare and counterterrorism tactics that have since been applied elsewhere.

“The US approach to Somalia is defined entirely through its counterterrorism [lens],” the academic Elmi told *The Continent*. He argues this has left deeper problems – including poor governance and the unresolved legacy of Somalia’s civil war – largely untouched.

For people living on Somalia’s front lines, that conflict is a daily reality.

Ugaas Ahmed Ugaas Sayyid Ali is a clan elder in southern Somalia, much of which is controlled by al-Shabaab. He told *The Continent* his people are caught “between two fires” – pressured by the government and its allies on one side and al-Shabaab on the other. More than two decades of foreign military intervention have still not produced lasting stability and peace, he said. ■

* Name has been changed to protect identity. This piece was published in collaboration with Egab

ANALYSIS

NIGERIA

How 9/11 bled the north's economy

The hawala system was a lifeline, but the war on terror disrupted it – with dire consequences.

**AHMAD MUHAMMAD SHEHU
SORONDINKI IN KANO**

THE RESPONSE of the United States to the 9/11 attack concentrated on military counterinsurgency. But the country also focused on cutting off funding to militant groups that threatened it.

In October 2001, the US Congress introduced anti-money-laundering policies through the Patriot Act, which froze cross-border accounts linked to informal money-transfer agents.

The US also pressured bodies like the Financial Action Task Force to set global standards targeting informal fund transfers.

This crackdown disrupted northern Nigeria's local economy. After 9/11, the US increased its scrutiny of hawala, an informal money-transfer system used to move funds across borders.

Hawala runs on trust. A person gives money to a local broker, who instructs another broker elsewhere to pay the recipient in local currency. No money crosses the border at the time: the brokers settle the debt between themselves later.

That flexibility made hawala a lifeline

for unbanked communities – and, after 9/11, a target for US authorities trying to curb funding to terrorist networks.

In northern Nigeria, hawala was used for remittances, religious payments, and cross-border trade. At Kano's West African Pilgrims Association market, an informal currency-exchange hub, the impact was devastating.

"Before 9/11, our hawala operations ran smoothly," said Abubakar Idris, a broker for more than two decades. But then "funds were frozen, regulations were imposed, and capital was wiped out, driving legitimate clients away".

Mallam Habibu, a trader who sold agricultural produce across the Sahel, suffered financial collapse and today works as a bricklayer. "Our cross-border trade relied entirely on hawala," Habibu told *The Continent*.

The crackdown did not distinguish between funding for militants and charity work. Education programmes also had their accounts frozen and flagged on international blacklists.

Extremist factions adapted by shifting from foreign patronage to profiting from domestic crime.

Unemployed, uneducated youths

became radicalised, frustrated by a perceived Western anti-Islamic campaign. When Boko Haram was formed in 2002, they readily joined.

The group has spawned offshoots like the Islamic State West Africa Province and bandit cartels across northwest Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

“Before 9/11, recruitment didn’t start with guns: it started with scholarship promises to Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa, funded by external charity networks,” a source from the Muslim Brotherhood, who requested anonymity, told *The Continent*.

“When global counter-finance rules froze those channels, the networks went underground and shifted toward aggressive, clandestine radicalisation within our own borders.”

Bashir Muhammed, a Kano-based security-risk analyst, said post-9/11 policies “exposed the paranoia of the US security architecture”.

“By cutting off foreign financing pipelines without resolving underlying grievances, these policies forced militants to adapt,” he said. “They resorted to localised terrorism and entrenched kidnapping-for-ransom in the internal economy.”

Twenty-five years later, Boko Haram has killed more than 35,000 people, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. And kidnapping and other criminal economic activities have flourished across northern Nigeria.

This history shapes how renewed US involvement is received. Recent security co-operation between Washington and Abuja has prompted protests. Some people in the north view the US’s return as another intervention by a country whose policies helped to create the conditions they are still living in. ■

This piece was published in collaboration with Egab



Caravan of courage:
Traders and herdsmen cross a tributary of Lake Chad to N’Gouboua, Chad, using the same route Nigerian refugees used to flee Boko Haram.

