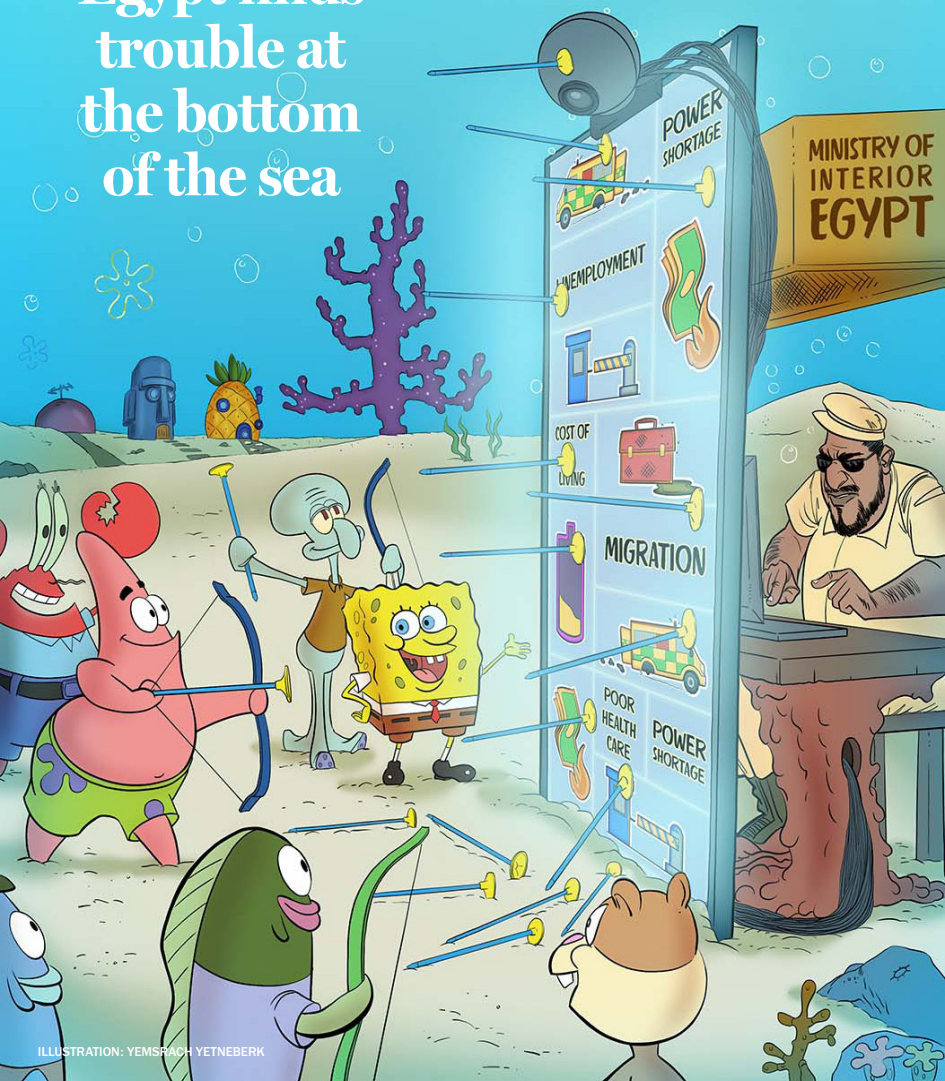


The Continent

Egypt finds
trouble at
the bottom
of the sea





COVER: In just two weeks, a Facebook page called “Bikini Bottom Residents Complain” amassed almost two million members by inviting Egyptians to reimagine their everyday frustrations using cartoons and AI-generated images in the style of the Nickelodeon character SpongeBob SquarePants. Then the page was shut down.

It is unclear whether its teenage administrators shut it down themselves or authorities intervened. But it fits a familiar pattern. Four years ago, authorities arrested organisers of a joke Batman “event” circulating on Facebook. Last year, dozens of online content creators were swept up in a mass crackdown. What made the Bikini Bottom page unusual was not the severity of its criticism, but its reach. Nobody necessarily intended to build a political forum. Yet, in a country with an increasingly restricted public sphere, millions of people talking freely turned it into one (p13).

Inside

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

MAPS

Size does matter

As *The Continent* went to press, the UN General Assembly voted on an African-led resolution calling for fairer world maps. Backed by the AU and led by Togo, the proposal urges governments, schools, international organisations and tech companies to use Equal Earth and other equal-area maps where size matters. It does not ban the Mercator map, but challenges its distortion, which makes Africa appear smaller than it is. According to the *SABC*, Togo's Foreign Minister



ILLUSTRATION: YEMSRACH YETNEBERK

Robert Dussey told the UN this campaign is not a Togolese initiative – it's for the African continent.

MOZAMBIQUE

A reversal of fortunes

Less than 24 hours after appointing Waldemar Fernando de Sousa as central bank governor, President Daniel Chapo revoked the appointment. *Zitamar News* says De Sousa is accused of having approved \$2-billion in illegal borrowing in his previous role as one of the bank's administrators. The job is now going to Felisberto Dinis Navalha, who was originally named as the deputy governor. It's a tough gig: economic growth at 1.74%, and Mozambique is trying to restart talks with the IMF.

KENYA

Standard procedure

Alex Kiprotich, an associate editor at Kenya's Standard Group, was abducted near Nakuru on Tuesday. He was dumped hours later near Masinga Dam, 200km away. His employer said the abductors demanded he reveal *The Standard's* sources. Kiprotich had reportedly escaped an abduction attempt in June. The group said both incidents were linked to his journalism. Police said they were investigating, and the Committee to Protect Journalists has called for a full inquiry.

SOMALIA

Beat 'em, don't buy 'em

Somali Defence Minister Ahmed Moallim Fiqi has urged governments not to pay ransoms for ships held off the Gulf of Aden. He was speaking at the country's national internal security conference in Mogadishu. Fiqi warned payments would fund more pirate attacks and encourage more vessel seizures, *TRT* reports. In March, a Chinese vessel taken in January was released after a \$1.5-million ransom payment. Somalia would not negotiate with abductors even as attacks increase, he said. Fiqi also called for Somalia to be self-sufficient in its security.

