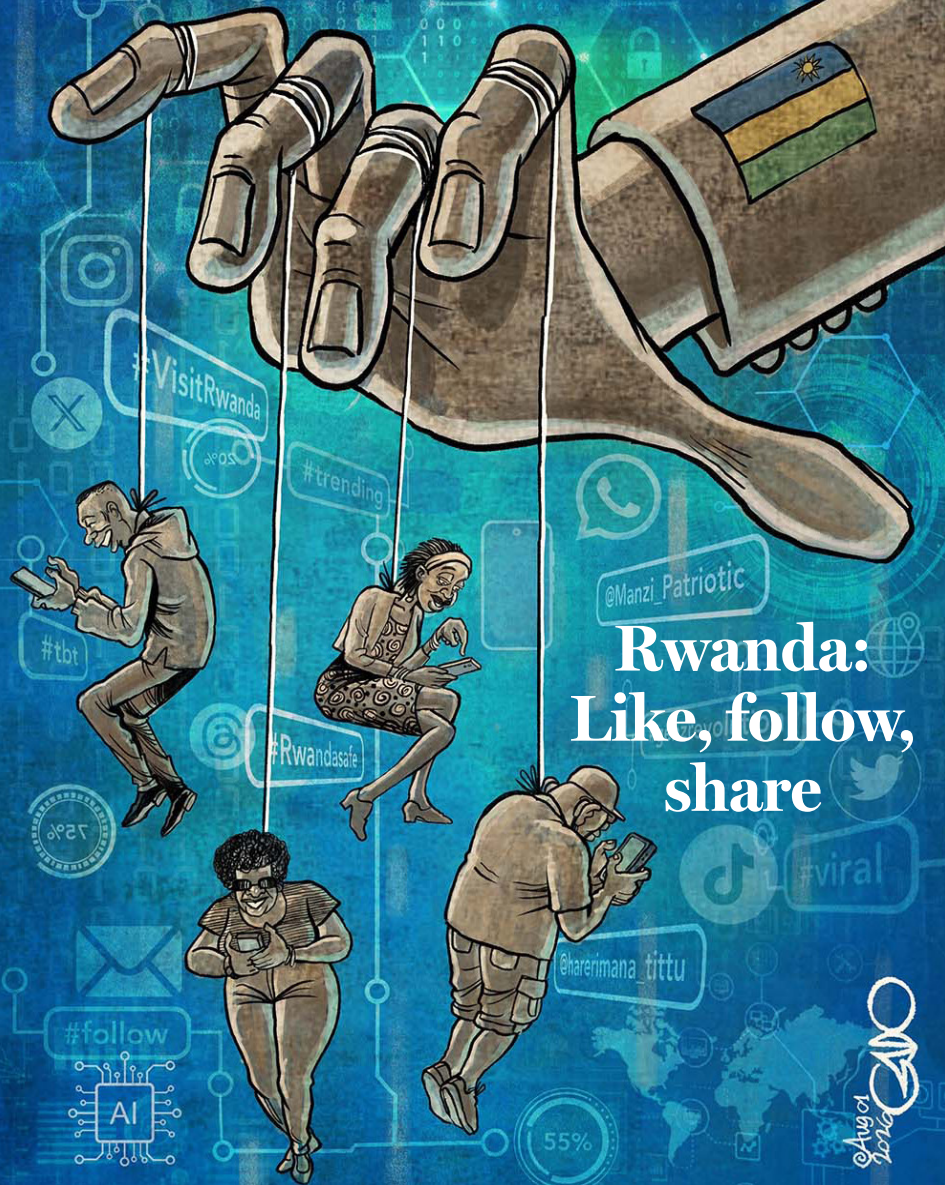


The Continent



**Rwanda:
Like, follow,
share**



COVER: You don't have to go far on a social platform to see a video of how nice life seems in Rwanda. Its capital, Kigali, has hosted a carousel of global sporting events. It wants to host Formula One. Such narratives crowd out the other side of Rwanda's story – its role in the war in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. But then that's the point: the country puts a lot of work into its soft power. This is an open secret with few details, but this week *The Continent* has the receipts for an \$85,000 influence campaign (p12). We also look at how a crackdown on journalists has opened up space for these campaigns inside Rwanda (p19), and how they're aimed at decision-makers in Brussels and New York (p17). In the Great Lakes, it's a battle over which version of the war the rest of the world believes – or even gets to see.

Inside

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We live in the same world, let's read from the same page

The third issue of *The Atlas*, our new international newspaper, in partnership with Coda Story, was published on Thursday. The cover looks at an American startup trying to turn darkness into daylight with giant mirrors. *The Continent* subscribers get it automatically.

Anyone else can sign up at www.theatlasnewspaper.org.

THE WEEK IN BRIEF

CONSERVATION

Poison suspected in elephant deaths

Fifteen elephants found dead in southern Kenya over the past month are suspected to have been poisoned after eating tomatoes laced with cyanide, *AP* reports. Officials did not identify the people thought to be responsible, but farmers near Amboseli National Park have previously been accused of poisoning elephants to stop them from raiding their crops. The Kenya Wildlife Service warned that contamination



PHOTO: BEN CURTIS/AP

could also threaten livestock in the area, but said that there was no immediate risk to human health.

DRC

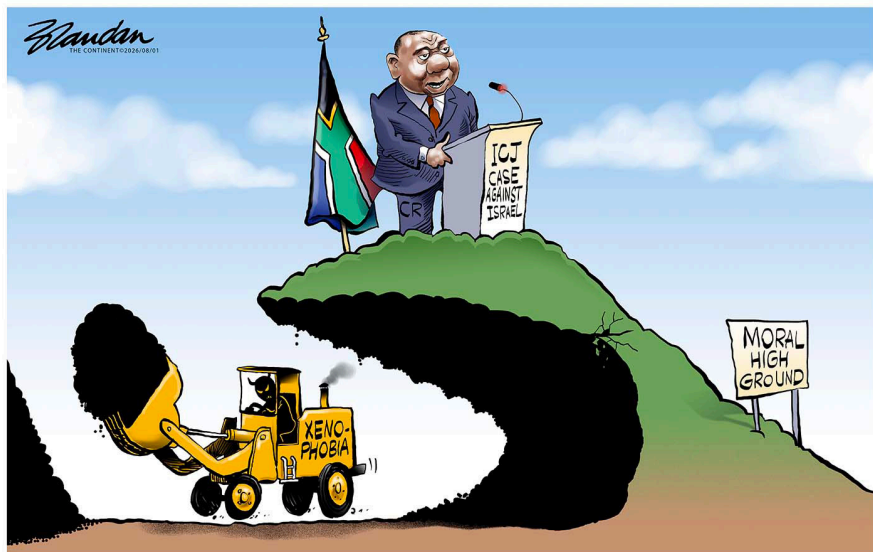
Showtime for fast-tracked Ebola vaccine

A major milestone in the fight against Ebola was reached after a volunteer received the first shot of an experimental vaccine targeting the Bundibugyo strain. Oxford University developed the vaccine in eight weeks, using the same tech as the AstraZeneca Covid-19 jab, *AFP* reports. If successful, more studies are planned in Uganda, whose health minister recently declared it Ebola-free. Over 1,033 deaths have been confirmed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

POWERLESSNESS

Dumsor redux re-disgruntles Ghana

A fault in Ghana's power grid on Wednesday caused widespread outages, affecting the capital Accra and large swathes of the country. The state power utility said engineers were working to restore supply, *BBC* reports. The cuts disrupted homes, business and transport, with commuters unable to use phone-based taxi apps. Ghana has long struggled with power cuts, known locally as "dumsor", although the electricity supply has become more reliable in recent years.