PHOTO: JEROME DELAY/AP

ANALYSIS

LIBYA

The strange afterlife of America's bargain with Libya

Twenty-five years after 9/11 turned Gaddafi from an international pariah into a trusted partner, the US is again courting Libya's competing power centres – including the Islamist groups Gaddafi once helped the US to hunt down.

HINDIYA ALASHEPY IN BENGHAZI

ON 31 AUGUST, Libya's rival institutions signed a United Nations-brokered roadmap in Tripoli, committing to elections within two years. The country is split between two administrations: the UN-recognised Government of National Unity in the west and the eastern camp, controlled by the Libyan National Army.

A US-led initiative is running alongside these two factions, with the aim of aligning them economically and militarily. It has already produced a unified national budget – as well as agreements with US oil companies.

This American courtship of Libya's rival camps is easiest to understand against an older bargain – one struck not with today's factions, but with Muammar Gaddafi in the shadow of 9/11.

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, Washington and its allies classified Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism. Libyan intelligence directed the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, which killed 270 people

and triggered years of international sanctions and isolation.

At home, Gaddafi was fighting a different enemy: the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an Islamist insurgency aligned with al-Qaeda's ideology that clashed with his security forces throughout the 1990s.

After 9/11, that domestic fight became a strategic asset. Gaddafi offered Washington intelligence on the insurgent group, framing its members as part of the al-Qaeda network. Libyan intelligence handed over names, travel routes, and detention records. Suspects were rendered to the US or interrogated jointly with Western agencies.

In exchange, Gaddafi demanded – and received – political rehabilitation. In 2003, he accepted responsibility for Lockerbie and agreed to pay billions in compensation. The UN lifted its sanctions.

Then came 2011.

As Gaddafi's forces threatened Benghazi during an uprising against

his rule, a UN-authorised intervention to protect civilians evolved into a Nato campaign that helped rebels to overthrow him.

Among those fighting Gaddafi were former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group members he had once imprisoned. Washington backed the rebellion, despite its inclusion of Islamist factions.

Another 9/11

The security vacuum after Gaddafi's fall made Libya fertile ground for the same extremism he had spent years suppressing.

On 11 September 2012, former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group militants attacked the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing the ambassador and three other Americans. Washington's engagement scaled back sharply.

That history explains why reconciliation remains so combustible today and how the two competing administrations have positioned themselves.

Tripoli authorities drew support from Libyan Islamic Fighting Group-aligned networks, whereas the Benghazi camp coalesced around Gaddafi-era officers and eastern militias.

The latter has presented itself as a guardian against "Islamist terrorists". This is not merely political rhetoric – it forms the core justification for the Benghazi-aligned camp's parallel institutions and military campaigns against Tripoli.

Now Washington is again trying to bridge that divide. Oil and investment

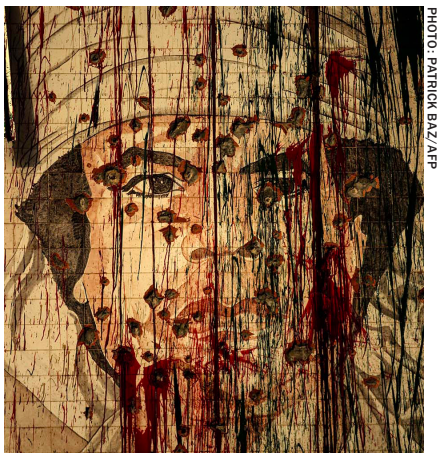


PHOTO: PATRICK BAZ/AFP

Head hunt: A portrait of Muammar Gaddafi, at the time a fugitive, in Tripoli in September 2011.

are important incentives, as well as the goal of stabilising Libya.

Abdel Nabi Mohammed, a member of Misrata's council of elders, is not convinced the efforts will work.

"The crisis will not end until perpetrators are punished and families displaced from Benghazi and the east are able to return home," he told *The Continent*.

But there is a striking circularity at play. After 9/11, Washington embraced Gaddafi because he could help to fight Islamist militants. It later helped to overthrow him, during a rebellion that included those same former militants. Twenty-five years later, it is now courting the rival political and military orders that emerged from the wreckage. ■

This piece was published in collaboration with Egab

PHOTO ESSAY

Sanctum of the apes

WORDS AND PHOTOS: MARTA MEINARDI IN SANAGA-YONG



IN CENTRAL Cameroon, primatologist Dr Sheri Speede cares for multiple generations of chimpanzees. The job is difficult and the staff-to-chimp numbers are daunting.