LIBYA

**Bank sues
Burkinabé junta**

The Libyan Foreign Bank has taken Burkina Faso to an international arbitration tribunal over the 2024 nationalisation of Banque Commerciale du Burkina, which the two states jointly owned. *Business Insider* reports the Libyan bank filed the claim with the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes on 17 August. Burkina Faso cited operational difficulties and accused its Libyan partner of failing to provide support. The bank rejected the allegations. The dispute has not yet been adjudicated and the compensation sought has not been disclosed.



PHOTO: SÉNAT DE MADAGASCAR

MADAGASCAR

**The power-to-prison
pipeline**

Richard Ravalomanana, the former Senate president, has been sentenced to 10 years of hard labour for his role in a violent crackdown on youth-led protests in 2025, *Midi Madagasikara* reports. A court in Antananarivo found Ravalomanana guilty of complicity in murder. Prosecutors accused him of directing security forces to use violence against demonstrators during the protests that helped to topple Andry Rajoelina's government last year. The unrest began over power and water shortages. At least 22 people were killed and more than 100 injured. Ravalomanana denies the allegations and plans to appeal.

BUSINESS

Uber is over it

After 12 years on Nigeria's roads, Uber is leaving. According to *TechCabal*, when the e-hailing app announced it would wind down its operations this week, active drivers were told they would receive a once-off discretionary "goodwill payment" as they leave. The exit comes as ride-hailing companies battle rising fuel costs, inflation and currency volatility, which have pushed up operating costs and squeezed drivers. Uber said its help centre will remain open until 23 September. The company also confirmed it has stopped operating in Uganda.



PHOTO: SAMBA BALDE/AFP

That's the point: President General Horta N'Tam's one-year transitional term is coming to an end, but he is amassing more power.

GUINEA-BISSAU

Just say yes

Guinea-Bissauans have approved constitutional changes giving the president greater powers, with 70% voting in favour, the electoral commission said on Tuesday. The changes allow the president to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, as well as to dissolve Parliament, *AFP* reports. The junta says the changes will stabilise institutions, but opposition groups urged a boycott, citing restrictions on public freedoms. The referendum comes less than 10 months after a military coup and ahead of the 6 December presidential elections intended to restore civilian rule.

SENEGAL

IMF loan programme:
Read the small print

The IMF has agreed to a new \$2.2-billion, 36-month loan for Senegal after suspending a previous deal over undisclosed debt, but requires reforms and "decisive corrective measures" to address past misreporting. Senegal's public debt reached 132% of GDP in 2024, although its fiscal deficit narrowed to 6.4% in 2025. Parliament speaker Ousmane Sonko has demanded transparency over the deal, including details of any debt treatment, and said commitments must ultimately be debated by legislators. The agreement still requires approval by the IMF's executive board.

GHANA

Back like he never left

Carlos Queiroz has been reappointed as Ghana's head football coach, just weeks after announcing his departure after the World Cup in July. The 73-year-old took charge in April and led the Black Stars to the last 32, where they lost 1-0 to Colombia. The Ghana Football Association said Queiroz's experience and team knowledge made him the right choice for its "next chapter", the *BBC* reports. The length of his new contract was not disclosed. Queiroz will now prepare Ghana for the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers against Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia and Somalia.

NIGERIA

It's not what it looks like

The US plans to withdraw about 200 military personnel from Nigeria. Defence Headquarters spokesperson Major General Samaila Uba described the move as routine, *Premium Times* reports. He said intelligence sharing, training, technical assistance and information sharing would continue. The US troops were deployed to northeastern Nigeria earlier this year to support counter-terrorism efforts, initially focusing on intelligence and training. Nigerian authorities said foreign forces were not intended to conduct combat operations.

GUINEA

Discovery of mass grave prompts probe

Civil society groups are calling for an independent investigation after six unidentified men were found bound and blindfolded in a mass grave in Forécariah Prefecture on 24 August. The organisations said the discovery raised fears of extrajudicial executions and called for forensic experts to help to identify the victims, *Al Jazeera* reports. Guinea's armed forces said the bodies had been taken to a hospital for identification and that an investigation would be conducted, with results made public.



PHOTO: COMMISSION NATIONALE DE DEFENSE ET DE SECURITE GUINEENNE

NEWS

COMOROS

French PM's faux pas infuriates Comorians

Tone-deaf comments about aid bring up an old dispute about who owns Mayotte.

FAÏZA SOULÉ YOUSSEF IN MORONI

FRANCE'S PLAN to tie aid packages for African countries to their level of support in curbing what it calls "illegal migration" has strained its already tense relationship with the Union of the Comoros.

Last week, French Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu faced backlash after his visit to the disputed Indian Ocean island of Mayotte. He said developmental aid to Comoros and six other African countries would be based on "the ability to co-operate well in the fight against smugglers; the ability to take back foreigners in an irregular situation".

About half of Mayotte's population are immigrants, the majority from the neighbouring Comorian islands.

Comoros says it owns Mayotte. In a 1974 referendum, Mayotte voted to stay with France while the other Comorian

islands chose independence.

Comoros Foreign Minister Mohamed Mbaé accused France of condescension: "Comorians are at home in Mayotte, there can be no question of expelling Comorians from their own territory."

The Maore Committee of Comoros, which campaigns for the return of Mayotte, accused France of engaging in neocolonial blackmail.

Rafsandjani Mohamed, president of the opposition Ushe party, said, "The Comorian government has made so many concessions that France feels it can do whatever it pleases. It also represents the failure of a regime that outwardly lays claim to Mayotte while selling it off behind the scenes."

The UN General Assembly has passed several non-binding resolutions recognising Comorian sovereignty over Mayotte, while France maintains the principle of self-determination applies. ■



PHOTO: MARINE GACHET/AFP

MayNotte: France's Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu wants to curb immigration to Mayotte.