SPORT

Fifa sellouts fumble football world's buy-in

Fifa's bid to create a new company to ~~to~~ run the World Cup appears to have backfired. It wants to sell stakes to private investors while keeping control, *Al Jazeera* reports. The plan could raise more than \$4-billion, but needs approval from Fifa's member countries. Investors would be led by a firm founded by Joshua Kushner, brother of US President Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Europe's football body Uefa says it will boycott World Cup games if the deal happens, and the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football has also protested.

RUSSIA

Terrorism for thee (could never be me)

Russia has charged Telegram founder Pavel Durov with facilitating terrorist activity, alleging his messaging app was used by Ukrainian intelligence to recruit young Russians for attacks. Durov, who denies wrongdoing, has previously said Telegram co-operates with law enforcement and protects users' privacy. The Kremlin said it will place the Russian-born billionaire on an international wanted list, *Reuters* reports. But it has yet to comment on Telegram groups being used to recruit young Africans to fight for Russia in its war against Ukraine. What's that saying about love and war again?

HEALTH

Do you want the good news or the bad?

African countries are better prepared for disease outbreaks than they were five years ago, *Nature* reports, but major gaps remain. Most countries have improved their disease surveillance and laboratory capacity since Covid-19, according to the 2026 Africa Health Security Index. But biosafety and biosecurity systems have not kept pace. Researchers say the next challenge is to strengthen governance, training, and logistics so new labs and vaccines can be used effectively in future outbreaks and epidemics.

ALGERIA

First woman speaker elected

Khalida Boufedeché has been elected as speaker of Algeria's parliament, making her the country's fourth-highest ranking official. She is the first woman in this position. Boufedeché, an MP for Algiers and a member of the National Liberation Front, takes the role after the party won 91 of 407 seats in this month's parliamentary elections. Despite the historic victory, the vote recorded a low turnout of 21%. Women now hold just 25 seats in parliament, down from 38 in the previous legislature and 118 after the 2017 elections when gender quotas were in place, *AFP* reports.



Firm: NMG owner Rostam Azizi comes to grips with General Muhoozi Kainerugaba.

UGANDA

Gag lifted, for now

The Nation Media Group has resumed operations in Uganda after the government lifted a shutdown ordered by the president's son, army chief General Muhoozi Kainerugaba. The decision followed talks between Kainerugaba and the company's majority shareholder, Tanzanian businessman Rostam Azizi, *Reuters* reports. Kainerugaba ordered the closure of the *Daily Monitor*, *NTV Uganda*, and other media outlets in the NMG stable in June because he "did not believe in a free press," he said in an X post. Museveni's government previously shut down the *Daily Monitor* for 10 days in 2013.

UNITED STATES

Wait, so Africa's more than just one country?

The United States state department pitched up to a presentation at an Aids conference in Brazil with a map of Africa that had nearly every country mislabelled. *Reuters* reports the AI-generated map placed Nigeria in the Sahara, moved Mozambique to the Horn of Africa and relocated Côte d'Ivoire – the Ivory Coast – inland. The state department apologised, blaming a last-minute edit by a staff member. Perhaps the old joke should be updated: Americans only know the countries they've fought wars in – and even then, not always where they are.

KENYA

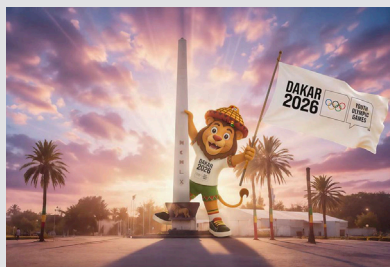
UK boot camp rebooted despite abuse claims

British soldiers will resume military training in Kenya later this year after the two countries signed a new defence co-operation agreement. Training was paused amid concerns from Kenyan MPs over allegations of human rights abuses and environmental destruction by British troops, *TRT* reports. Neither government addressed the allegations in the agreement. Britain trains more than a thousand of its troops in Kenya each year. A former UK soldier, Robert Purkiss, is facing extradition to Kenya over the death of 21-year-old Kenyan Agnes Wanjiru in 2012.

SENEGAL

Dakar prepares to make Olympic history

Senegal is less than 100 days away from hosting the Youth Olympic Games, the first Olympic competition ever held on the continent. The Games will begin on 31 October after being delayed for four years by the Covid-19 pandemic. Some 2,700 athletes will compete across 25 sports, with events taking place in Dakar, Diamniadio, and Saly. Chief organiser Ibrahima Wade told *RFI* that construction works had been completed at 12 sites, either to



refurbish existing facilities or build new ones. The event will include a youth refugee team.

NEWS

THE HAGUE

Chad bails on International Criminal Court

N'Djamena denies following US instruction, despite saying Washington had urged it to reconsider its membership.

KIRI RUPIAH

CHAD HAS announced plans to exit the International Criminal Court. It is the fifth country to do so as the Hague-based tribunal battles political pressure, internal turmoil, and growing African discontent.

The Chadian government followed in the footsteps of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Venezuela. It said the court's record was "limited and uneven"

and accused the court of focusing disproportionately on Africa, where nine of its 13 investigations have taken place.

However, many African cases were referred by governments themselves or authorised by member states.

N'Djamena denied that the decision was made at the request of the United States, despite confirming Washington had urged it to reconsider its ICC membership. The US has vowed to weaken the institution, imposing sanctions on the court over its investigations into Israeli leaders.

The ICC faces one of the most difficult periods in its history. Last week, member states voted to dismiss chief prosecutor Karim Khan after allegations that he sexually assaulted a staff member, which he denies.

Ottília Maunganidze of the Institute for Security Studies told *The Continent* Chad's planned exit could weaken the court's effect in the Sahelian band, reflecting a global recession from the rule of law.

"Victims and survivors of international crimes should be at the centre of this debate," she said. "Instead, the focus is on states, effectively detracting from what the ICC was established to ensure."

