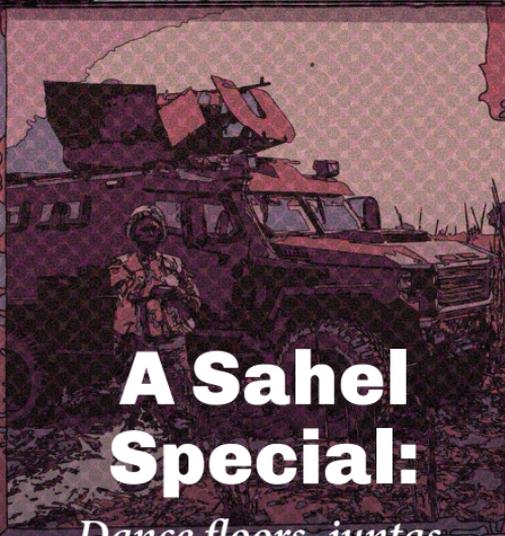
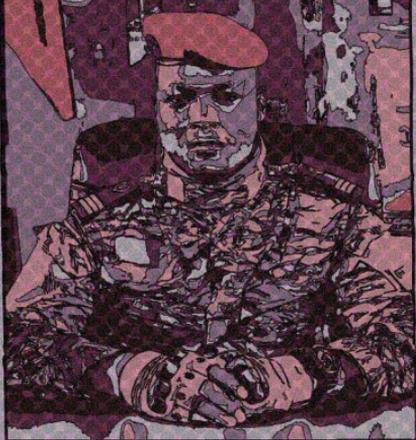


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A Sahel Special:

*Dance floors, juntas,
climate change and
an election*



THIS WEEK'S COVER STORY:

The new military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – along with the not-so-new dynasty in Chad – are promising a new dawn in the Sahel. It's an enticing vision, rooted in the language and the aspirations of pan-Africanism. This special edition, guest edited by journalist Beverly Ochieng, looks at the increasingly vast gaps between that vision and reality.

Graphic: Wynona Mutisi.

Stylised Photos: Marco Longari, Michele Cattani, Patrick Robert.

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In the Sahel, the sands are shifting



Photo: Achraf Pictures/The Continent

Guest editor: Beverly Ochieng

Many of the world's faultlines run through the Sahel. It is battling a long-running militant insurgency. It is a major crossroads for international migration and smuggling routes. Geopolitically, it is home to several new and untested regimes – including Burkina Faso, which is governed by the world's youngest leader, 36-year-old Ibrahim Traoré. They are attempting to replace the support of one set of superpowers (France and the United States) with another (China, Russia and Iran).

If the metaphorical sands are shifting, the literal sands are shifting too: climate change is exacerbating desertification, leaving less land for farming and grazing. This is a key driver of conflict.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, at least 30,000 people have been killed in violent incidents between 2020 and 2023. It is clear that something had to change. It is much less clear whether the juntas that now control Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – having each come to power in a military coup – represent the right kind of change.

In Ouagadougou, Bamako and Niamey, the flags of the three countries fly on landmarks to represent their unity of interests and identity. But on national radios and televisions, voices that support the military chiefs prevail, leaving little space for contrasting views, nuance or – even worse – criticism.

It is telling that some of the journalists that contributed to this special edition requested pseudonyms or anonymity,

fearing the consequences of speaking out.

It is also telling that in each of these countries, promises to restore civilian leadership are being brushed aside. Captain Traoré, who models himself on Thomas Sankara, demands public loyalty “so as not to demoralise those on the front line” – and is increasingly accused of forcibly conscripting people who are not deemed to be loyal enough.

Geopolitically, it is home to several new and untested regimes – including Burkina Faso, which is governed by Africa's youngest leader, 36-year-old Ibrahim Traoré.