Speede was originally a veterinarian in the United States. She visited Cameroon in the late 1990s and met

Jacky, a chimpanzee kept in a small cage outside a hotel in Limbe for nearly 30 years. In 1999, she brought him to her sanctuary, Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue, and he became one of its first residents. Jacky, who's estimated to be in his sixties, still lives there today.

However, almost three decades later,

chimpanzees and other great apes are still in danger, hunted as some of the most prized bushmeat in the world.

The practice is also fuelled by beliefs in traditional medicine, with numerous conditions believed to be treated with chimpanzee parts. The adults are killed and the infants sold to wealthy buyers or zoos.

The country is home to the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, officially classified as an endangered species: conservation groups estimate only 3,500 to 9,000 individuals remain in the wild.

Killing chimpanzees officially became illegal in Cameroon in 1994. "Enforcement" began on paper in 2006, but there is little government action

against wildlife trafficking.

Cameroon's chimp population is mostly safeguarded by three wildlife centres – Ape Action Africa, Sanaga-Yong, and Limbe Wildlife Centre. Together they house more than 200 rescued chimpanzees. There is no plan to release them, owing to the lack of enforcement against wildlife trafficking, as well as no protected forested habitat in which to set them free.

Some sanctuaries rely exclusively on rotating international staff, but Sanaga-Yong has hired two Cameroonian veterinarians, Dr Mael Firina and Dr Christian Atonfack. This is part of ongoing efforts to promote knowledge localisation and sustainability. ■



Cameroonian veterinarian Christian Atonfack works full-time to prepare meds, monitor behaviours, and attend to any medical necessities at the Sanaga-Yong chimp sanctuary.



Sanaga-Yong caregivers carry an anesthetised chimpanzee back to his enclosure after a medical procedure at the sanctuary's clinic.



Sheri Speede, founder of the Sanaga-Yong, and veterinarian Hannah Steel perform emergency field surgery on a chimp on a makeshift operating table lit by torches and Christmas lights.



The sanctuary lies in the middle of Cameroon's Mbarague forest. There is very little light pollution in this remote region, leaving the night sky carpeted with stars.

This story was made possible with support from the Pulitzer Center and forms part of the Africa leg of Big Tech's Invisible Hand, a cross-border collaborative investigation led by Brazilian news organisation Agência Pública and the Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística.

FEATURE

How Big Tech reins in Nigeria's digital autonomy



Nigeria says it wants to create indigenous tech and AI. But the settlement of a \$33-million fine on Meta provides a glimpse into behind-the-scenes conversations: The tech giants, eager for data and lifelong customers, are using soft power and training programmes to lock Nigerians in. And regulators are often helping them to do so.

ANIBE IDAJILI AND ATHANDIWE SABA

IN FEBRUARY 2025, representatives of the world's wealthiest tech companies sat down with Nigeria's data protection officer. Meta, Microsoft, and Google had come to discuss collaboration. In a press release, the regulator said it "warmly welcomed the collaboration offer" and expressed "delight".

At that time, Meta was fighting Nigerian regulators over how it handled millions of people's personal data.

The previous July, another regulator in Nigeria, the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, had fined Meta \$220-million. It investigated WhatsApp for more than three years. The

commission found, among other things, that Nigerians had been given too little control over how their information was collected, shared, and used.

This was after WhatsApp users had to accept new privacy terms if they wanted to continue to use the chat platform. Those terms allowed Meta to share their information across its companies and with third parties. That data could build a deep profile of people that could then be sold to third parties, which could draw on it to sell users products and services or to influence them.

Separately, shortly after the sit-down, the Nigerian Data Protection Commission imposed a fine of nearly \$33-million on Meta.



Metastasised: The Nigerian Data Protection Commission let big tech firms off easy. PHOTO: NDPC

That case was settled a few months later. A *Premium Times* investigation found the fine and eight corrective orders were set aside. Instead of being held to account for breaking the law, Meta committed to comply with it and strengthen its data-protection measures.