Chad's exit will take effect next July – the court's laws mandate a one-year waiting period after receiving a notice to withdraw. ■

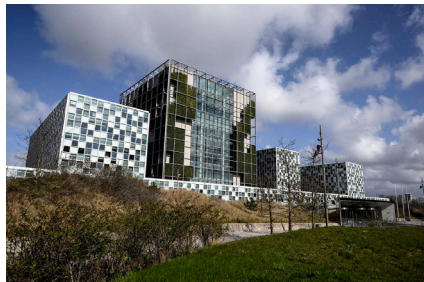


PHOTO: JOHN THYS/AFP

Hague ague: The Trump regime is sick of the ICC.

UGANDA

A clean dream is giving dumpster fire

The government's effort to clean up the streets only exacerbated the country's garbage problem.

IAN SMART IN KAMPALA

THE UGANDAN government has borrowed a leaf from Rwanda: last weekend it rolled out a countrywide cleaning day, to be held on the last Saturday of every month.

Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja said the goal was to address poor sanitation that leads to disease outbreaks.

But the inaugural edition ultimately backfired, worsening the very conditions it aimed to fix.

Police roadblocks meant that commuters and drivers were grounded as the state enforced the cleanup from 7am to 10am.

Around the country, people were compelled to sweep the streets and collect litter. Motorists who did not comply had their vehicles impounded and there were reports of police assaulting people on the street.

The aftermath was even worse. It seemed there was no plan for how the heaps of collected waste would be disposed of. In Kampala, mounds of trash were piled up along the streets and in public places.

The unpleasant sight and smell of oozing garbage bags left residents holding their noses. Reportedly, some of the bags contained rotting animal remains and human waste. Some people resorted to burning the waste, despite the potential toxic environmental hazard.

"We participated in the exercise to keep our country clean and protect public health," a resident who asked to remain anonymous told *The Continent*. "Leaving the garbage uncollected defeats that purpose and creates another health hazard."

It took days for authorities to mobilise garbage trucks to clear the piles of trash in the capital. ■



PHOTO: UGANDA MEDIA CENTRE

Redistribution of not-wealth: Good luck, chaps.

TUNISIA

Killer heatwave stokes fury with Saied's iron-fisted failings

Young Tunisians who have not protested before have joined the call for the president's removal amid rising authoritarianism.

CHADHA HADJ MBAREK IN TUNIS

MARCHING down Avenue Habib Bourguiba last Saturday, thousands of Tunisians revived a familiar chant: "Leave!" and "The people are hungry, the prisons are full!" Those slogans are a callback to 2011, when mass protests toppled dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

This time the collective anger is directed at President Kais Saied. He was elected in 2019, but took absolute control in July 2021 by suspending parliament. Since then, he has ruled by decree. Over the past five years Tunisians have marked 25 July – Republic Day – with rallies against the growing authoritarianism.

This year is different. A heatwave that began on 12 July has aggravated this year's protests, with temperatures topping 50°C. Power and water outages have led to the deaths of 150 to 200 people, according to the Organisation of Young Doctors.

Yet many Tunisians who haven't protested before are out in the streets. And there's no sign of them retreating.

Living standards have reached



PHOTO: FETH BELAD/AFP

Enough: Tunisians protest against President Kais Saied's regime in Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Tunis.

"unprecedented levels of deterioration and collapse", said activist Wissem Saghir, who protested in 2011.

Protesters are also demonstrating against unemployment and the Saied regime's crackdown on freedom of expression.

Unemployment is estimated at 15.2% and more than twice that for young people, at 38.4%. And at least 34 people are on trial for "conspiracy" including top opposition figures, 81-year-old Ahmed Nejib Chebbi and 85-year-old Rached Ghannouchi. ■

This article is published in collaboration with Egab



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INVESTIGATION

Rwanda: Under the influence

RWANDAN officials are under sanctions for supporting rebels in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is also accused of laundering conflict minerals, including gold and coltan, through its borders to help finance that conflict.

At the same time, Rwanda is celebrated as a poster child for development. It is sold as a destination for tourism, natural beauty, major sports franchises, and international tournaments.

How does it pull off both?

Part of the answer is a carefully curated influence operation. In this three-part

package, we look at how Rwanda's influence campaigns work, how they target decision-makers in Brussels and New York, and how the silencing of independent media at home created the space for them to operate largely unchallenged.

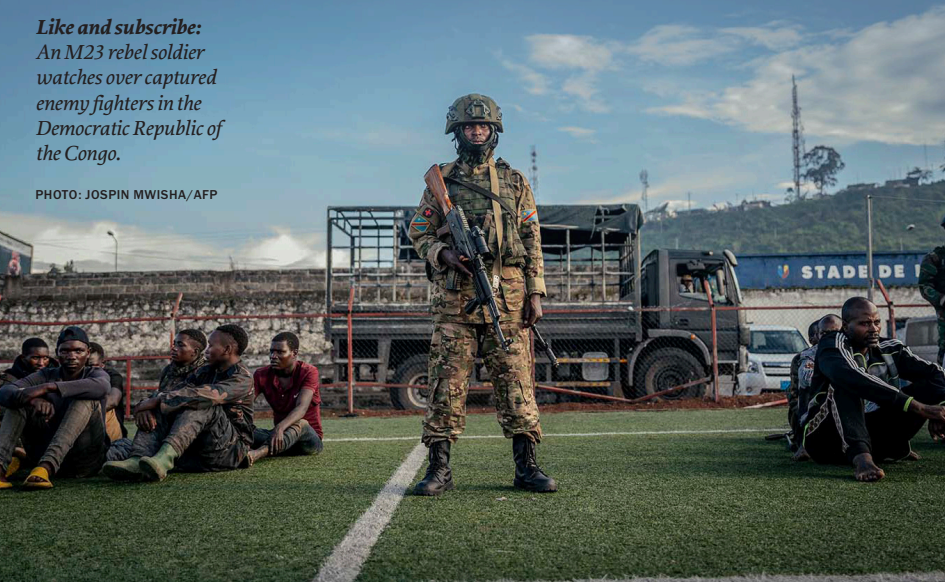
We know something about how this influence operation works because someone in the Rwandan state set the wrong sharing permissions on a spreadsheet.

That exposed who was being paid in a \$85,000 campaign. To find out more, keep reading.

Like and subscribe:

An M23 rebel soldier watches over captured enemy fighters in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

PHOTO: JOSPIN MWISHA/AFP



The influence operation we aren't supposed to know about

Rwanda has a playbook for responding to criticism of its involvement in eastern DRC. This investigation reveals how one core narrative team co-ordinates a layered response: challenging evidence, questioning credibility, amplifying official documents, introducing counternarratives, and flooding threads with competing claims.