Nonetheless, in each of these countries – and in Chad, which is preparing for the most predictable presidential election – there are still some who are publicly demanding a different kind of change. “We invite Malians to come together and defend the principles of democracy and good governance,” said a coalition of opposition groups and civil society activists in Mali last month.

Yet, across these countries, as in the rest of Africa, demand for elections has dropped – by 19 percentage points in Burkina Faso, 15 in Mali and 8 in Niger, between 2011 and 2023, according to data from Afrobarometer. Is this the kind of change the Sahel so desperately needs?

Beverly Ochieng is a Nairobi-based Africa security analyst who focuses on the Sahel and regional geopolitics.

NIGERIA

Chinese store denies racist shopper policy

The Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is investigating the owners of a supermarket in Abuja, following a viral video indicating that the

store accepts only Chinese customers. Nigerian shoppers went to the store to verify the allegations in the video and were also turned away, before the commission stepped in. The commission has yet to conclude its investigation but China General Chamber of Commerce, which owns the building, has denied the racism accusations.



Untilled, further notice: Authorities shut down the shop in Abuja accused of not allowing entry to black Africans. Photo: FCCPC/X

MALI

Insurgents kidnap 110 bus passengers

Militants in Mali ambushed three passenger buses on 16 April and kidnapped more than 110 civilians, according to AFP. The captives were taken to a forest between Bandiagara and Bankass. Mali continues to weather attacks by groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, despite being governed by a military junta that took power promising to secure the country.

LIBYA

Sandstorm dusts off old Hollywood cliché

On Monday, Libyan skies took on the orange hue used by Western filmmakers to signal “exotic foreign location” amid a powerful sandstorm. Flights at airports in Benghazi and Tobruk were suspended and schools were closed. Derna, the city where massive flooding in September last year killed over 4,000 people, was also blanketed by sand starting from around 5am local time.



Short-term solution: UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and President Paul Kagame. Photo: Justin Tallis/AFP

UNITED KINGDOM

UK adds one-way ticket to Rwanda to Rishi Sunak's bill

Britain's Parliament has passed a bill declaring Rwanda a safe country to send asylum seekers may be sent before even considering their applications. The law allows Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to circumvent a top court ruling that declared Rwanda unsafe. Sunak said flights to Rwanda of unwanted migrants would start in 10 to 12 weeks. In Rwanda, however, some of the housing that both governments claimed were built for these migrants, has reportedly been sold off.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Biden revives old stereotypes

On his uncle who died in a World War II plane crash, US president Joe Biden recently said: "They never found the body because there used to be a lot of cannibals, for real, in that part of New Guinea." His remarks drew the ire of Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape, whose country has tried to shake off the "man-eater" stereotype peddled in the West. Former British prime minister Boris Johnson also once described his party's infighting as "Papua New Guinea-style orgies of cannibalism and chief-killing".

NIGERIA

Binance executive sent back to jail in row with regulators

A Nigerian high court judge on Tuesday sent Binance's Chief Financial Crime Compliance Officer, Tigran Gambaryan, back to prison to wait for a bail ruling. Gambaryan was charged with money laundering and moved to Kuje prison in late March, after his colleague Nadeem Anjarwalla fled Nigeria. The two had been held without charge in a guest house for a month. Authorities accuse the crypto firm of economic sabotage and demanded information on its top 100 users.

SOUTH AFRICA

ANC loses to Jacob Zuma again and again

A court in South Africa has ruled that the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party did not breach trademark law by using the name and logo of the now-defunct armed wing of the African National Congress. The ruling is the second ANC legal loss to MK. In March, the governing party lost its bid to stop MK from fielding candidates in the 29 May general election. Former president and kleptocrat Jacob Zuma, who once headed the ANC, loudly defected to MK and will run as its presidential candidate.