ALGERIA



PHOTO: FATEH GUIDOUN/AP PHOTO

Deadly wildfires reignite death-penalty debate

MADJID SERRAH IN ALGIERS

PRESIDENT Abdelmadjid Tebboune has called for convicted arsonists to be sentenced to death after unprecedented wildfires in Algeria.

In late August, raging wildfires killed 12 people, although unofficial reports put the figure at more than 200. In Jijel province, temperatures exceeded 45°C and wind speeds reached 100km/h, making conditions difficult for firefighters. The fires destroyed homes and agriculture, forests and livestock.

Tebboune suspects foul play and has given the minister of justice until 15 September to amend the penal code so the perpetrators could be executed.

Human rights lawyer Hachem Saci called for caution, saying the current policy was “strict and tough enough”. The death penalty may already be applied to arsonists if someone dies in the fire, although no executions for any crime have been carried out since 1993.

“What matters most is prevention, rather than increasing the punishment,” Saci told *The Continent*. ■

BOTSWANA

‘When you are breathing, there is hope’

Newly naturalised citizens remain optimistic despite harsh post-camp realities.

KELETSO THOBEGA IN GABORONE

MONTHS after leaving Dukwi Camp in central Botswana, many former refugees are struggling to adapt to their new lives. They were granted citizenship by Botswana in June.

For many of them, the camp had been their home for years after fleeing war and insecurity in Burundi, Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and the DRC.

Botswana has about 1,200 registered refugees. Recent changes to immigration law have allowed them to gain citizenship, so they can “contribute meaningfully to the economy”, according to the country’s minister of home affairs.

The transition comes with its own struggles. Outside the camp, there are no provisions or donations. “It wasn’t easy at the camp, but at least you didn’t worry about where your next meal would come from,” Abel Takuwane from Zimbabwe told *The Continent*.



Well come: Refugees from several African states were granted Botswanan citizenship in June.

PHOTO: BOTSWANA MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND HOME AFFAIRS

“[The] cost of living in Botswana is high and jobs are scarce,” said Magdeline Seole*, originally from the DRC. She does odd jobs cleaning homes and braiding hair in Francistown.

Despite the challenges, some former refugees are optimistic. Fenny Ibdahin from the DRC moved to Gaborone and is glad he got a new start after 14 years in the camp. “I now hope to get a job,” he said. “It’s not easy, but we are trying.”

Kay Leb*, a widow with two children, arrived from Somalia 16 years ago. “Living in a refugee camp is like being in prison because you don’t have much personal freedom,” she said.

Leb is a trained tailor and her dream is to start a clothes shop. “I believe things will work out. When you are breathing, there is hope.” ■

*Names changed to protect identities

Reading is resistance



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NAMIBIA

Hands off our agricultural intelligence

In the AI era, data is a valuable commodity – and the government is trying not to give it away on the cheap.

TRACY TAFIRENYIKA IN WINDHOEK

LAST MONTH, the Namibian government cancelled a \$2.4-million contract with 6th Grain Corporation, a United States agricultural-technology company, after a fierce domestic debate on data sovereignty. Critics feared 6th Grain was more interested in harvesting data than harvesting crops.

The one-year agreement, signed in June, promised to use satellite imagery, geospatial analytics, and AI to monitor Namibia's production of staple crops – including maize, mahangu, millet, sorghum and wheat – to support the country's food security and agricultural policy goals. 6th Grain said the project would be donor-financed, although exactly who was funding it was not publicly disclosed.

The deal was concluded without an open tender and scrapped when a government review found it did not follow the legal and procedural standards for state contracts.

The 6th Grain Corporation promised

all agricultural intelligence gathered by its tools would ultimately be transferred to the Namibian government. But not everyone was convinced.

Agricultural scientist Helvi Shindume told *The Continent* the deal would have created risks around data sovereignty, cybersecurity and technological dependency.

“If a foreign company controls the platform and the data, Namibia could become dependent on an external provider to access or analyse information about its own agricultural sector,” she said.

Geologist Andrew Ipinge, meanwhile, noted that detailed geological maps, geophysical surveys, borehole records and mineral-occurrence data can help identify areas with deposits of uranium, copper, lithium, gold and rare-earth minerals.

“Once someone else has the map, they don't need to do the exploration,” he said.

6th Grain has ongoing AI-powered projects in several African countries.



Data farm: Namibia cancelled a contract with an agri-tech firm citing security concerns.

PHOTO: CSIPRO

The company has deployed similar models in Rwanda and Tunisia, partnered with agro-multinational Syngenta in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and produced cropped-area maps for the World Bank's Disaster Risk Financing programme in Senegal.

“If a foreign company controls the platform and the data, Namibia could become dependent on an external provider to access or analyse information about its own agricultural sector.”

Vladimir Eskin, 6th Grain's founder and chief executive, doesn't have much experience in agriculture. But he is one of the world's foremost experts in the business of data collection.

A company he previously co-founded, Knoema, initially billed

itself as a platform through which public data would be accessible to all. Knoema collected and organised tens of millions of public data sets, including through a landmark deal with the African Development Bank. But after the company was sold to a private equity firm in 2020, its focus shifted towards serving clients willing to pay for its data and analytics.

The Continent contacted 6th Grain for comment. Chief science officer Molly Brown said the company's intention was to provide training, capacity building, and full documentation of the system before the end of the contract, with “no expectation of annual subscription fees”.

With this approach, she said, the company anticipates countries with which it partners will “reduce dependency on contractors and foreign governments [by being provided with] the software and knowledge needed to support their agriculture sector”. ■

FEATURE



Bikini Bottom (by way of Egypt) residents participating in a crowded council meeting.

The Republic vs SpongeBob SquarePants

What began as a humorous Facebook group dedicated to a fictional Bikini Bottom quickly morphed into a digital forum in which millions of Egyptians (un)seriously aired real-world grievances. But this is the Egypt of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, and even a fictional bottom of the sea isn't far enough away from his crackdown on expression and dissent.