**MICHELA WRONG IN LONDON
AND JAMES OKONG'O IN NAIROBI**

RWANDA has carefully cultivated a strong international reputation. For years, critics have said that part of that reputation is actively shaped online by groups of people – or accounts – working together to promote the government's messages and challenge its critics. Now, an administrative error offers a rare glimpse of how that system operates.

A Google spreadsheet listing nine state-funded digital operatives was left as a publicly accessible link. That link was shared with journalists by sources, detailing the personnel, equipment, and budgets behind one influence operation.

Their task: shaping opinion about the conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where March 23 Movement (M23) rebels – backed by Rwanda – now hold territory larger than Rwanda itself. None of the influencers disclose any government affiliation in their handles, presenting

themselves instead as ordinary, patriotic Rwandan citizens.

This investigation examined 60,000 posts on X, published in English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Kiswahili. An analysis of the posts by the nine influencers reveals three main lines of attack: discrediting critics of Rwanda's well-documented support for M23; promoting a narrative that casts the DRC army as interchangeable with a Hutu militia founded by the perpetrators of Rwanda's 1994 genocide; and framing Rwanda simply as a protector of the persecuted Tutsi minority in eastern DRC.

The document was created in January 2024. At the time, Rwanda was under increasing international scrutiny over its alleged backing of M23. It was also gearing up for an election in July that year, which President Paul Kagame later won with over 99% of the vote.

Since the rebels seized large swathes of eastern DRC in January 2025, the United States, European Union, and the United Nations have sanctioned

Community Engagement & Community Officer - Proposed Budget

S/N	Proposed Candidates	Phone Number	Total Budget Year 1
1	Muhire Leon Pierre (@leonPMuhire) Team Leader	078172XXXXX	RWF 13,000,000
2	Irizabimbuto Marchal (@irizabimbuto) Ass. Team Leader	07886XXXXX	RWF 12,340,000
3	Boho Ntaganira Winny (@BohoNtaganira)	07863XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
4	Liliane Umuhiza (@lilianeumuhiza5)	07826XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
5	Janviere Akimanzi (@Manzi_patriote)	07896XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
6	Harcimana Tilo (@harcimana_tito)	07883XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
7	Mvuyekure Patrick (@mutrickure84)	07882XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
8	Tuyisenge Epiphanie (@_TuyisengeEpiph)	07883XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
9	Ignace Ndayizweye (@Ignacendzyz)	07886XXXXX	RWF 11,140,000
	SUB TOTAL		RWF 103,320,000
10	Staff Welfare & Operations 20%		20,804,000
	GRAND TOTAL		RWF 124,124,000



PHOTO: YOLANDE MAKOLO

Left: A screenshot of the spreadsheet; phone numbers redacted. Right: Government spokesperson Yolande Makolo.

Rwanda’s military, top officials, and M23 commanders.

Kigali rejects accusations it was working with M23, saying it faces legitimate security threats from armed groups in eastern DRC and is acting to protect Congolese Tutsi communities.

The spreadsheet, still live this week, suggests another battle was being fought at the same time.

It documents only one team and does not establish the full extent of Rwanda’s online influence operations. But it offers a rare insight into digital propaganda: it puts names, budgets, equipment, and organisational structure to a system that usually operates behind anonymous accounts and patriotic slogans.

The spreadsheet lists nine individuals by name, phone numbers, and X handles, as well as payments for phones, computers, airtime, internet data, and monthly salaries of between 750,000 and 900,000 Rwandan francs (about \$520 to \$620).

The operation’s annual budget is

listed as 124,124,000 Rwandan francs (\$85,610). It is run from the Office of the Government Spokesperson (OGS), led by Yolande Makolo. The team, intelligence analysts say, prepares messaging, hashtags, photos, and videos for distribution through networks of activists and social-media users across Rwanda.

These networks are organised through student associations, genocide survivors’ organisations, and regional youth groups. Members are told which topics and hashtags to amplify. They are also mobilised to report opposing accounts to X’s moderators, attempting to trigger suspensions and silence critical voices.

Former sports journalist Prudence Nsengumukiza, who worked for digital news platform *Kigali Today*, says Rwanda’s civic-education programmes encourage young people to regard online activism as a patriotic responsibility.

“You are told as soon as you see

someone criticise Kagame on social media, you have to go on the attack, to intimidate,” says Nsengumukiza, who fled Rwanda in 2021 and now works for Amnesty International in Brussels. “You’re told: ‘Try to have as many accounts as you can.’”

According to Nsengumukiza, incentives include free internet access and monthly stipends. Training sessions organised by the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front’s youth wing also teach participants how to maximise the reach of their posts and top performers receive bicycles and smartphones.

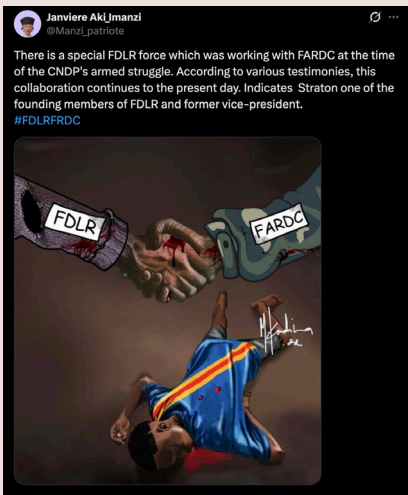
The network

An analysis of the nine listed accounts shows that they do not simply repeat

identical messages. Instead, they perform complementary roles.

One of the biggest accounts is Tito Harerimana (@harerimana_tito), who repackages official speeches, military statements, and government documents. Harerimana is one of Rwanda’s most successful social media influencers, with more than 117,000 followers. They are a sustained amplifier of pro-government narratives, particularly about the M23 conflict and Rwanda’s regional security posture.

A more combative group, including Janviere Akimanzi (@Manzi_patriote), responds rapidly to criticism from foreign governments, journalists, and organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.



Paul bearers: Posts on X by accounts listed in an inadvertent leak of Rwanda’s hitherto covert social-media influence campaign.

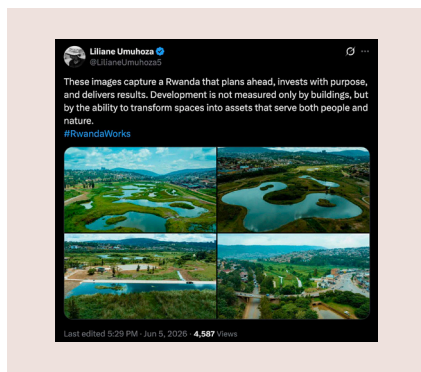
These accounts question methodology, dispute evidence, and flood critical posts with replies intended to make them appear contested or discredited, regardless of their accuracy.

Accounts including Tuyisenge Epiphanie (@_TuyisengeEpiph, handle now defunct) focus on domestic audiences, translating international developments into Kinyarwanda and framing them through national security and patriotism.