In it to win it: Ex-president Jacob Zuma has formed a new party to challenge the ANC. Photo: Emmanuel Crosset /AFP

NORTH AFRICA

Algeria's 'Maghreb alliance' gambit infuriates Morocco

On Monday, Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the head of Libya's presidential council Mohamed Al-Menfi, and Tunisia's President Kais Saied met to discuss a potential new regional coalition. Moroccan and Mauritanian leaders were not invited, fuelling speculation in Moroccan media that this new coalition is part of Algeria's master plan against Morocco, its regional nemesis. An Arab Maghreb Union including all five countries exists. Formed in 1989, it hasn't convened in 16 years, largely thanks to the deep political rift between Algeria and Morocco.

ECONOMY

Rumours of South African decline are grossly exaggerated

South Africa's gross domestic product is now over seven trillion rand (\$378-billion), making it Africa's biggest economy once again, according to the International Monetary Fund. Loadshedding allowing, the country will retain the rank until 2027. Algeria, which has enjoyed an oil price boom in recent years, is second with a GDP of \$267-billion while Egypt, which devalued its currency by 38% in March, slid to third, with a GDP of \$348 billion. Nigeria, which was Africa's largest economy from 2014 until 2022, slipped to fourth, with a GDP of \$253-billion.

BURKINA FASO**Army executed 223, including children**

Human Rights Watch reports that on 25 February, the Burkinabé national army “summarily executed at least 223 civilians, including at least 56 children.” It said the army went into two villages in northern Yatenga after militant groups opposing the government had passed through, and accused residents of complicity with the militants, rounded up people and killed them. The coup-run government dismissed the organisation’s claims as “hasty and biased”. It then banned the foreign broadcasters that had aired them.

DRC**Prosecutors want 15 months for journo**

By the time you read this, Congolese journalist Blaise Mabala may have been sentenced to 15 months in jail. His crime is being the head of journalism at a radio station whose owner was beefing with the local governor. He has already spent more than three months in jail. Mabala was arrested over a program in which his boss – Jacks Bombaka, the owner of Mème Morale FM and vice-governor of Maï-Ndombe province – disparaged his own boss Rita Bola, the provincial governor.



The United States ambassador to Niger met with the country’s military government this week, along with leaders from the US military’s Africa Command, to discuss an ‘orderly and responsible withdrawal of US forces’ from Niger. French troops left last year. Last week, 100 Russian military trainers were deployed in the country.

Tanzania

World Bank parks park funding amid abuse reports

Lydia Namubiru

The World Bank will withhold a portion of funds it offered for a \$150-million expansion of Ruaha National Park in Tanzania, in response to reports of human rights abuses on the project. Before suspending its funding last week, the bank had already given the Tanzanian government \$100-million for the project.

In September, the California-based Oakland Institute released a report revealing that, to expand the park, the government planned to evict 20,000 people from surrounding areas. It said wildlife rangers were already violently seizing cattle from those communities to force them off the land. Before going public, the activist organisation had reported its findings to the bank in April and petitioned it in June to conduct its own independent inspection of the project's actions in Mbarali district, near the park.

In November, the bank eventually agreed to do its own investigation – but



Whoa: Ruaha National Park was set to expand its borders, reportedly by seizing land illegally. Photo: Kristin Palitza/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

had in the meantime sent the Tanzanian government an additional \$35-million for the project. The activists say that this bankrolled additional abuses. “During the first months of 2024, rangers illegally seized and auctioned off thousands of cattle from herders while preventing farmers from cultivating their land – devastating countless livelihoods as a result,” the Oakland Institute said on Tuesday.

Traditionally, lenders like the World Bank turned a blind eye to borrowers’ internal actions if they were not purely economical. But in 2016, the bank’s board approved a framework that includes mandatory social and environmental standards that its investments must meet.

This opened a window through which rights campaigners are now compelling it to divest from countries and projects that abuse human rights. ■

Evolution

Hadedas have a superpower

(And no, it's not just that they're *super* annoying.)

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

Some places wake up with the crow of the cockerel. Not Johannesburg. Here, we are roused by the ear-splitting shriek of the *Bostrychia hagedash* – the large, ungainly, grey-brown bird better known as the hadeda ibis.