The commission then announced that “in collaboration with Meta” it had translated the country’s Data Protection Act into local languages. In May, another arm of government launched GovGuide Nigeria, an AI service built with Meta’s technology to help Nigerians to navigate public services. Its privacy notice says it can collect a range of users’ data, which can be used for various purposes, including training the model.

It isn’t clear who owns GovGuide and who can access the data, which includes conversations people have with the bot using WhatsApp. Neither the state nor Meta replied to questions about this.

What happened behind closed doors to let Meta off the hook isn’t clear. *The Continent* asked both Meta and the government about the timelines. In Nigeria, there is no routine public record

showing which companies approach which government officials, what they want from them, or what is discussed.

So, *The Continent* began to build a record. Our investigation traced at least 17 publicly documented engagements between major tech companies and the Nigerian state since 2024. They include meetings with the president and regulators, government AI projects, training programmes, funding, and policy discussions.

Many of the meetings are ordinary interactions between government and companies operating in one of Africa’s largest digital markets. But others bring tech companies closer to the institutions tasked with protecting people – the very institutions responsible for deciding how these companies can operate in Nigeria.

Customers for life

Ali Sabo, head of digital rights at the Centre for Information Technology and Development, describes this as “soft influence”. Although the projects can lead to development, “they also quietly shape how policymakers view technology and governance”. If left unchecked, Sabo warns, outside tech platforms may threaten government independence, lead to over-reliance on specific vendors, and could restrict future policy choices.

“Partnerships need to be out in the open, protected by clear safeguards, and open to input from universities, civil society organisations, and local tech builders,” he told *The Continent*.

But locking in the state, and users, is a

core pillar of how Big Tech firms operate.

In October 2024, the Nigerian government partnered with Data Science Nigeria. It announced a Google grant of 2.8-billion naira (just over \$2-million at current exchange rates) for national AI talent programmes.

These programmes were tied to the federal ministry of communications, innovation and digital economy. One targeted 20,000 advanced learners; another 25,000 teachers and 125,000 learners. A state AI campus focused on civil servants. Analysts note these steps help to secure lifelong customers, now tied to Big Tech ecosystems.

It also isn't clear who owns the data.

Google's communications and PR manager for West Africa, Taiwo Kola-Ogunlade, told *The Continent* its products use "industry-leading technology" to protect users' information and pointed to privacy controls, its registration with the regulator, and the appointment of a data protection officer.

His response did not state where the data generated through the public-sector programmes is stored, how long it is retained, or whether it can be used to improve commercial AI products.

In 2025, Microsoft ran a similar programme, the AI National Skills Initiative, to train 35,000 people. When asked about data privacy and access, Microsoft provided figures that only covered registrations, learning activity, and certification.

On the role of its own products in the training, Microsoft said: "Specific training pathways may include Microsoft



PHOTO: UNILORIN

It's a trap: When outside tech firms offer to train staff, it can be seen as 'seeding a captive user base'.

technologies, where relevant to the curriculum." A student at the Federal University of Technology, Akure, who participated in a Microsoft programme, said she received free access to Copilot and LinkedIn Premium.

Tech analyst Eze Hanson considers these programmes a mix of smart philanthropy and workforce development. When the software of one company is used in state-backed training of thousands of people, he said it "can be perceived as seeding a captive user base".

It also runs the danger of making countries dependent on particular companies. That's at odds with what the government has been saying. Nigerian President Bola Tinubu has embraced AI. Earlier this month, his government said it would put locally built technology at the core of its drive to build a \$1-trillion economy.

Achieving that will mean moving people out of the ecosystems Big Tech companies have tied them to. But, even if they leave, those companies will retain all their user profiles and data. ■

DATA

Democratic rigour no longer de rigueur?

TUESDAY 15 September is the United Nations’ International Day of Democracy. Much ink has been spilled – including by us – about the challenges facing African democracies. But what do Africans think about democracy?

Across 38 countries we surveyed, a solid majority (64%) say they prefer it to non-democratic alternatives. The same proportion reject military rule (65%), and larger majorities oppose dictatorship (79%) and a one-party state (76%).