PATRICK SHAFIQ*

IN LATE August, a Facebook group called "Complaints of the Residents of Qaa al-Hamour" appeared on the platform. Qaa al-Hamour is the approximate Arabic translation of Bikini Bottom, the fictional

hometown of Nickelodeon's cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants.

The premise was simple: it welcomed users to draw or AI-generate cartoons in the style of the *SpongeBob* world, which users would treat as if it were a real Egyptian city and air their grievances.

Posts rapidly began to appear highlighting power shortages, poor public health services, the cost of living, the lack of jobs, and even annoying neighbours. New businesses opened, and imaginary officials appeared to regulate them.

Migration became a flashpoint too, with far-right Kemetist groups insisting, in mock-pharaonic style, that Bikini Bottom was “only for Bikini Bottom people”.

By the second week of its existence, the Facebook group had grown to nearly two million members and 10,000 posts.

The alternative world even had its own ministries that members could tag to report a problem.

But the deep-sea alternative world started to crumble when it became entangled with its real mirror image. The SpongeBob memes began trending across several social media platforms, and as new members poured in, some began tagging the real Egyptian interior ministry to report what they deemed “dangerous political satire”.

Then the page was suspended. One of the admins of the page, who said she was a teenage girl, posted a video saying



The power is cut off in Qaa Al Hamour.

they were “naive and just wanted to have fun” – and that they were not responsible for the political content.

It's unclear whether the Egyptian authorities pulled the page or if the admins panicked and shut it down. Several media outlets report that it is being investigated by the interior ministry. *The Continent* contacted Meta and Egypt's ministry of interior for comment. They did not reply.

Batman, too

The current Egyptian state has taken a heavy-handed approach towards online expression. It learned from the 2011 revolution, organised through social media platforms. It has since become one of the most active state actors on Facebook, establishing an official presence for numerous public institutions.

And SpongeBob isn't the first time Egyptian authorities have treated a cartoon as a threat. In 2022, a joke

Facebook event titled “Helwan Real Batman Battle” was set up after two Facebook users insisted that each of them was the real superhero.

A third proposed the two should “fight a battle” in Cairo's Helwan district to “solve this issue”. Whoever was still alive at the end of the battle would be declared the real Batman, the event's description said. The post prompted a wave of memes, jokes, and quotes, and was even light-heartedly referenced by Egyptian celebrities, the *BBC* reported.

However, pro-government television networks loyal to the president raised alarm, alleging the “event” could incite violence against security forces. Police arrested the four organisers on charges of “planning a riot”.

And last year dozens of online content creators were arrested in a mass crackdown. Many are facing criminal charges of “violating family principles or values in Egyptian society”, a law that Human Rights Watch says has become one of the key tools for criminalising free expression in recent years.

One of those arrested was a tattoo artist who published videos of himself tattooing women, which authorities said “contradicts societal traditions”. Another was a 16-year-old who was sentenced to two years in prison by a juvenile court for posting videos of herself dancing, which the court said was “promoting vice and debauchery”.

The interior ministry often relies on users' tags to track down online creators – which likely led to the exposure of the SpongeBob group.



Facebook users reimagined the underwater town as a local neighbourhood, whose residents experience frustrations that eventually boil over.



Political allegory

Political satire has endured through all of modern Egyptian history, surfacing in different mediums and tools, despite the squeeze of exile, censorship, and arrest.

Doaa el-Adl is a pioneering female Egyptian political cartoonist who recently captured the zeitgeist by drawing a caricature of SpongeBob and his cartoon friend Patrick running away in terror.

She said some of the group's AI-generated memes "are funny and carry smart political allegory" at a time when political cartooning is being hemmed in by red lines. That, she told *The Continent*, "was a successful recipe".

Today, the creative and circulatory power of generative AI is enormous, letting people around the world produce



Top: A community notice board titled "Sea Bottom Residents Complaints Group" lists funny grievances about utility bills, water currents, and disputes among neighbours, alongside local tea kiosks and housing notices.

Above: The sign on the right translates to "Please wait, long time, thanks."

and share content with ease, Andrew Simon, a historian of media, popular culture, and the Middle East, told *The Continent*.

But Simon, who has studied how the cassette tape decentralised state-controlled media and democratised cultural production in Egypt, said, “unlike cassettes, generative AI operates in a highly centralised landscape”, and that the question of control by Big Tech companies, “is key to understanding the power and politics of any technology”.

El-Adl added that AI-generated political cartoons carry an ethical problem too: they plagiarise real artists’ work, harm the environment, and feed big corporations that may not share the

same values. Caricature requires local context, she said.

“Satirists need a satirical sensibility and a distinctive artistic style, and views shaped by their own life experience,” El-Adl said. “Political cartooning is better off without AI-generated content.”