The loud, discordant call of the hadeda is common not just to this city, but to urban areas across sub-Saharan Africa. It's hard to describe, but once heard can never be unheard. It was American musician Pharrell who put it best, after being woken up at some ungodly hour while on tour to South Africa in 2018: “What the f*** is that?!”

For some reason, these birds – native to the continent – thrive in places where humans have settled en masse. Now we know why.

As reported in the *Mail & Guardian*

this week, scientists at the University of Cape Town have just discovered that hadedas have a superpower. They can somehow sense the vibrations of earthworms and other invertebrates that are moving underground – even when they can't see, hear, or smell their prey.

Researchers have termed this sense “remote-touch”, and describe it as “a fusion of touch, hearing, and echolocation”. This unique sense works best near ground that has been recently watered – like parks and suburban gardens. So next time you hear a hadeda in your backyard, remember: they are only there because your grass really is greener. ■



Illustration:
John McCann/
M&G

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Sons of the father:
Chad's transitional
president, Mahamat
Déby, son of Idriss.
Photo: Denis Sassou
Gueipeur/AFP

Daddy issues

Chad's Mahamat Déby is determined to fill his father's shoes – and not just with the blood of his enemies.

Aboubakar Nour in N'Djamena

For the past three decades, one name has always been on the Chadian presidential ballot – and has always been announced as the winner: Déby.

First, it was Idriss Déby.

Come the election on 6 May, it will be Mahamat Déby.

When Idriss Déby died fighting rebels in April 2021, his son, Mahamat, was handed the presidency, and is now seeking to legitimise his rule. Nine other candidates are challenging him. Nonetheless, he is very likely to win,

having sidelined his critics and opponents. Key among them was his cousin, Yaya Dillo, who was killed on 28 February during clashes between security forces and members of his Socialist Party Without Borders. State security had accused Dillo of leading an attack on the headquarters of the intelligence service in N'Djamena. Dillo denied these allegations.

Mahamat Déby insists Dillo was not deliberately assassinated and says that he is open to an international investigation.

Dillo had been a thorn in the side of Déby senior, too, running against the late president in the 2021 election. At that



Down to the wire:
The late president
Idriss Déby Itno of
Chad, before his death
in April 2021. Photo:
 Patrick Robert/Syigma
 via Getty Images

time, he survived a raid by security forces on his home – but his mother, his son and at least five other people were killed.

Hope against hope

Threats and criticism that dogged the elder Déby's rule still prevail in Chad: rebels are waging an insurgency from neighbouring countries, political opposition faces constant threats and intimidation, and the nation is divided. As such, the upcoming election has stirred a complex mix of passion, hope, suspicion and cynicism.

The only meaningful contender against Mahamat is his prime minister, Succès Masra, who joined the military government this year, after leading deadly protests against it in October 2022.

For some, his decision to join Déby's government reduced his credentials as one of the few bulwarks against the political status quo. But it is also a practical way of steering the upcoming election by managing the government tasked with organising it.

Masra's candidacy has attracted fervent

support from Chad's youth, who are often politically marginalised.

In the economist-turned-leader of the Transformers party, they see hope for a new generation of Chadian political leaders who are ready to challenge established norms and promote transparency, democratic governance and socioeconomic development. A champion of their aspirations and rights.

He has pledged to fight corruption, promote education and employment and consolidate national unity – issues that resonate deeply with a population eager for change and progress.

However, the road to the presidency is strewn with dangers, and Masra and his supporters are fully aware of that. International observers and human rights organisations are closely monitoring the electoral process, fearing rights violations and political manipulation.

Nonetheless, many Chadians will turn up on 6 May to make their voices heard at the ballot box – even as the state prepares to inaugurate another Déby. ■



Foreign legion redux: Critics of Burkina Faso's junta are being conscripted to fight in the Sahel. Photo: Michele Cattani/AFP

Critics of the junta keep ending up on the front lines

Joining the civilian militia was once a patriotic act. Now it's also a punishment.

