

with Mail & Guardian

The Continent

An election in the
most important
country on the planet





Cover: The world doesn't care if there's democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo – as long as the resources flow and rainforests grow. (p14)

Inside:

- **Nigeria:** Army kills 88 civilians in “bombing mishap” (p7)
- **Israel:** Importing Kenyans to fill the gap of youth sent to war (p8)
- **Tanzania:** The death penalty is alive and well (p10)
- **Somalia:** What “loss and damage” actually looks like (p12)
- **Film:** The movie about a missing movie (p20)
- **Cuba:** Kenya cancels controversial doctor exchange programme (p23)

INTRODUCING OUR 2023 READER SURVEY

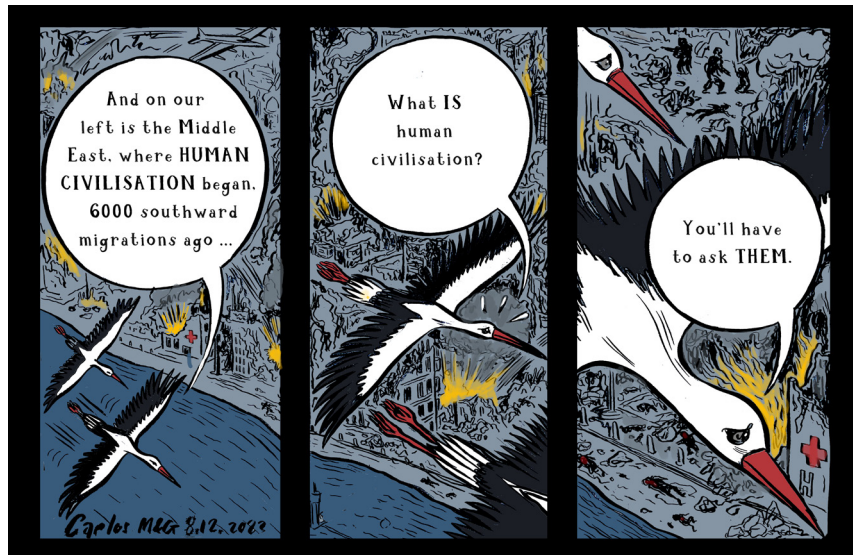


In last year's reader survey, one subscriber neatly summed up *The Continent*: “It's good.” This newspaper likes concise. We also value your thoughts on how we're doing, and what else we can do. Please give us a few minutes of your time and complete this year's survey. We use your answers to make our journalism better, and to convince funders to give us the money to keep doing it. This means we can pay journalists for their work, and keep *The Continent* free for all.



NEXT WEEK: The Africans of the Year edition!

Meet the people who made us proud in 2023, while our editors review the year in news, music, movies and books.



EGYPT

Cairo lifts eye to sky with Beijing booster

Egypt has launched its second earth observation satellite, MisrSat-2. It will take images of Egyptian and neighbouring territories that the government plans to use for digitally mapping areas with mineral prospects, and to monitor changes in vegetation and water volumes in the River Nile to prepare for disasters. Egypt first launched a satellite in 2007, but lost contact with it in 2010. With support from China (as part of its Belt and Road Initiative), Egypt has since built the biggest satellite assembly and testing centre in Africa and the Middle East.

FOOD SECURITY

There is rice again, but only for some

India has eased its export ban on cheap rice varieties for selected African countries: Comoros, Madagascar, Equatorial Guinea, Egypt and Kenya. A letter from India's trade ministry on Thursday, however, set specific amounts that may be exported to each. In late July, India prohibited the export of non-basmati rice, which tends to be cheaper, fearing that domestic supplies were falling too low. Notably, several major importers of Indian rice in Africa, such as Benin, Togo, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, were not included in the easement.



Hard to swallow: More than three quarters of the people living on this continent can't afford a healthy diet.

HUNGER

20% of Africans undernourished

A report from the AU and UN this week said that 282-million Africans don't have enough food. That's an increase of 57-million since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. A full billion Africans cannot afford a healthy mix of food, according to the report, a far higher rate than the global average. "The majority of Africa's population – about 78% or more than one billion people – remain unable to afford a healthy diet, compared with 42% at the global level, and the number is rising," the report said.

BURKINA FASO

On ne parle plus Français, capisce?

French keeps losing that *je ne sais quoi* that makes a language official. On Wednesday, Burkina Faso's Council of Ministers released a draft law that will demote French from the status of "official language" to merely a "working language". National languages will be promoted to official status instead. Mali also demoted it in June and made 13 local languages official. Rwanda switched its entire school system from French to English 15 years ago, in a row that started with France arming the regime that carried out the 1994 genocide.