Others take an indirect approach. Liliane Umuhoza (@lilianeumuhoza5) rarely discusses the conflict. When eastern DRC dominates international headlines, she floods timelines with tourism campaigns, wildlife photography, and images of Kigali, helping to ensure that searches for “Rwanda” produce scenes of tranquil prosperity.

Researchers say such operations do not need to convince everyone to be effective. Their power lies in shaping the online environment. Rwanda has relatively low social-media penetration, with about 9% of its population active on social platforms. Co-ordinated activity can create an impression of overwhelming public consensus and make criticism appear isolated or contested.

When journalists or rights organisations publish allegations about Rwanda’s role in eastern DRC, the response unfolds in layers: the evidence is challenged; the author’s credibility questioned; official documents amplified; humanitarian



counternarratives introduced; and reply threads filled with competing claims. At home, the same events are explained in Kinyarwanda.

Researchers say such operations do not need to convince everyone to be effective. Their power lies in shaping the online environment.

Rwanda’s OGS did not respond to *The Continent*’s emailed questions by the time of publication. We also contacted eight of the individuals named in the influence operation via phone, text, email, and social media. The ninth was unreachable. Only Irizabimbuto Marchal replied, saying: “I believe you have reached the wrong person. I think you should direct your inquiry to the OGS office for assistance.” ■

This story was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

THE SOFT POWER LAYER

Providing cover, distance, and alternative branding.



BAHO NTAGANIRA WINNY

@BahoNtaganira

Presents as an independent, literary voice sharing grassroots narratives.

JANVIERE AKIMANZI

@Manzi_patriote

Floods critical posts with replies to make dissent appear contested.

IRIZABIMBUTO MARCHAL

@irizaabimbuto

Hijacks search results with diversionary hashtags.

LILIANE UMUHOZA

@lilianeumuhoza5

Floods timelines with tourism and cultural imagery (#VisitRwanda).

THE AGGRESSORS

Silencing dissent and overwhelming critical content.



TITO HARERIMANA

@harerimana_tito

The primary broadcaster for international & domestic audiences.

MUHIRE LEON PIERRE

@leonPMuhire, handle now defunct

Frames UN and NGO reports as biased against Rwanda.



THE DISCREDITORS

Undermining sources, questioning evidence, and seeding tactical propaganda.

IGNACE NDAYIZEYE

@Ignacendzy

Tags international actors on Rwandan government comms.

THE AMPLIFIERS

Broadcasting government messaging and maintaining a positive national image.



TUYISENGE EPIPHANIE

@_TuyisengeEpiph, handle now defunct

Translates geopolitical developments into narratives of national pride.

MVUYEKURE PATRICK

@mutrickure84

Seeds visual evidence of military interceptions.

The  Influence Ecosystem

A THREE-PRONGED STRATEGY

COMMENT

Local influence operations, global audiences

The leaked government spreadsheet revealed how part of Rwanda's online influence operation was organised. But such campaigns have also sprung up in the DRC. Identifying the networks that run them is only part of the story. The next question is what they were trying to achieve.

URI LUDGER AND MABLE AMURON

DURING one of the most critical phases of the war in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), some of the most co-ordinated online activity was not aimed at ordinary Rwandans or Congolese. It was aimed at diplomats and policymakers thousands of kilometres away. That's what our research at Thraets, a civic-tech research lab, suggests.

By the time fighting escalated in early 2025, the conflict's competing narratives were well established. March 23 Movement (M23) rebels were advancing towards Goma and Bukavu. Rwanda, led by President Paul Kagame, said it faced a legitimate security threat from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a militia linked to perpetrators of the 1994 genocide.

Meanwhile, DRC President Félix Tshisekedi's administration described M23 as a Rwandan-backed force invading Congolese territory. The M23 itself maintained it was a Congolese

movement pursuing domestic political grievances.

As diplomats debated how to respond and weighed sanctions, this contest increasingly moved online.

Thraets analysed more than 2,000 posts from nearly 800 accounts using 12 hashtags between January and March 2025, when M23 captured Goma and Bukavu. We identified three distinct influence campaigns.

The first was the Congolese government's mobilisation effort under #CongolaisTelema. It was publicly led by state officials, but nevertheless showed signs of co-ordinated amplification, with identical messages repeated by journalists who otherwise presented themselves as independent voices.

The second centred on a single highly active account that flooded regional conversations with anti-Kagame content, generating more engagement than any other in the dataset.

The third was the most sophisticated. About 90 accounts co-ordinated five anti-Tshisekedi hashtags in four tightly

synchronised waves, producing nearly a third of all posts collected. Yet the operation was not designed to reach the largest possible audience.

Its posts repeatedly tagged institutions including the United Nations and the Council of the European Union. Activity surged in the 48 hours before a European Union Foreign Affairs Council meeting discussing possible sanctions. Most messages were in English rather than French or Kiswahili – the languages spoken by much of the region's population.

Targeting Brussels and New York

Taken together, these choices suggest a campaign aimed less at persuading Congolese citizens than at influencing officials in Brussels, New York and other diplomatic centres where decisions about sanctions, aid, and international policy are made. This third campaign also inserted itself into #CongolaisTelema, ensuring that anyone following the Congolese government's mobilisation encountered allegations against Tshisekedi's administration.

Its narratives closely mirrored arguments advanced by Rwandan officials and M23 representatives during diplomatic engagements: that the Congolese army was collaborating with the FDLR militia; that Tutsi communities faced an existential threat; and that Tshisekedi had become the principal obstacle to peace.

The campaign did not fabricate incidents. Instead, it selected genuine



PHOTO: THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Foment moment: Accounts targeted The Council of the European Union before a vote on sanctions.

events and framed them to support a broader political argument. UN reports have indeed substantiated instances of collaboration between the Congolese military and the FDLR. Furthermore, there is credible evidence of escalating violence directed at Congolese Tutsis.

But stripped of context, these realities worked to shift responsibility for the conflict and sought to shape diplomatic decision-making.

Whether the campaign altered policy is impossible to determine. Its importance lies in what it reveals about the intended audience. Influence operations need not mobilise a country or dominate mass opinion. They can target a much smaller, more consequential group: the international officials whose decisions determine sanctions, aid, diplomatic recognition, and the political costs of war. ■

Uri Ludger and Mable Amuron are researchers at Thraets, a pro-democracy civic tech research lab. Their full report is available at thraets.org

REPORT

How silencing Rwanda's press cleared the field for influence

Rwanda's state-funded influence operations thrive in a media vacuum as independent journalists have been killed, jailed, or driven into exile. Many of those who remain retreat into music and sports to 'avoid trouble'.

LINDA NGARI

RWANDA has one of the most effective government-run influence operations on the continent. These campaigns are effective because independent journalism has been systematically extinguished, leaving government narratives with little domestic pushback.