Pierre Wendpuire*
in Ouagadougou

Boukaré Ouédraogo, civil society activist. Arouna Loure, anaesthetist. Zinaba Rasmné and Bassirou Badjo, activists. Issaka Lingani, journalist and political analyst. Yacouba Ladji Bama, journalist. Ablasse Ouédraogo, a 70-year-old ex-foreign minister.

What unites these disparate individuals is that each has publicly criticised the military government led by President Ibrahim Traoré, an army captain. Each

was forcibly conscripted into a civilian militia group, and sent to the front lines of Burkina Faso's fight with militants in its Sahelian north. This appears to be an attempt to silence the junta's critics.

President Traoré became the continent's youngest leader – he is now 36 – in September 2022, when he ousted another military government that had come to power in a coup in January that year. He promised to end nearly a decade of insecurity in just three months.

But insecurity has only worsened. Deaths caused by Islamist insurgent



Frexit: A banner depicting Ibrahim Traore is seen at a protest demanding the departure of French forces from Burkina Faso. Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP

groups have tripled since before the coup, according to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. Questions about military rule efficacy are getting louder.

But the price for speaking up is steep. Dozens of critics have been sent to fight with the Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP), a state-sponsored vigilante force fighting alongside the armed forces. President Traoré has made this civilian militia a cornerstone of his security policy, and claims to have recruited nearly 90,000 people.

Complex community response

Vigilante groups – notably the Koglweogo, initially drawn from the Mossi community in Fada N’Gourma in the Est region – have been fighting on the front lines since 2015. Koglweogo first emerged after the 2014 uprising against longtime dictator Blaise Compaoré, which created security vacuums and divisions within the military.

While the Koglweogo provided immediate security, particularly in

volatile borderlands, they were linked to widespread human rights abuses. Among the unresolved cases is the 2018 New Year’s Eve killing of more than 200 civilians, largely from the Fulani community, in the northern locality of Yirgou. This was in response to a deadly attack by the now-defunct Ansarul Islam group.

Still, the Koglweogo provided a practical model for a local security response. Vigilantes supplemented an army overwhelmed by militant attacks, and operating in unfamiliar and hostile territories with limited resources. Their knowledge of parts of the country largely outside the control of the government in Ouagadougou was useful for intelligence.

As military intervention by France, and the moribund regional joint force known as G5 Sahel, failed to stem the tide of militant attacks, thousands turned up for recruitment into civilian vigilante groups like Koglweogo.

In 2020, former president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré formalised the civilian

militias, bringing them into the existing security establishment, before Traoré decided to put them front and centre.

Many have willingly answered the current president's call to sign up, while others have been forcibly conscripted.

Either way, it is a very dangerous business. The African Defence Review describes the VDP as “poorly trained and lightly armed”. It has suffered heavy casualties, amid complaints that it is not receiving adequate protection from the regular army. It has also been implicated in human rights abuses, particularly against nomadic Fulani communities.