BOTSWANA-ZIMBABWE

A protocol observed: No passport needed

Zimbabwe's president says he met with Botswana's president and the two agreed that people should move easily between the two countries. The Southern African countries share a border. The BBC reports that Emmerson Mnangagwa said: "We impose constraints on ourselves which are more colonial than they are patriotic." More African countries are signing bilateral agreements to ease movement with their neighbours, but only four have ratified the African Union's continental treaty on free movement.



Sahel and back: The G5 leaders and friend. Note the French hand out.

SAHEL

We need to break up (It's not me, it's coup)

Formed in 2014, the G5 Sahel was intended as the solution to the region's chronic insecurity. The multinational military alliance included Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and

was supposed to pave the way for the withdrawal of foreign peacekeeping troops. Since then, insecurity has only increased, while four of the five countries involved have experienced coups or unconstitutional transfers of power.

After Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew last weekend – following Mali's withdrawal last year – the remaining members decided to dissolve the force.

ITALY

Algeria rushes in as Russia fuels end

Algeria has replaced Russia as Italy's top gas supplier. This is a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which led EU countries and the US to impose sanctions on Russian products. Italy previously got 28% of its gas from Russia. That has dropped to less than 3%. Algerian gas went to 20% from 12% before the war. Algeria is the fifth-largest supplier of liquefied natural gas in the world, and the largest in Africa.

ETHIOPIA

Six killed in drone strike on ambulance

At least six people were killed when an armed drone targeted an ambulance in Amhara province, according to the BBC. The attack took place last week, but a communications blackout meant that it was several days before the news emerged. The Ethiopian government is fighting against an armed militia group in the region – a group the government armed and empowered during its brutal civil war against Tigrayan rebels.

ISRAEL

AI enables unprecedented civilian casualties

An investigation by *The Guardian* found that artificial intelligence enabled the unprecedented intensity of Israel's aerial bombardment of Gaza. A military AI program, known as "The Gospel" is capable of selecting 100 or more targets in a single day. Human operators, in stark contrast, can verify just 50 targets in an entire year. The accuracy of this AI is not known, but the civilian casualty count in Gaza is horrifying – more than 12,000 and counting.

UNITED KINGDOM

Rishi revives rejected Rwanda refugee plan

The British government's latest manoeuvre to resuscitate its plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda is so dubious that even the Rwandan government is getting a little bit skittish. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government wants to pass legislation that will force judges to declare Rwanda a "safe country" – regardless of its dubious human rights record. In response, Rwandan foreign minister Vincent Biruta pointedly reminded his counterpart that there are "obligations on both the UK and Rwanda to act lawfully".



Count me in: Kendrick Lamar performs in Kigali. Photo: Rwanda Presidency

RWANDA

Kendrick Lamar delivers spellbinding propaganda performance

American rapper Kendrick Lamar graced the BK Arena in Kigali on Wednesday night, in a performance described in a breathless press release as "unlike any live show Rwanda has seen before". The Grammy Award-winning musician was introduced by President Paul Kagame. The event was organised by Global Citizen, a New York-based organisation whose mission is supposedly to create a world "where everyone has an equal chance to thrive" – except, that is, for opponents of Rwanda's autocratic regime, who are routinely detained or killed.

Nigeria

Killing civilians is not a ‘mishap’ – it’s a trend

The drone strike that killed 88 people in Nigeria is part of a disturbing and increasingly unchallenged pattern in conflict zones around Africa and across the world.

Kiri Rupiah

The Nigerian army has killed at least 88 people in what President Bola Tinubu called a “bombing mishap”. On Sunday, a drone dropped explosives on people gathered in the town of Tudun Biri to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. An eyewitness told BBC Hausa a second bomb was then dropped on those trying to rescue people and retrieve the bodies of the slain.

The strike in Kaduna State, in north-west Nigeria, was not the first such “mishap”. SMB Intelligence, a Nigerian research firm, estimates that the Nigerian air force mistakenly killed more than 300 people in 14 incidents between January 2017 and February 2023, while targeting bandits and Boko Haram insurgents.

The state rarely acknowledges these incidents and the civilian deaths. In late January a mistargeted airstrike by the Nigerian air force reportedly killed 39 people and injured at least six others in Kwatiri, in Nasarawa State. Five months

later, in a letter to Human Rights Watch, it acknowledged the operation, saying it was “based on credible intelligence”, but did not mention civilian deaths.

Death from above is not the only army “mishap” Nigerians have to worry about. An investigation by *HumAngle*, a Nigerian news outlet that covers conflict in the country’s restive north, found evidence that hundreds of people in these areas had been “disappeared” through arbitrary arrests by the Nigeria military, and through extrajudicial executions. The military did not respond to that report.