That control has its roots in the 1994 genocide, when misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda helped to drive the killing of more than 800,000 Tutsi by the majority Hutu population. The current president, Paul Kagame, co-founded the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which led the military offensive that ended the genocide.

After six years as vice-president, Kagame became president in 2000. He set about an extensive information management campaign as part of the project to build a "new Rwanda". The ideology of Umunyarwanda was intended to create a unified national identity and eliminate ethnic divisions.

In 2008, Kagame introduced a law against genocide denialism, under which



PHOTO: VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSELS

Samuel Baker Byansi fled Rwanda in 2022.

journalists, activists and politicians have been jailed.

Journalist Samuel Baker Byansi was arrested several times before fleeing to Europe in 2022. As a young journalist, he attended the compulsory civic-education programme called *itorero ry'igihugu*. It was introduced in 2009 to help create the post-genocide "new Rwandan citizen". Patriotism was amplified and dissenting voices of all kinds were erased. This means Rwanda has one of the least free media ecosystems on the continent.

Reporters Without Borders ranks it 149 out of 180 countries for press freedom. It says eight journalists have been killed since Kagame became president

and about 35 forced into exile. Those remaining often support the government or restrict themselves to music and sports writing to “avoid having problems.”

This decline created a vacuum now occupied by pro-government voices recruited to push state narratives and disparage exiled journalists.

Rubens Mukunzi worked as a journalist in Rwanda for 13 years before fleeing. Reporting by his education newspaper, *Oasis Gazette*, prompted intimidating calls from the education minister. “That’s the time I started facing serious harassment and intimidation,” he told *The Continent*. That’s the time that I started to say, ‘I’m not safe anymore in my country,’ until I fled.”

Sweetening the deal

The government wields the carrot, as well as the stick.

Byansi said journalists are offered high-end dinners by state officials, as well as perks like free fuel and tax exemptions to abandon stories unfavourable to the government. At first, there is still some room to do some stories.

“They want you to [somehow] maintain your credibility as a journalist, so that when you defend them it becomes a little bit credible,” he told *The Continent*. “They give you all those privileges and they give you this money, but in return you are compromising your own ethics.”

YouTube is one of the few remaining spaces for critical reporting, although advertising was suspended in Rwanda in 2021. Even there, repression follows.

In May, singer and YouTuber Aimable Karasira died on the day he was set to be released from prison. Authorities say it was from an overdose of prescription medication. Rights groups have called for an independent investigation.

Another two YouTubers, Augustin Nsanzimana and Emmanuel Niyonshuti, were also arrested that month for “suspected spreading of false information” through their channel, Imbarutso ya Demokarasi, or The Rise of Democracy. Authorities acknowledged holding them three days after their disappearance.

Exile does not end the pressure. Byansi is attacked almost every time he posts, and is accused of criticising Rwanda because “he is in need of a visa” – presumably from a Western country. He has also received messages identifying the locations of his wife and daughter, followed by threats against their lives.

Byansi will not disclose where he lives in Europe. A Freedom House report found Rwanda uses assassinations, rendition, spyware, family intimidation, digital threats, and mobility controls against people abroad.

“The government has physically targeted Rwandans in at least seven countries since 2014,” the report states. “Rwandans as far-flung as the United States, Canada, and Australia report intense fears of surveillance and retribution.” ■

This reporting was supported by the International Center for Journalists’ Michael Elliott Award

FEATURE

Vigilantes go door-to-door in xenophobic dawn raid

Last week's brutal attack on migrants in an informal settlement outside Johannesburg – reported here for the first time – is not an isolated incident.



Rubble and ruin: Life in Dukathole was hard enough to begin with.

ALL PHOTOS: PAUL BOTES/THE CONTINENT

**TEBADI MMOTLA
IN DUKATHOLE, GERMISTON**

JERSON Punguane takes off his dark-blue raincoat and lifts his striped T-shirt to show the five stab wounds on his back, each closed with stitches. He was stabbed simply because he is a migrant.

He welcomed *The Continent* into his tiny room in Dukathole, Germiston, just

east of Johannesburg. Dukathole is an informal settlement: lots of shacks and little to no infrastructure.

Rubbish piles up on street corners and foul-smelling sewage water runs through the streets.

Punguane is from Mozambique and has been living in Dukathole since 2015. He makes a living cutting grass for more affluent households in Germiston.



Targeted: Jerson Punguane (top left) was stabbed by a roving band of xenophobic vigilantes. Other residents – anyone suspected of being a foreigner, including children – were rounded up in the early morning raid and marched to the police station.

ALL PHOTOS: PAUL BOTES/THE CONTINENT

Last Thursday at 7am, Punguane was walking through the area when he saw a group of people assembled in a field. They were surrounded by anti-migrant vigilantes. When one of the vigilantes recognised him, Punguane realised he was in trouble. When he tried to run, the man stabbed him five times.

According to eyewitnesses, the vigilantes in Dukathole that morning claimed to be with March and March, which describes itself as “a grassroots citizen movement”. Over the past few months, the group has been running a co-ordinated countrywide campaign to rid South Africa of “illegal immigrants”. The campaign has been characterised by widespread violence and intimidation, although March and March insists it is committed to peaceful protest.

Earlier that Thursday morning, a group of men and women forcefully kicked open Joseph Stevens’* door in Dukathole. Stevens is Mozambican.

“They hit me on my leg, and ribs. They took my money, R870, and my cellphone,” he said. “They said they didn’t want any migrants. Even if you have an ID or a passport, they don’t want you.”

He estimates 15 people attacked him. Stevens’ left eye is bruised and his lower lip smeared with blood and pus. He is too scared to go back to Dukathole.

When *The Continent* spoke to Stevens, he was waiting outside the Mozambican embassy in Pretoria, together with dozens of other people, with no idea of what comes next – and no money to return to Mozambique.

Anyone suspected of being a foreigner – even children – was rounded up in the early morning raid.

One father, who is South African with a Mozambican partner, said his four daughters – aged four, six, nine and 17 – were taken from their home and detained at a nearby workers' housing compound. Although they were later released, the traumatised family is planning to leave the area.

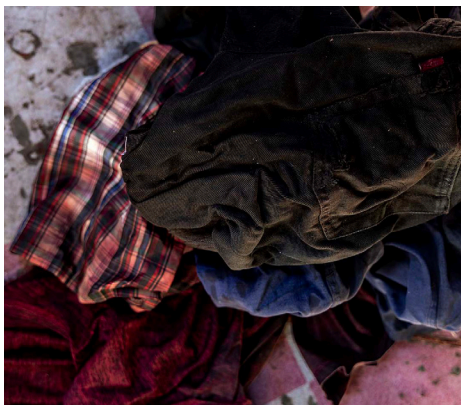
Other suspected migrants were later marched to the Germiston police station, where dozens of anti-migration protesters gathered to demand that they be deported.