Afrobarometer combines all four of these indicators into a “demand for democracy” index.

We have more confidence in people’s commitment to democracy if they also reject authoritarian regimes. (Not all self-proclaimed supporters of democracy do.)

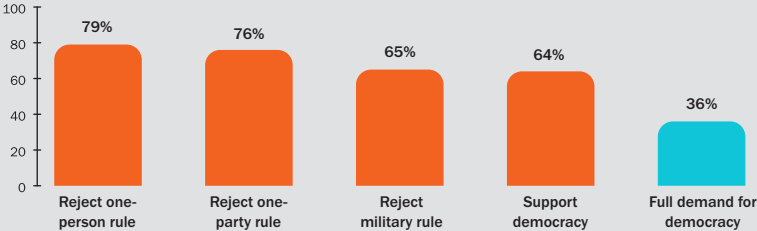
The more stringent measure is sobering. Barely more than a third (36%) of Africans hold pro-democracy views across all four indicators. Mali (8%) and Gabon (11%) showed the lowest levels of support.

Demand is lower among youth, women, uneducated adults, unemployed citizens, and poorer respondents than their counterparts. And it’s declining. Across 28 countries surveyed consistently over the past decade, the share of steadfast democrats is down by 10 percentage points.

Our research shows falling demand is tied to deteriorating governance.

To avoid a vicious spiral, African leaders need to demonstrate a commitment to democracy and deliver for their people. ■

Demand for democracy | 38 African countries | 2024/2025





MUSIC REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



Rising Starr

Ayra Starr's new album is a statement – and a celebration of personal growth.

STARRGIRL, the third studio album by Nigerian pop princess Ayra Starr, has had an extended rollout going back to last April, when its earliest single, *Gimme Dat* with Wizkid, dropped.

At least four more singles have followed, including smash hits *Hot Body*, *Who's That Girl*, and *Where Do We Go*.

It is a pleasure, then, to report that there is nothing stale or redundant about *Starrgirl*, the full body of work

that arrived in August.

Ayra has been famous since she was a teenager – her first album was titled *19 & Dangerous*. Her previous work has dwelt on her relationship with her fans and public image. But, title notwithstanding, *Starrgirl* is no corny meditation on fame.

The record shuns easy labels, instead embracing joy and freedom while exploring ideas of personal and professional multiplicity.

Ayra is an artist born in Benin Republic and formed in Lagos, who now lives in New York. These cross-cultural connections are central to her vision of artistic fluidity. *Starrgirl* comes from a place of abundance and she is generous with her talent – no two songs on the record sound quite the same.

Ayra is also a proper shapeshifter, who can't be pinned to any one idea or sound on her album. She flirts, purrs, and shimmies her way through an eclectic collection of sounds and moments.

Her voice could start out throaty and mysterious as it does on *Amazing* or on standout *Heaven Baby*, before building to a full release by the chorus. She hasn't met a beat she couldn't tackle into submission and knows what to do to adjust to the changing demands of the record.

This record delivers the star girl it promises. ■

The Quiz

- 1 Which country's name means "lion mountains" in Portuguese?
- 2 What year did Tanzania's Samia Suluhu Hassan first take office as president?
- 3 What is Burundi's political capital?
- 4 What is Burundi's economic capital?
- 5 True or false: English is one of Cabo Verde's official languages.
- 6 The Roman-built Baths of Antoninus (pictured) are found in which country?
- 7 Guinea-Conakry is another name for which country?
- 8 What is the name of South Africa's national rugby side?
- 9 Lubanga, Luena and Lobito are cities in which country?
- 10 What is the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa?



HOW DID I DO?

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

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 you don't already know your ancient ablutionary infrastructure, this quiz might get you into hot water."

PHOTO: FETHI BELAID/AFP

Big Pic

Left on reed: Every September thousands of young women gather for the Umkhosi Womhlanga, or reed dance, at the royal palace in KwaZulu-Natal to present a tall reed to the Zulu King Misuzulu kaZwelithini, as a traditional rite of womanhood.

PHOTO: CECILIA SEREGNI/AFP



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