In the statement that described Sunday’s strike as a “mishap”, President Tinubu promised a “full-fledged investigation”. But as reported in issue 143 of *The Continent* – about a 2018 drone killing by American soldiers in Somalia – states are not impartial investigators of their own soldiers. In that case, a US army investigation found that inexperienced American soldiers working with flawed intelligence killed a woman and her 4-year old daughter. But it exonerated them. ■

Kenya

Israel recruits 1,500 Kenyan workers, says Tanzania and Uganda next

Mwangi Maina in Nairobi

Kenya is exporting 1,500 farm workers to Israel, the labour ministry said on Wednesday. The announcement comes shortly after Malawi sent more than 200 young people to work on Israeli farms, which have been left short-staffed due to the ongoing war in Gaza, with plans to send up to 5,000 Malawian workers.

Many Israeli farmhands have joined the army, while an estimated 10,000 migrant workers have fled since the conflict began. They did not want to work in a war zone. Palestinians from Gaza, who previously made up nearly 20% of the agricultural workforce, have been barred from working on the farms.

Despite the risks, Noah Wekesa – currently working as a boda boda driver in Nairobi – said that he would take the opportunity if he could. “I will die once, either in Kenya or Israel.” A colleague, who is considering applying, said that

he is already risking his life by riding motorcycles for a living, for considerably less financial reward.

Opposition leader Raila Odinga slammed the deal, saying that it showed that President William Ruto’s economic policies were failing to provide jobs at home for Kenyan people. “Once upon a time, Kenyans were so proud and so confident of their nation that they refused to seek jobs abroad, including with the United Nations,” he said. “Today, our people are scrambling to leave the country.”

Israel’s ambassador to Kenya, Michael Lotem, said that Israel is actively recruiting more farmworkers from Tanzania and is targeting Uganda next, according to the BBC. ■



Slim pickings: Israel is scrambling to find people to work on its farms as its war intensifies. Photo: Jalaa Marey/AFP

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The Continent

Tanzania

The death penalty is alive and well

In defiance of a recent continental court judgement, the government wants to keep capital punishment on the books – even if death sentences are never executed

Kizito Makoye in Dar es Salaam

Nationalism appears to be trumping modern human rights standards in Tanzania. In particular in its response to calls by a top African court to revise its law on the death penalty.

In two rulings issued on Tuesday, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights found that the Tanzanian state violates the right to life by sentencing people to death without giving judges any discretion in the matter. It also ruled that sentencing people to die by hanging is cruel, inhumane and violates the right to dignity. The court has issued similar rulings in three other cases since 2019.

Under a colonial-era section of

Tanzania's penal code, the death penalty is mandatory for murder. However, several convicts sentenced to death petitioned the continental court, asking it to defend their right to life. They won the legal battle, with the court advising the Tanzanian state to revise the law.

Following the Tuesday rulings, *The Continent* spoke to Tanzania's deputy solicitor-general, the deputy secretary of its Law Reform Commission and a legislator in its Parliament. All three expressed outrage and vowed to fight for a reversal of the rulings.

Sarah Mwaipopo, the deputy solicitor-general, told *The Continent* that Tanzania maintains that law because of "the necessity of the death penalty as a deterrent for heinous crimes". Joseph Musukuma, a member of Parliament, echoed this: "The death penalty scares people from killing each other and this provision in the penal code ensures that perpetrators are severely punished for taking another person's life," he said.

But such rhetoric is contradicted by practice. The Tanzanian state has not executed any convicts in nearly 30 years. Instead, once sentenced to death, prisoners languish in limbo until they die of other causes. More than 490 Tanzanians now live in that limbo.

The officials' hardline positions appear motivated more by nationalism than criminal justice. "This is an infringement



on our sovereignty. The court is overreaching by dictating changes in our legal system. We shall appeal to protect our legal autonomy,” Mwaipopo said.

Zainab Chanzi, deputy secretary of the Law Reform Commission, expressed similar sentiments: “The court’s interference in our legislative processes is unwarranted,” she said, arguing that it raised questions about respect for Tanzania’s sovereignty.

The official position is frustrating to the country’s human rights activists, who hoped that the African court’s rulings would be a wake-up call for the country to bring its law in line with modern standards.

“The death penalty has no place in a civilised society. It should be abolished,”

said Anna Henga, who heads the Legal and Human Rights Centre. Onesmo Olungurumwa of Tanzania’s Human Rights Defenders Coalition also urged Tanzanian authorities to reconsider their stance on the death penalty and promptly align the country’s laws with global human rights norms.