"The foreign nationals without valid documentation were arrested for contravention of the Immigration Act after being found to be in the country illegally," Captain Tintswalo Sibeko, police spokesperson for Gauteng, told *The Continent*.

The South African government says that at least 72,906 people have been repatriated or deported in the past two months, since the anti-migrant campaigns began in the country. March and March had set a 30 June deadline for undocumented foreign nationals to leave the country. The group has been holding weekly protests since a major demonstration on that deadline.

Sandile Dube, national spokesperson for March and March, denied the attacks on migrants in Dukathole were connected to the movement when he spoke to *The Continent*.

Doctors Without Borders, which has launched an emergency medical



Stabbed: Jerson Punguane's blood-stained clothes.

humanitarian response to the surge in anti-migrant violence, confirmed it treated several Dukathole residents for injuries caused by beatings. It says the violence has displaced tens of thousands of people and resulted in at least four deaths and numerous injuries.

According to Vuyi Maloi, who has been living in Dukathole for more than 30 years, the violence against migrants is misplaced. She suggests that tensions may have more to do with local elections scheduled for November.

"People have been brainwashed. With the elections coming, we are fighting each other... We don't have jobs, we don't have homes, we have been living in shacks for many years," Maloi said. "If you are not friends with the political leaders, you will not get a job. It's not the foreigners who are taking jobs." ■

* Name has been changed to protect identity

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 **KEN OPALO** – the political scientist and public intellectual whose blog, *An Africanist Perspective*, is required reading for continental policymakers.

VENUE* Java House in Valley Arcade, Nairobi. The coffee is consistent. "It's a good place to sit and think. There are lots of people around, but it also has little nooks where I can go hide and write a few hundred words at a time."

DRINK "I drink about four cups of coffee a day. The first two cups, I like black. The second two, I like to add some milk. Sugar is in my tea, not my coffee."

LISTENING "I listen to a lot of kids' podcasts because of my five-year-old... One of these is called Circle Round. It's based in Boston, but they do stories from around the world and have an amazing collection of African stories."

MONUMENT** "I have a draft blog post on the absence of well-done civic monuments on the continent... I wish our region could do better, because

monuments are great for telling stories about where we think we've come from and where we want to go."



PHOTO: COURTESY KEN OPALO

*We interviewed Opalo 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.

Africans, we must make our own history

KEN OPALO believes we, as a continent, are at an inflection point. The population is expanding, economic growth is stalling, and the world around us is changing in unpredictable ways.

The doomsday scenario is clear: “We could just collapse and go belly up. You know, all the urban kids need jobs, agriculture is no longer viable, almost everyone is online and demanding change and change doesn’t happen – there’s chaos everywhere.”

Counterintuitively, the threat of how bad things could get could catalyse our leaders to make smarter decisions – even if it’s just to save their own skins.

“History teaches us that people respond to incentives. Many countries in Africa have incumbent elites who have a lot to lose if we go belly up. And so the coming pressure will focus minds and plant the seeds for change.”

Opalo is an associate professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington DC. His blog, *An Africanist Perspective* – which ponders questions of political economy, international affairs, and development in detail – has developed something of a cult following among African policymakers.

“Originally, blogging was a way to sort of cosplay the people I considered as my intellectual heroes,” he says.

Opalo is not cosplaying any more.

“What I’m trying to do with it is to instigate debate on the continent, mostly among high-level people about things they should be thinking about. I try to make it intentionally dense. I assume people know things I think they should know. Hopefully, that forces them to go look it up and raise their level of thinking.”

Getting people to take their thinking to a higher level – and push our own ideas much harder – is a consistent theme of Opalo’s work. Otherwise, he says, there’s a vacuum that gets filled by the one-size-fits-all “global best practices” espoused by the likes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – which have historically been a poor fit for emerging African economies.

He even wants us to do corruption better.

“You have to professionalise and jump to a higher level. Which means that, if you’re corrupt, you wouldn’t be this sort of corruption that involves carrying money in bags and storing them in houses. You’d be corrupt in the sense that you use policy to favour friends, who then have to run successful businesses. So the concession stops being money in bags and turns into more productive sorts of concessions – which is how other places do it.”

He cites countries like Türkiye. “It’s a corrupt place. It’s run by a strong man.



Mu-four-and-a-half-i, tops: Are leaders bad because they're corrupt or because they're lousy at corruption?

PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP

There's no reason why Uganda shouldn't be at that level, right?"

Opalo argues that we are not going to get anywhere by complaining about structural inequalities and demanding international institutions reform themselves – as valid as these complaints and demands may be. African countries must get their own houses in order first.

"There's a school of thought that if only we can reform the [United Nations] or the global financial architecture, then African countries would do well. I don't buy that. African countries will do well once we've cleaned house and reclaimed our agency – our role as history makers in our own right. Then we can enter the global stage and do global politics."

This point is all the more pressing given that we are living through a time of swift technological change, which requires governments to develop policy at an equally rapid pace. Opalo is worried

we are going to spend too much time shouting about the justice dimension of artificial intelligence – factors like algorithmic biases, its environmental considerations, and the potential effect on labour markets.

I think African countries will do well once we've cleaned house and reclaimed our agency – our role as history makers in our own right.

What we should be doing, in his view, is "investing in engineers to master the technology and apply it for our own benefit, before we start the conversation about global distributed justice".

Opalo concludes: "It's always going to be a losing game when we try to reform global systems while our own countries remain weak." ■

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.

“My late grandmother's sewing machine chair in Bafoussam, Cameroon,,



ILLUSTRATION: ANNICK KAMANG

EVENT REVIEW

BY URI LUDGER



ALL PHOTOS: KELVIN JUMA

Kwote: Everything, everywhere, all for dance

**From Afro-house to Gqom,
Kenya is an oasis of
African sound - if you know
where to seek it out.**

OVER THE PAST decade or so, the electronic scene in Kenya has built a local identity strong enough that people are now making musical pilgrimages across the country.

Whether it is Beneath the Baobabs at the Kenyan coast in Kilifi, or Nyege Nyege just across the border in Jinja, Uganda, these events introduced me to the idea that music could be worth a journey.

Enter the music collective Kwote. Last

year it hosted its first event in Machakos. The first Kwote event I attended was held in Kilifi; the second in Nakuru. By the time the Kajiado edition arrived last month, I was already well on my way to becoming a groupie.

Tickets cost 1,500 Kenyan shillings (\$12) per person and another \$8 for a round trip by bus from Nairobi. Ngina Mualuko, Kwote's communication and culture lead, says that relatively affordable ticket pricing is a conscious decision, because "we are still building community".