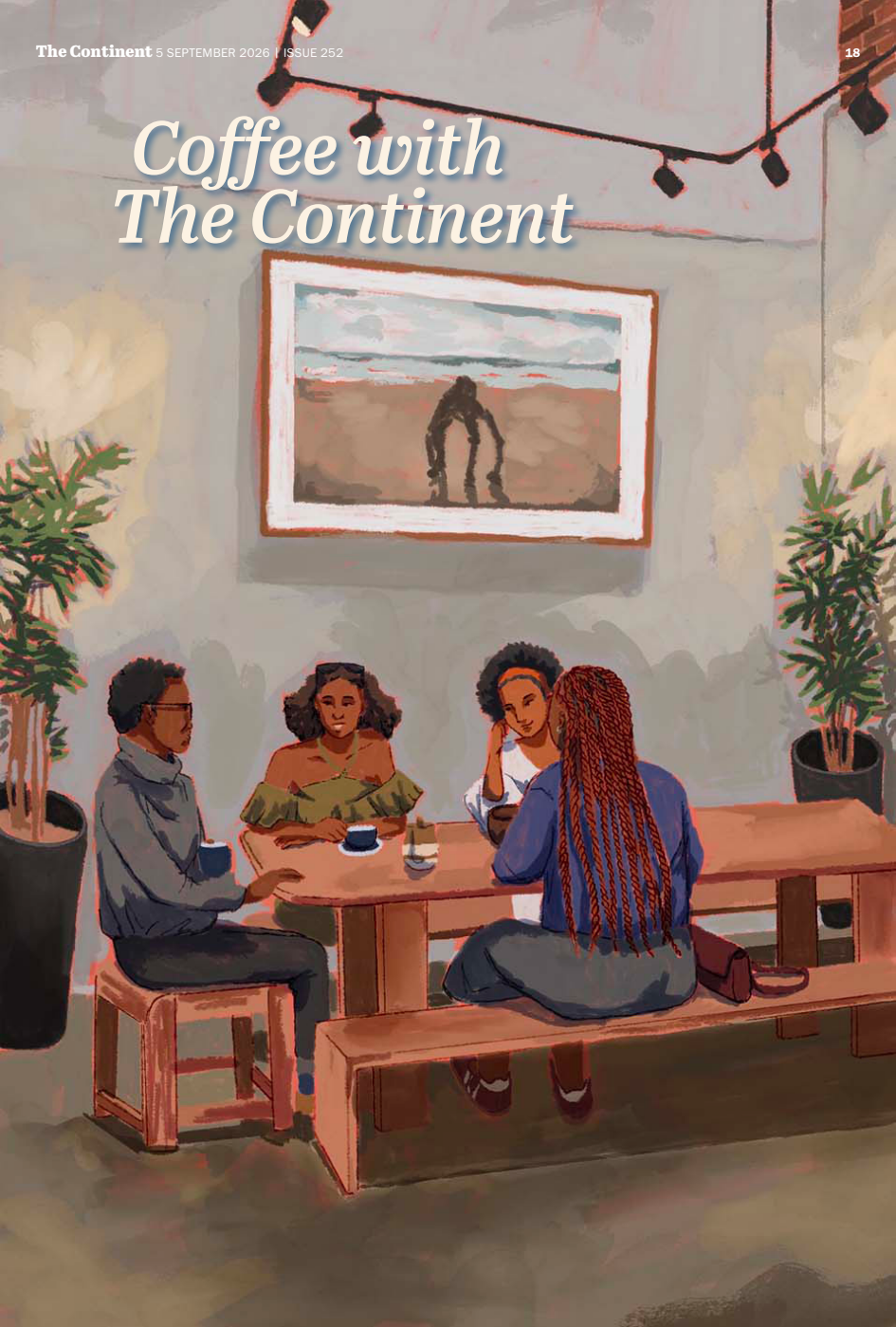
The SpongeBob memes continue to circulate through other pages and users. But for now, Bikini Bottom has gone quiet. ■

* The journalist is writing under a pseudonym for their safety.



A mother and son grouper walking past a stall selling treats for the Islamic holiday Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet's birthday). But the prices have increased so much.

Coffee with The Continent



INTERVIEW

Welcome to Coffee with *The Continent*, where we chat to smart people with smart ideas. You're all invited. This week, our guest is **NEO MUYANGA**, the Soweto-born composer, sound artist, librettist, music director, and impresario at The Centre for the Less Good Idea.

VENUE* Kōhī by Ifuku, at 44 Stanley, just in front of his studio, or Home of the Bean in Maboneng in Johannesburg.

DRINK He loves his coffee, especially a black Americano. "I studied in Italy, and it's so uncool there to order an Americano, but that's what I drink." He grinds his own coffee at home, whether in Johannesburg or Cape Town. "In Joburg where my life's a bit faster, I use a machine. Arabica from Ethiopia is my favourite bean. Second is Ugandan."

SOCIAL NETWORKS "I've never understood how people can manufacture more time in their day to do stuff on social media... The algorithm gets you wound up and you end up going from wormhole to wormhole. I'd never get to the studio."

MUSIC "I try to listen to everything. I'm interested in culture, so I watch clips on

YouTube or Instagram if I can access [them] because I don't have Instagram. Sometimes, people send me tapes. A lot of younger composers have found a way to find me. One guy came to see me at the centre today and brought a whole keyboard to play. So, I listen to people live. I travel a lot too and go and see whatever's happening wherever I am."

MONUMENT** Monuments are complicated as they're "decidedly propagandist and often obscure more than they reveal". He remembers the Rhodes Must Fall movement as a reminder of problematic monuments. "What came out of that conversation philosophically was whether it's better to destroy them or to take them off their pedestals but preserve them so their stories can be taught. I agree more with the latter than the former, but it's not an easy binary."

**We interviewed Muyanga online. His dream venue was brought to life by illustrator Wynona Mutisi.*

***Last year, The Continent ran a series on iconic monuments across Africa. We're asking each guest to nominate a monument iconic to them.*

A musical communion

THERE is an argument in South Africa that Neo Muyanga finds deeply ignorant – the idea the country should have had a civil war because, more than three decades after the end of apartheid, economic power remains deeply unequal.

“Some have argued that, if we’d had our civil war and spilled blood, then perhaps we’d have had the reset we needed. They’re ignorant of what civil war means and haven’t looked at examples from our neighbourhood, like Angola or Mozambique – at how long it takes to recover from such a struggle.”

That’s why it was “incredibly important” for him to produce *The Bacchae: An African Choral Ballet* in South Africa in 2026, he says.

The spectacular project involved the Johannesburg Ballet, the University of Johannesburg Choir, the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra, and a cast of 140. It is based on the ancient Greek tragedy of political disorder, vengeance, and violence. It asks South Africans to consider what turmoil and lust for blood really look like – and what that eventually produces.

The project was influenced by Wolé Soyínká’s *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973). It was Soyínká’s “response to the Biafran secession movement, what became the Nigerian Civil War.”

Muyanga’s answer to South Africa’s unfinished transformation agenda is a



PHOTO: THE CENTRE FOR THE LESS GOOD IDEA

new way of imagining old problems. That idea runs through his work.