Tanzania is not unique in Africa. Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Cameroon, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are all death penalty abolitionists in practice but have refused to revise their law books.

In Uganda, despite a two-decade moratorium on executions, the country recently included the death penalty in its draconian anti-homosexuality law. ■



Crisis: The flooding in Somalia has washed away entire towns.

Loss and damage are not hypothetical

In just over a year, Somalia has been hit by two extreme and opposite weather events, with drought and then flooding devastating lives.

Liban Mahamad in Dolow

This year's climate negotiations started with a big announcement – a new fund to pay out countries being destroyed by a heating world was ready to go, after decades of negotiation. The fund is intended to support communities who did the least to create the climate crisis, but are paying the highest price.

A few thousands kilometres away from the air-conditioned rooms of Expo City Dubai, millions of people in Somalia are already living with the bitter reality of

climate change. In Dolow, in the south-west, camps created when people fled here to escape a drought of historic proportions are now strewn with torn tents and debris – the makeshift homes washed away by raging floods.

“We are forced to sleep outside,” Halima Nur told *The Continent* in November. She came to the camp from Baidoa, more than 200km away. Baidoa was suffering its worst drought in nearly 40 years. “I lost everything I had because of the drought. I lost a child along the way. I came to this camp in February empty-



No respite:
Displaced Somalis
face perpetual
hardship. Photo:
Liban Mahamad

handed.” Another of her children is now sick, after weeks of sleeping in the open. As are hundreds of others in the Dolow camps. “The rain is a good thing but it can also cause damage,” she said. “It washed away our tents. It’s very cold at night.”

Adan Ali in Bardhere, 260km south of Dolow, faced the same extremes. “I think we needed the rain,” he said. “We were recovering from a very bad drought.”

But the local river burst its banks, destroying homes and the bridge that connects them with other communities nearby. Ali said: “We can’t go back to our houses. We are stranded. We lost everything, even lives.”

Somalia’s government estimates that the floods displaced 1.1-million people and killed more than a hundred. Last year’s drought displaced hundreds of thousands, with an estimated 43,000 killed.

For the dead, the loss and damage fund came too late. For the survivors, support depends on the ability of negotiators



Floodshed: Homes of refugees from drought-ravaged areas lie in ruins in Dolow. Photo: Liban Mahamad

to ensure polluters actually do pay for destroying communities like Dolow. ■



The world is brutally indifferent to the DRC's democracy

The country's future is inextricably intertwined with that of the planet itself. That is not necessarily a good thing.

Words: Simon Allison. Photos: Moses Sawasawa in Goma

As far as the health of the planet is concerned, there are two reasons why the Democratic Republic of Congo matters.

First: Beneath its vast land mass lies the world's largest deposits of cobalt. This rare blue-grey metal is an essential component of the lithium-ion batteries that are supposed to power the green energy revolution. At our current level of technology, going from fossil fuels towards things like solar power and electric vehicles depends on a steady supply of cobalt. No cobalt, no green revolution.

Second: Atop its vast land mass is the world's second-largest rainforest. Rainforests absorb carbon dioxide and emit oxygen. Keeping them alive is one of the most effective things we can do to keep global heating under control. If other continents had done a better job of preserving their own forests, we might not be in this mess at all.

In other words: what happens in the DRC matters, not just for its people, but for everyone who calls this planet home.

That being said, Congolese citizens do have a few more immediate concerns as they head to the polls on 20 December. Despite – or because of – its extraordinary natural resources, it remains one of the world's five poorest countries. Corruption and squandering of public resources “persists and remains largely unpunished”, according to Amnesty International. And a violent conflict with various militia groups, centred in but not limited to the east, shows no sign of abating.

This state of affairs is hardly a



resounding endorsement of President Félix Tshisekedi, the incumbent who is running for a second term in office.

His election in 2018 was controversial: independent observers determined that he had finished second, behind another opposition candidate, Martin Fayulu. Nonetheless, the courts and the electoral commission gave the vote to Tshisekedi, perhaps thinking that he would go easy on outgoing president Joseph Kabila, who has been implicated in multiple corruption scandals but has yet to face any prosecution.

If the vote goes ahead on 20 December as scheduled – logistical challenges, including the insecurity in the east, make this uncertain – then Tshisekedi is

likely to be declared the winner again, if only because of the electoral advantages conferred by incumbency. The electoral commission is packed with Tshisekedi loyalists, according to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, and opposition leaders complain that both it and the courts are biased in the president's favour.

These opposition leaders include Fayulu – described by his supporters as “the elected president” – who has promised to right the alleged wrong of the 2018 vote; Moïse Katumbi, the businessman and former Katanga governor who was once one of Tshisekedi's closest allies; and Denis Mukwege, the Nobel peace prize-winning doctor and activist.