Our destination was the Olepolos Country Club, a stunning venue perched on a scenic ridge of the East African Rift Valley.

The club's deck had been cleared out to create a dance floor and we were dancing as soon as we got off the bus, right up until 11 pm.

The largely unfamiliar (to me) DJ lineup may have been an intentional effort to platform rising talent, but I did recognise Abby Muthoka, known as ABBY, the Nairobi-based music producer and DJ. She's been a mainstay since the first edition and always closes out the night.

Her set was unapologetically Kenyan. You could feel the local scene's DNA creatively woven into Afro-house, 3-step and Gqom bangers – a distinctly African sound that can now be heard from Johannesburg to Nairobi, from Beirut



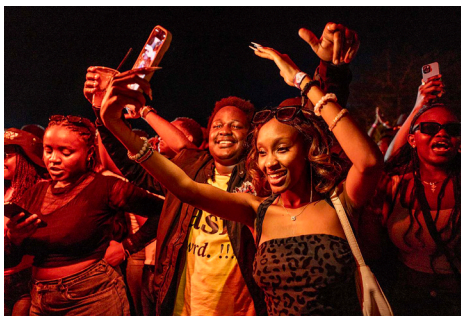
to Rio.

Kwote's slogan is "listen, learn, love". The listening is the music. The learning is the cultural curation, the location, the "word of the place". The love follows naturally.

The grand ambition is to push people to learn and appreciate Kenya differently, beyond what was taught in school or absorbed from mainstream sources.

The grand ambition is to push people to learn and appreciate Kenya differently.

During ABBY's set, I danced my head off to electronic African music. At that moment, I was proud to be

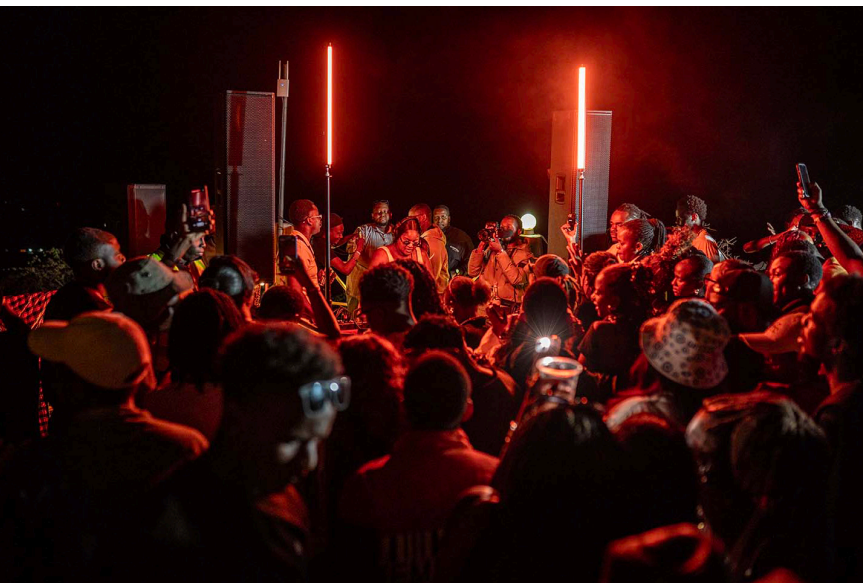


part of a group of pioneering young Africans who are not afraid to build and to claim space in this world. It's fitting that "kwote" means "everywhere" in Kiswahili.

Kwote wants to hold events in all 47 Kenyan counties. There are four on the calendar for this year, with the next stop in Eldoret in September.

I don't know if Kwote will travel to every county, but the collective is trying to build a community and experiences that matter. I'm happy I've been a part of its early stages. ■

Uri Ludger is a Nairobi-based data journalist, analyst and dance-floor don



DATA

Work's like a dream

AFRICA's Women's Day (31 July) recognises the efforts of women on the continent to advance their social and economic status. This week, we're exploring a key aspect of women's empowerment: financial independence.

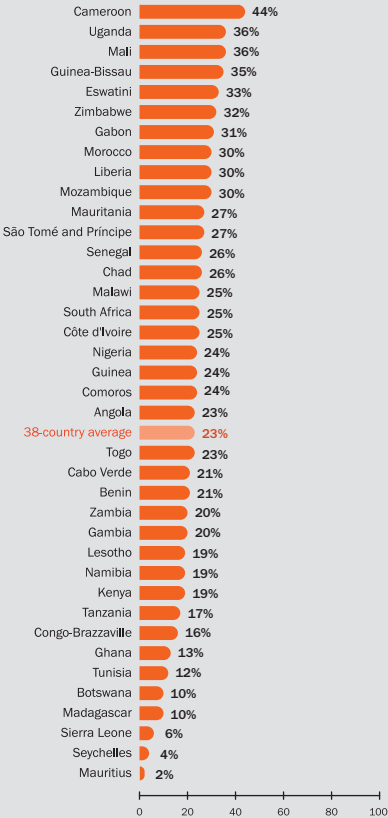
We asked Africans across 38 countries how often women in their communities are barred from taking paid employment by their spouses or other family members. Disturbingly, nearly one in four (23%) say this happens "often" or "always".

In Cameroon, the proportion who say women are frequently prevented from earning an income jumps to nearly double the continental mean (44%). The share is above a third in Uganda (36%), Mali (36%), and Guinea-Bissau (35%).

More women (24%) than men (21%) say loved ones routinely restrict women's work opportunities. Poor citizens are twice as likely as well-off individuals to agree (28% vs 14%).

There are also obstacles outside the home: One in 10 respondents (10%) say the main barrier to women entering and advancing in the workplace is that it's not socially accepted for women to work. Almost twice as many (19%) cite employers' preference for hiring men. ■

Women often/always barred from working by family | 38 African countries | 2024/2025



The Quiz

- 1 How many time zones are there in Africa?
- 2 Who was the first person convicted by the International Criminal Court?
- 3 Which city will host Africa's first-ever Olympic event?
- 4 True or false: Ghana's flag contains a green star.
- 5 How long has Paul Kagame been the president of Rwanda?
- 6 Which Ugandan boxer is the grandson of Idi Amin?
- 7 Who is Liberia's capital Monrovia named after?
- 8 Which country comes last by alphabetical order?
- 9 What year did South Africa host the Fifa World Cup?
- 10 What is the name of the strait (pictured) that separates Africa and Europe?



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

"Would it be queer to steer clear of the sea, if the straits are messing it up for everyone else?"

PHOTO: JAVIER FERGO/AP

Big Pic

Min-maxing: Residents apply mud to the minaret during the replastering of the Sankore Mosque, marking its 600th anniversary on 26 July. Hundreds gathered to replaster the Unesco World Heritage site – one of Timbuktu's three great mosques, alongside Djingareyber and Sidi Yahya.

PHOTO: AFP



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