Whether he is putting African stories into European opera houses, creating spaces for experimental African musicians, or revisiting an ancient Greek tragedy from Johannesburg, Muyanga keeps asking what can be made when Africans stop accepting the boundaries circumscribing what belongs to them and what is possible.

“We felt Africans needed to find a new language for where we were going,” he says. That phrase comes from the Pan African Space Station (Pass), the music platform and audio exhibition space Muyanga founded with Ntone Edjabe in 2008.

“We asked each other and other people what and who would be regarded as avant-garde or experimental from the African experience.”

They mostly drew blanks. But Sun Ra and his Arkestra offered a way.

“Sun Ra’s famous for saying, ‘There are



Frenzied: A scene from *The Bacchae: An African Choral Ballet*, composed by Muyanga. PHOTO: LAUGE SORESENSEN

other worlds [they have not told you of]’ That became the tagline for the Pass. We were interested in exploring what was happening across the continent and the diaspora – avant-garde, future-forward, and experimental material.”

Pass, which also recalls the *dompas*, the ID book that controlled movement during apartheid, was launched as a festival in Cape Town. In the “bastion of white privilege”, they went looking for “the most cutting-edge, most dangerous-minded musicians or composers about to become world famous”.

After three years, they ran out of money. However, Pass has continued its work on its website and through pop-up performances around Cape Town.

Muyanga wrote his first operetta, *The Flower of Shembe*, in tribute to his

mother’s connection to the Shembe Church, an African-initiated Christian movement also known as the Nazareth Baptist Church. He followed that up with a theatre piece, *Memory of How It Feels*. More recently, he wrote *How Anansi Freed the Stories of the World*, which premiered at the Dutch National Opera and Ballet in 2021 and was performed again in 2025.

“I saw the opera house as a place people who look and sound like me don’t often get to go into. I was let in and brought a story to subvert the conversation. That seemed to work so well we were invited to do it a second time.”

Muyanga calls what he does “new opera” – his compositions have included scratch DJ, hand drums and electric jazz guitar. His musical references stretch

through Zulu and Nguni music, Famo, township choral traditions, San and Khoikhoi traditions, Ethiopian music, and Egyptian shaabi and zar.

He calls them different idioms of making songs – traditions that can retain their own voices while creating something new together. It is an idea Muyanga encountered years ago in Italy, where a scholarship was his escape from the brutality of apartheid. Despite encountering racism there, he also found something more transformative.

“I think of choirs as a really wonderful technology for making community,” he says. “It was a saving grace for me.”

Madrigals, surprisingly, felt familiar. “Each voice tells its own story, but also adds to a cohesive whole”, much like Southern African traditions of singing, harmonising, and improvising.

That tension between the individual voice and the collective has followed

Muyanga ever since – from his Blk Sonshine days to theatre, opera, and the many musical traditions he now brings together. Yet he has resisted the fame that has come with it.

“[Fame] makes you unfree. I knew early on I wouldn’t thrive in stardom because I’m solitary. I spent a lot of time alone as a kid, because I had to run away from home [to escape apartheid] when I was 11,” he says. “I ended up being the kind of person who always was on the move, alone.”

Perhaps that is why the idea of communion looms over most of his work. Like a choir, everyone can sing their own part and still make something larger together. For Muyanga, this may be where Africa’s possibilities lie too: not in everyone becoming the same, but in finding new ways for its many voices, histories, and “idioms” to create something that did not exist before. ■



Spidey sense:
Muyanga’s *How Anansi Freed the Stories of the World* premiered at the Dutch National Opera and Ballet in 2021.

PHOTO: MICHEL SCHNATER

We love to hear from you

UNLESS you're a 2026 subscriber (hi!), you'll remember our most recent Big Annual Survey™, in which 1,481 of you took part. In it, we asked you to tell us about your Happy Place™. We'll be sharing a few of those responses with you this season. Look out for our mascot Astro, who's hiding somewhere in each illustration.

“A local coffee shop, alfresco, watching cars and people go by, enjoying the blue sky. Also, taking a long walk in one of the forests in Nairobi.”





Zambian opposition leader Brian Mundubile (seated, right) and his running mate Makebi Zulu (left) were arrested and charged with treason after Hakainde Hichilema won the election. PHOTO: NRPUP

PHOTO ESSAY

The charge that won't die

Treason is a dangerously elastic crime levelled against political opponents. Like a Swiss Army Knife to insecure governments, it collapses the distinction between opposition and attacks on the state. In many countries, it carries the most serious sentence – the death penalty.

WORDS AND RESEARCH: KIRI RUPIAH

LAST WEEK, Zambia's opposition leader Brian Mundubile and his running mate were charged with treason, together with 16 others, after a disputed election. Incumbent Hakainde Hichilema was sworn in for a second term on Tuesday – the president himself

had faced a treason charge nine years earlier while in opposition.

Treason charges against opposition figures in Africa have been a recurring feature of the continent's legal systems, going back to the era of colonial rule. In the first decades after independence,

they were mostly used against coup plotters and military rivals who attempted to overthrow governments.

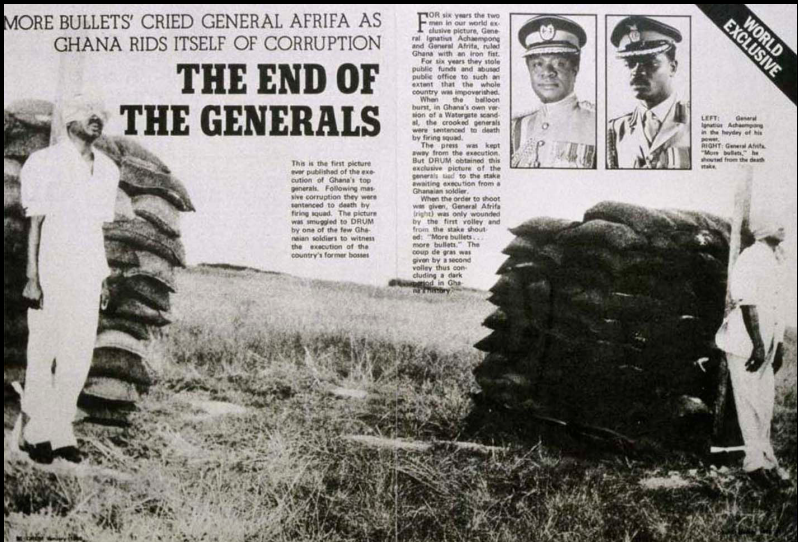
There were many coups in those early post-independence decades. By one count, there have been more than 200 military coups in Africa since the 1960s.