Whoever does end up occupying – or remaining within – the palatial Palais de la Nation has a daunting task ahead of him. The DRC is one of the hardest countries



Above: Independent observers said Martin Fayulu won the 2018 election, but courts gave it to Tshisekedi. Below: Voters head to a campaign rally for Moïse Katumbi, one of President Tshisekedi's main rivals.





Above: Supporters rally for Nobel peace prize laureate Denis Mukwege, who is running for the presidency. Below: Fayulu supporters gather at a campaign event in Goma.

in the world to govern, given its size (it is the second-largest country in Africa, after Algeria), population (96-million people), and poverty level (per capita GDP is just \$586.5 – a fifth of Nigeria’s).

Once-in-a-generation opportunity

But the incoming administration also has an extraordinary opportunity to transform the prospects of the country and the people that live there. If it is able to leverage all that cobalt, and those rainforests, into meaningful development and redistribution of wealth, then the DRC could be transformed for generations to come.

To do that, the next president will have to do better than almost all of this country’s rulers to date. From Belgium’s King Leopold to Mobutu Sese Seko to



Joseph Kabila, the land's natural resources have too often been used for the personal enrichment of a tiny elite.

To make things even more complicated, the DRC will not be left to its own devices while it figures out how to govern itself better. The vast mineral riches on offer, coupled with the dizzying new revenue-generating possibilities of unregulated carbon-offset markets, have attracted the attention of exploitative companies and countries, none of whom appear to have the best interests of the Congolese people at heart.

Some illustrative examples: Chinese state-owned companies have signed multibillion-dollar deals to secure access to cobalt mines. But they have already been implicated in corrupt and fraudulent practices. Neighbouring countries, most

notably Rwanda, are accused of stoking conflict and then taking advantage of the chaos to export Congolese minerals as their own. Glencore, the Swiss-based mining company, is aggressively pushing ahead with new mining ventures in the DRC, even after it was forced to pay \$180-million to settle cases of corruption there. The United States and Europe tacitly endorsed the last election, even when independent observers concluded it had been stolen, in the interests of stability – but whose stability, exactly? Certainly not that of the nearly 7-million people who are currently internally displaced within the DRC – the highest number ever

Below: Militia groups calling themselves Wazalendo have formed to fight the M23 rebels in the North Kivu province of DRC.



recorded, according to the International Organisation for Migration.

There is little evidence from his first term to suggest that Tshisekedi is capable of surmounting these considerable challenges. A number of his allies and aides have been implicated in major corruption scandals. Insecurity has worsened, with the national army repeatedly implicated in civilian massacres amid dubious alliances with some militia groups. The same old companies appear to be doing the same old dodgy deals.

But the cobalt keeps flowing. The rainforests are not disappearing as quickly as they could. While that may not translate into any material benefit for the country's residents, it is all that a brutally indifferent world appears to require from the DRC – regardless of who wins the election. ■



Above and below: Kenyan soldiers from the East African Community regional force (EAC-RF) board a plane to leave the DRC after Kinshasa refused to renew their mandate.





Photo: The Cemetery of Cinema

Forget me not, lest you forget yourself

Few people alive today can remember watching *Mouramani*, a seminal 1953 film by a young Guinean director. It has been lost. But now another Guinean director is trying to give its story new life.

Wilfred Okiche

Thierno Souleymane Diallo was in graduate film school in Niamey, Niger, when he first heard about *Mouramani*. This was a 1953 film directed by Guinean Mamadou Touré, then a 23-year-old student in Paris. Touré's film, which disappeared soon after, is considered by some to be the first film in French-speaking Africa to be made by an African, predating 1955's *Afrique sur Seine*, which is often credited with that honour.

Diallo was excited to discover that his

own country on the West African coast had a pioneering role in African cinema.

However, his excitement soon gave way to dismay when he realised almost no one had actually seen this film. As a result, there are conflicting accounts of the film's plot.

Diallo's search for the film, as well as the cultural repercussions surrounding that search, is chronicled in his debut feature documentary *The Cemetery of Cinema*, which premiered at the Berlinale earlier in the year and has since been travelling the festival circuit.



Photo: *The Cemetery of Cinema*

Through his translator Maud Martin – who also worked as a producer on the film – Diallo spoke to *The Continent* about this search for a piece of national identity.

“I eventually realised that we have no hope of finding the film, as I am not the first person to search for it,” he says. “But that it is fine, as the search was an entry point to this larger discussion of archives and memory.”

Diallo began to develop the project, seeking out fresh ways of situating himself within this broad and tragic story of his national cinema. He laments: “Cinema is dead in Guinea, waiting to be reborn.”

While developing the film in 2016, Diallo met Martin, an experienced French producer. It took them seven years to get *The Cemetery of Cinema* made.

The tone of the film is playfully absurd, and Diallo connects with his audience through his charming personality.

In this way, he is able to make the film a relatable celebration of the power and

potential of cinema to construct a national narrative.

The breeziness of the film’s narrative does not conceal the sombre reality about the unsophisticated state of Guinea’s film industry and infrastructure, or its failure to preserve its past. Political turbulence following the death of former president Ahmed Sékou Touré led to a coup d’état and a regime that was hostile to cinema. Archives were ransacked and film reels were razed or left to rot.

In *The Cemetery of Cinema*, Diallo stages a one-man protest on the streets of Paris. “I am protesting against the Guinean state that permits students to study cinema but cannot find work for them because there is no money investing in them,” he declares. “But also, against all other countries that do not allocate money to the arts. This film is dedicated to all the directors in the world that cannot make the movie they want to make.”

“This film is dedicated to all the directors in the world that cannot make the movie they want to make.”

At the end of the film, Diallo attempts a four-and-a-half-minute recreation of *Mouramani*, the folkloric story of a young man and his faithful dog.

This simple act of remembrance preserves the essence of the original, but in a different format that pays homage to established oral traditions.

Diallo explains: “Films are the people’s memory, a country’s memory. When they disappear, part of the people is lost too.” ■

Happy Anti-Corruption Day

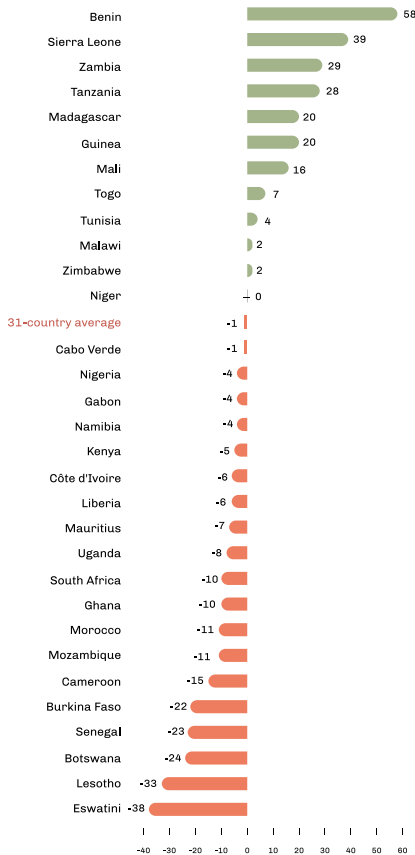
Most people don't *celebrate* International Anti-Corruption Day (9 December). If they take note at all, it's probably via grim reminders of corruption's corrosion of public services, development, and governance.

Afrobarometer survey findings from 39 countries offer such reminders, too, including the verdict, by two-thirds (67%) of Africans, that their governments are failing at fighting corruption, and that things aren't getting any better.

Except that they are – in some places. In Benin, the share of people who say their government is doing a good job fighting corruption has increased by a whopping 58 percentage points since 2014, from 19% to 77%. Sierra Leone's government has gained 39 points in public approval, and Zambia's 29 points, along with significant improvements in Tanzania, Madagascar, Guinea, Mali, Togo, and Tunisia.

Sure, it would be fair to say these big improvements were only possible because they weren't doing so hot before. And to note that 10 countries recorded double-digit declines over the same period, with Eswatini (-38 points), Lesotho (-33 points), and Botswana (-24 points) leading the pack (in the wrong direction).

Still, gains are gains. Happy IACD. ■



Change, in percentage points, between 2014/2015 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say their government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in fighting corruption

Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.

Bad medicine

Kenya has cancelled a controversial doctor exchange programme with Cuba.

Charles Ebikeme

To much fanfare, 100 Cuban doctors arrived in Nairobi in 2017. They were part of an exchange programme between Cuba and Kenya: Cuban doctors were sent to fill in some of the gaps in Kenyan healthcare, and Kenyan doctors would get training in Cuba. Now, six years later, Kenyan health authorities have decided to cancel the arrangement.

Kenya's healthcare system suffers from a mismatch between patient needs and the care that its diminishing and ill-equipped workforce can provide. A study in 2017 found that there were not enough chest specialists, physicians and emergency care nurses in the country. A 2018 assessment of health facilities reported that just 12% of all doctors in the country had the standard items needed to prevent infections, such as gloves, infectious waste storage and disinfectant.