But since 2000 – and particularly over the past decade – there has been a significant uptick in treason charges being brought against opposition leaders who have challenged incumbents, often in the run-up to or aftermath of elections.

The legal definitions of treason in many African countries share common foundational concepts, such as waging

war against the state or colluding with enemies with the intent of overthrowing the government. Yet, in recent years, these charges have increasingly been put forward for critical speech, calling for boycotts, or simply challenging an election result.

When treason is repeatedly invoked in highly politicised contexts – particularly when charges are later dropped or trials drag on for years – the term risks becoming a generic label for “anti-government” activity rather than a narrow crime of violent overthrow. In some ways, the concept is being degraded in public consciousness, even if formal legal definitions remain unchanged. ■



In June 1979, three former heads of state were executed for treason in Ghana. They were all military officers who had led coups between 1969 and 1979 – Ignatius Kutu Acheampong (left inset picture), Fred Akuffo (right inset picture), and Kwasi Afrifa. PHOTO: DRUM MAGAZINE



Kenya carried out its last execution in 1987, when Hezekiah Ochuka (centre) was executed for leading a coup attempt against President Daniel arap Moi five years earlier. PHOTO: STANDARD MEDIA



The last executions in Angola (Nito Alves, 1977, pictured), Senegal (Moustapha Lô, 1967), Niger (Major Bayere Moussa, 1976) and Gabon (Alexandre Mandja Ngokouta, 1985) were of coup leaders, for the crime of treason. PHOTO: ASSOCIAÇÃO 27 DE MAIO



Tanzania charged opposition leader Tundu Lissu with treason in 2025 after prosecutors accused him of inciting rebellion and seeking to disrupt elections. His trial is ongoing. PHOTO: AFP



In 2025, South Sudan's First Vice-President Riek Machar was charged with treason, murder, and crimes against humanity over militia attacks on government forces.

PHOTO: PETER LOUIS GUME / AFP

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

The AI boom is outpacing safety rules



Global tech companies are scrambling to build enough infrastructure for cloud computing and AI. The race for their versions to win means spending staggering sums – and cities are competing for their share. But people often know little about the massive buildings being erected near them. And, at Africa's southern tip, a proposed data centre is being treated like a warehouse because the rules have not caught up.

**EUNICE MASSON, LYSE COMINS, AND
ATHANDIWE SABA**

FOR 66-year-old Ncediwe Vanqa, water is something you get one trip at a time. From her home in Barcelona, an informal settlement in Cape Town, she walks to a communal tap up to seven times a day. She uses a communal pit latrine and, in emergencies, a bucket.

Less than 2km away, across the freeway, Cape Town is preparing for infrastructure operating at an entirely different scale.

Vanqa's experience is not unique. South Africa's public protector recently found that in two nearby settlements the

city had failed to provide adequate water, sanitation and electricity, with failures amounting to "maladministration" and "prejudice". The country's Constitution guarantees these basic services as human rights.

The city cited budget constraints, infrastructure backlogs and competing service-delivery demands as reasons for its failure; meanwhile, it is fast-tracking massive data-centre developments.

In July – shortly after those findings – the city's Municipal Planning Tribunal approved a land-use application by property developer King Air Industria for two data centres intended for Equinix. The vote was four to one in favour.



Clockwise from left:
A holding wall is already being built at the King Air Industria site.

Women do laundry in Barcelona settlement.

Ncediwe Vanqa collects water at her informal settlement's shared tap.

ALL PHOTOS: DAVID HARRISON/THE CONTINENT



The dissenting vote came from Wally Johnstone. “Most of us do not know what [the water and electricity demand is] for a facility that we are asked to approve, as no details have been made available,” Johnstone said.

This is not uncommon. Initially, building data centres faced limited resistance. But as communities become aware of their impact, resistance has grown. Such impacts include constant noise; water use, even in drought-stricken areas; heating of the surroundings; and heavy electricity use.

Courtship

Equinix was founded in the United States in 1998. It has grown to become one of the world's largest data centre operators and provides infrastructure for the likes of Amazon, Microsoft and Google.

Last year Equinix made more than

\$1.3-billion. McKinsey estimates that spending on data centres could reach \$7-trillion by 2030.

Equinix told *The Continent* it has not submitted planning applications, although documents confirm the site is intended for the company.

The Continent has established that Equinix staff met city officials at the company's request. These include three meetings between July 2025 and June 2026 with Lance Greyling, the city's director of economic development.

Greyling confirmed the meetings but stated no statutory approvals were discussed and that he did not intervene in the approval process. There is no evidence to suggest he did so. Greyling's role, he said, is to attract investment to Cape Town while ensuring companies meet legal requirements.

The King Air site is not the only project.

Deputy Mayor Eddie Andrews told *The Continent* Cape Town has approved five data centres and another two are being assessed. The city would not identify the companies, citing the Protection of Personal Information Act, but did not explain which provisions prevented disclosure.

Provincial legislator Brett Herron said the city is “courting” several hyperscale developments.

It’s a warehouse, not a data centre

Data centres are not new to South Africa. The country hosts about 64 of them, with another 10 planned, according to Data Centre Map. But hyperscale facilities bring infrastructure demands of a different order.

South Africa has no dedicated national data-centre policy and Cape Town has no separate land-use category for hyperscale facilities, which are assessed under existing industrial or warehousing rules. Johnstone, the one tribunal member who voted against King Air’s application, called that “wholly inadequate” and said it was “simplistic to consider a data centre as a warehouse that only stores computer systems”.