Cuban doctors were billed as the answer to this malaise. The plan was for each Kenyan county to get at least two specialist Cuban doctors – including family physicians, oncologists and surgeons dealing with plastic, orthopaedic, neuro and other specialities.

“Medical diplomacy” has been an essential component of Cuba's foreign

policy for close to 60 years. It routinely sends its health workforce to other countries and receives foreign workers to train. To date, over 130,000 Cuban doctors have taken part in international missions in more than 100 countries.

In post-apartheid South Africa, following the flight of white doctors, that country signed an agreement with Cuba that saw more than 450 Cuban doctors and medical lecturers deployed there between 1995 and 2005. At the same time, more than 700 South African medical students were enrolled at Cuba's Latin American Medical School.

Kenya sought to follow the same approach, but it did not prove to be as quick a fix as intended.

A 2018 assessment of health facilities reported that just 12% of doctors had items needed to prevent infections, such as gloves, infectious waste storage and disinfectant.

Soon after the announcement of the exchange programme, Samson Misango, a doctor working for the government, filed a lawsuit to bar the Cuban doctors. He argued that the Kenyan government lied about a shortage of specialised medical

practitioners, and that there were many unemployed Kenyan doctors available. The suit was eventually dismissed.

The programme also proved unpopular with Kenya's doctors union, partly because Cuban doctors received double the salary of their Kenyan counterparts.

Then, in 2019, Dr Hamisi Ali Juma, a Kenyan doctor on the exchange programme to Cuba, was found dead in his hostel in Havana. This shone a spotlight on the poor living conditions of doctors sent to Cuba for specialist training. Kenya's medical union and parliamentarians called for the programme to be cancelled.

This October, Cabinet Secretary for Health Nakumicha S Wafula announced that the ministry will not renew the bilateral agreement with Cuba, saying, "our very own healthcare professionals are committed to the cause".

However, the sudden withdrawal of 100 specialist doctors from the health system is bound to have consequences.

When Brazilian strongman Jair Bolsonaro said during his presidency that Cuban doctors in his country could only stay if they took an exam to validate their medical credentials, Havana withdrew its doctors. Health experts said that millions of Brazilians, most of whom live in remote, vulnerable areas, were subsequently left without healthcare.

Following Wafula's announcement, Kisumu Governor Anyang Nyong'o asked the national government to rescind the decision. "Where will we find replacements for these doctors?"

It's a good question, but the exchange



Old friends: South Africa welcomed doctors from Cuba as recently as May 2020, to help bolster the country's efforts to manage Covid-19. Photo: Misha Jordaan/Gallo Images via Getty

programme with Cuba might not be the right answer. As of 2021, with 13,376 registered medical doctors, Kenya had 26 physicians for every 100,000 residents. The World Health Organisation recommends a ratio of 100 doctors per 100,000 people. After six years, the exchange programme had added 100 doctors (for the price of at least 200 local ones) and sent 50 Kenyans for specialist training in Cuba – hardly denting the problem.

The union of Kenyan medics has suggested that the money for the exchange programme should instead be used for scholarships at local medical schools. This is probably a more sustainable solution: given that African doctors are leaving the continent in their tens of thousands to find better working conditions overseas, perhaps more needs to be done instead to keep domestic health workers happy. ■

Charles Ebikeme is a science writer based in London.

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

"More flags? This quiz has gone from BuzzFeed to semaphore."

What countries do the flags below represent?

1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Friends, family, indulgences and living the good life. Too few of us are – through endeavour, circumstance or good fortune – able to crown our year with such blessings. And not all who wore crowns last Christmas will be enjoying such blessings this year either.

But you can bet those lucky leaders still in the African Union game – those who haven't been voted out or done in by a dastardly coup – will be doing some last-minute Christmas shopping for their loved ones, because the hearts of our leaders are nothing if not big – almost as big as the size of their bloated delegations to the COP28 summit.

For a thoughtful gift from a discerning despot to the love of his life, might we suggest a “Too cute to coup” crop top? And for his wife, something befitting a first lady. Seat in the cabinet?

For the head of the military, nothing less than a gold-fringed restraining order. Like we always say, keep your friends close, your enemies closer, but don't let the guys with tanks come within 500m of your presidential palace.

Designer robes and diamond encrusted gavels for members of the judiciary, to go

with the “I Changed the Constitution” T-shirt you got them for their birthday. Got to keep the courts on-side! The electoral commissioner too, come to think of it. Pencil them in for an all-expenses paid holiday somewhere nice. (Whether the ticket will be one-way or not is of course dependent upon how the polls go).

The first daughter and first son also deserve gifts for working hard all year. Those tweets don't write themselves and those selfies don't go up on their own either! Appropriate gifts might include parastatals, taxpayer funded houses in Dubai, Paris, and Geneva, and, of course, the opportunity to run for the presidency later down the line! (Not you Muhoozi, Papa says you're getting coal in your

stocking this year 'cos you're working a little *too* hard.)

Then there are those leaders who are using this time to reflect on whether they've been nice enough to get a treat from Santa this year. Like President Félix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, anxiously wondering whether he'll wake up to find another term in office waiting for him under the Christmas tree

All I want for Christmas is AU



CONTINENTAL DRIFT
Samira Sawlani

after the elections on 20 December.

Others will be stressing over the guest list for Christmas dinner, and whether or not to invite the relatives they're currently feuding with. Of course, they simply must. Family is family, after all. Also, what would the *Keeping up with the Coupdashians Christmas Special* be without some festive drama? Popcorn sales would plummet!

Speaking of: the coup crews in Mali and Niger this week released a joint statement announcing that they are revoking tax treaties with France, so I guess that's Cousin Manny uninvited. The junta had a proper go at France's "hostile attitude" and the "unbalanced nature of these treaties". Which is almost as bad as not returning the tupperware you used to take home some leftovers *last* Christmas.

That's okay, Macron's seat at the dinner table will just go to Niger, the newest addition to the *Coupdashians* cast. That country also released a joint statement with Burkina Faso announcing their withdrawal from the France-backed G5 Sahel force, which was set up to fight terrorism in the Sahel region. Both governments said they cannot serve the dictates of any power that "treats them like children and denies the sovereignty of our people". Which is code for telling Cousin Manny to go away in a manger.

Also aiming for a fresh start is Guinea-Bissau's President Umaro Sissoco Embaló. Last week reports emerged that there had been clashes between members of the national guard and presidential special forces, after the former stormed a police station where two senior government



Félix Navidad: On 20 December the DRC electorate will decide if President Tshisekedi has been naughty or nice.

officials were being held for questioning. At the time Embaló wasn't even in the country, but when he came back a few days later he said it had been an attempted coup carried out by the national guard and supported by "certain political interests within the state apparatus". Which is code for Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner!

In fact he cancelled dinner altogether, dissolving the opposition-controlled Parliament, a move which is unlikely to earn him any new friends. So far, he's been on the receiving end of two coup attempts in two years, and this is his second time dissolving Parliament.

Don't worry though, we don't think he'll be alone for Christmas – we've heard there are three ghosts on their way to visit him as we speak! In fact we hear they'll be doing the rounds across the AU, to help our resident Ebenezers see the folly of some of their holly jolly ways.

So let us end this week with a wish for our dear leaders to behave, and for a joyous *peaceful* festive holiday for us all. ■

Identity, personality and bias

As Africa approaches a big election year, some lessons can be taken from Nigeria's busy year.

Afolabi Adekaiyaoja

Nigerians might be excused for having election fatigue, having gone to the polls several times in 2023 and often been dissatisfied with the results. Presidential and parliamentary elections in February were followed by votes for state governors in March, supplementary elections in April, and further elections for state governors in November.

So what have we learned?

First is that someone's identity shapes who they support, but does not drive voters to the polls. The impact of ethnicity and religion on voter preferences was clear in the presidential polls. Peter Obi, a south-easterner, swept the board in his home areas, Atiku Abubakar won in five of the six states in his north-east zone and Bola Tinubu – ultimately declared the winner – secured the vote in four of the six states in the south-west. Sharing a candidate's identity was not enough to mobilise voters to the polls however, with a turnout of just 27%.

Second is that while personalities often trump parties, you can't get elected without a powerful network. Running on the ticket of the smaller Labour Party, Peter Obi was still able to win Lagos and secure a quarter of the national vote. He

failed to perform as well as opinion polls suggested, however, because he lacked the powerful network of "godfathers" and allies needed to both get out the vote and protect it against manipulation.

One of the things learnt is that someone's identity shapes who they support, but does not drive voters to the polls.

The third lesson is that despite frequent reforms, Nigeria's voting architecture remains unfit for purpose. The new electoral act was supposed to strengthen the Independent National Electoral Commission and the electoral framework, but did not ensure credible polls. A major problem is that the commissioners responsible for running elections at the state level continue to show partisan bias.

Until this changes, elections will continue to be controversial and chaotic – and turnout, as well as Nigerian democracy, will suffer. ■

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THE BIG PICTURE

Annual inflation: Holidaymakers pool their resources to beat the heat and keep their heads above water at a leisure park in Bishoftu in Ethiopia. Just 40km outside Addis Ababa, Bishoftu's crater lakes and resorts make it one of the premium getaway spots near the capital.

Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP



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