Grant Oosterwyk, a senior lecturer in information systems at the University of Cape Town, called it a “profound regulatory mismatch”. He added: “The category has simply not caught up with the infrastructure being built inside it.”

This gap in planning rules affects how officials treat applications. But a warehouse does not need vast, guaranteed supplies of water and power.

The Legal Resources Centre calculated the data centres could consume 4.4-billion litres of water a year using conventional evaporative cooling. Less water-intensive methods exist, but they cost more. There are similar concerns around electricity usage.

King Air Industria told the city tribunal final resource-use figures would be provided during the site development planning phase.

The race is already spreading

eThekweni Municipality, like Cape Town, lacks specific planning definitions for hyperscale data centres. Yet, in April, its council authorised negotiations with the Korean South Power Consortium for a proposed AI facility south of Durban.

Council documents estimate a \$3-billion to \$10-billion investment, with potential municipal support for land and infrastructure, although exact utility requirements remain undetermined.

South African cities are being offered billions in investment and a place in the global AI and cloud economy. But the infrastructure is arriving faster than the rules designed to govern its scale.

In similar cases, like in Chile, centres created few jobs, used up resources, polluted, and provided little to locals. In other cases, community pushback has meant more efficient data centres and more tax paid to towns and cities.

For communities such as Vanqa’s, the question is how the public can assess what data centres will cost them in land, electricity and water before the decisions to build them are made. ■

DATA

AU as good as gold

WEDNESDAY 9 September is African Union Day. (Not to be confused with Africa Day, which commemorates the AU’s formation. Keep up!) It’s a good time to reflect on how we view the body.

Majorities of Africans say the AU has a positive influence on their country (55%) and recognises their country’s interests (56%). Few think the organisation harms their country (13%) or fails to acknowledge their country’s needs (18%).

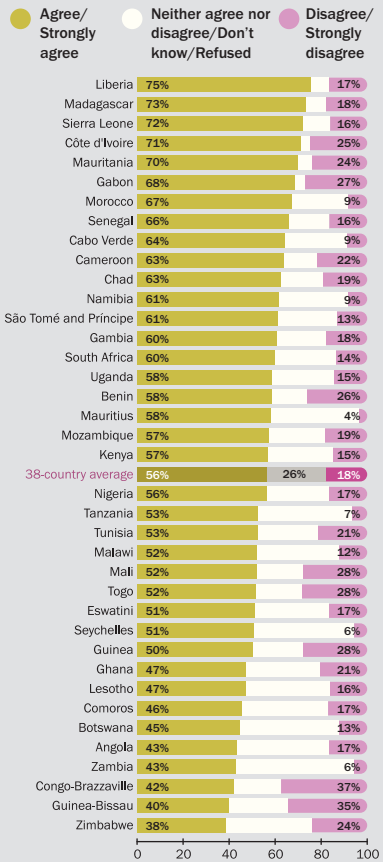
Positive views predominate across all five subregions of the continent. Central Africans are somewhat more likely than citizens in other parts to offer negative appraisals.

Three-quarters (75%) of Liberians say the AU recognises their country’s needs, the most among the 38 countries we surveyed. But fewer than half agree in nine countries.

Notably, large minorities don’t take a position. One in four (26%) perceive a neutral effect, don’t know what influence the AU has, or decline to offer an opinion, and one in three (32%) provide the same responses regarding the AU’s recognition of their national interests.

Perhaps that’s the purpose of AU Day – to create awareness and understanding of the work the organisation is doing. ■

AU recognises country’s needs | 38 African countries | 2024/2025



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.



TC BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



To endure or not to endure

How much is too much to withstand?

MUBANGA Kalimamukwento's *The Shipikisha Club* begins in the aftermath of the protagonist, Sali, killing her husband, Kasunga. She appears in court and revisits the events that led to the murder through flashbacks and recollections.

A running theme is the friction between Christianity and traditional

beliefs and some of the novel's most interesting passages describe many beautiful aspects of Bemba culture, which will resonate with African readers.

However, we've also inherited damaging ideas, like shipikisha, which means "to endure". Many African women will know a version of this – how they must learn to withstand the ravages of the patriarchy in silence. The burden is placed on a woman to hold her marriage together, no matter what she suffers.

Kalimamukwento's characters are all wonderfully complex. Sali is unlikeable, yet is simply a woman who knows what she wants, but makes poor choices. Kasunga is weak, but has redeeming qualities, particularly in how loving he can be. The couple's daughter, Ntashé, suffers under some of the weakest writing, yet also exemplifies complexity in her accounts of the fateful night.

This Zambian author makes us care deeply about her characters by entreating us to understand them and *The Shipikisha Club* builds to a shocking crescendo – no small feat when readers know the crime at the start.

The core of this powerful novel is an examination of drivers of domestic violence. Too often society is shocked by its dramatic manifestations, like murder, when there are always warning signs. Why, Ntashé asks, did one of her parents not leave? Readers will ask this too. ■

The Quiz

- 1 In which country is Sandwich Harbour (pictured)?
- 2 Soweto, made up from the first letters of South-Western Township, is in which country?
- 3 Which country lies between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers?
- 4 What is the capital of The Comoros?
- 5 Of which country is Abdelmadjid Tebboune the president?
- 6 What is the capital of Botswana?
- 7 Which state did Mobutu Sese Seko rule over from 1965 to 1997?
- 8 What is Egypt's currency called?
- 9 Which country is home to Malagasy people?
- 10 What is Egypt's largest city?



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

"My devilish brilliance stretches from the sandy dunes to the deep blue sea. Now for a sandwich..."

PHOTO: MOLA MOLA SAFARIS

Big Pic

Zen-sation: North of Lusaka, students train at a complex that houses Africa's first Shaolin Temple – part of a Buddhist monastic martial arts tradition. They sleep, study and train there, leaving only for a few days in December to visit home.

PHOTO: GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/AFP



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