Politics adds mud to murky water

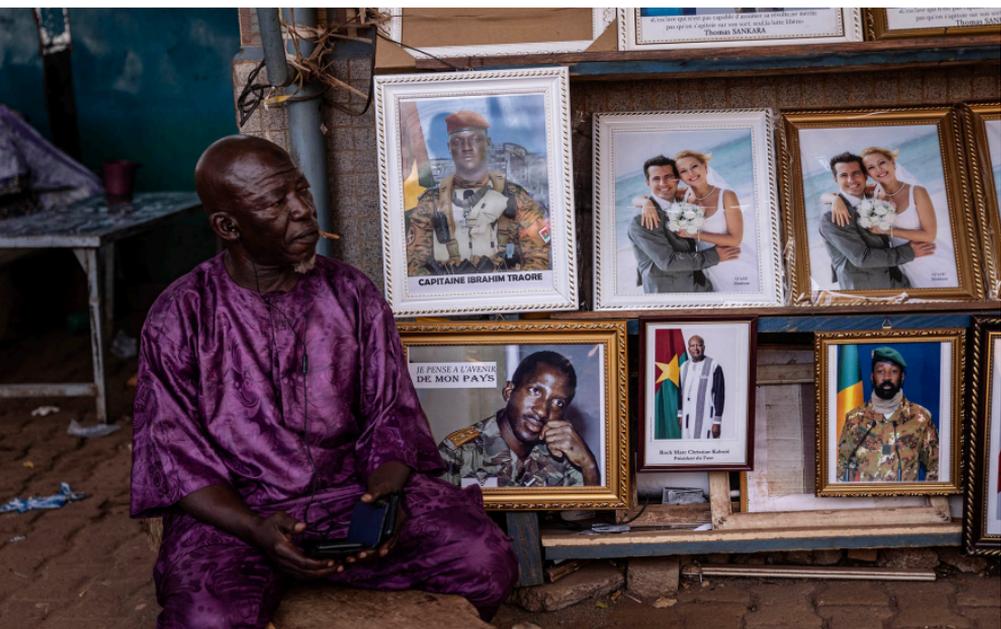
President Traoré would rather not hear criticism of his security policies. He has

called for greater “patriotism” from the media, leading to extensive self-censorship in reporting on the security crisis.

“I am not asking you to praise Captain Traore, but to handle information in such a way so as not to demoralise those fighting on the front,” he said.

What he did not say was that, for his critics, joining militias to defend the fatherland would not be voluntary. The junta then risks subverting the patriotism that compelled so many to sign up. “We cannot accept militarisation, kidnappings, penal requisitions and targeted assassinations,” said activists from Le Balai Citoyen, a civil society group. ■

**The writer requested to use a pseudonym for their safety*



Oh captain, my caption: A storekeeper sells portraits of Ibrahim Traore, among others, in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP

Those who can, leave

Vignettes from Niger's border with Benin.

Issa Sikiti Da Silva in Gaya

In the border town of Gaya, a 69-year-old Nigerien farmer waits for a long-distance truck to take him home. He holds on tight to a bag of fertiliser bought in neighbouring Benin. Supplies in Niger have grown scarce since 2019 and became even more restricted after the regional bloc, Ecowas, imposed sanctions in response to the military coup in July 2023.

“The coup brought everything to a standstill,” says Mamadou, speaking in the Zarma language. Food prices in the landlocked country rose by nearly 25% in the months of the sanctions, which were not lifted until February 2024.

Long before the political crisis, food production in Niger began falling victim to the increasingly hostile environment, as the Sahara desert crept south and drought degraded the soil. “Production decreased every harvest season until there was nothing coming out,” says Mamadou. Many farmers have been forced to leave the country. “But I am too old to leave.”

Salimata (35) was a farmer in Niger. She was young enough to leave. She is now a domestic worker in Benin.

“The problem with Niger is that the



Wave of despair: Prolonged drought and unpredictable weather patterns in Niger have exacerbated food shortages and conflict. Photo: AFP

rain has totally disappeared, replaced by long months of drought. But when the rain comes, it brings floods which destroy crops. It is a hopeless situation,” she says.

Between August and September 2023 at least 50 people died in floods in Niger. The General Directorate of Civil Protection said more than 3,000 head of cattle were killed and 3.9 tonnes of food destroyed.

Not that dry weather is much better, especially for livestock herders.

“Our cattle keep decreasing, dying one by one of hunger and thirst, due to lack of grazing space and water,” says Abou, a Fulani herder. Searching for pasture, the herders push south, where agrarian Zarma people, such as Mamadou, farm.

It’s a recipe for conflict.

“My brother and I took our cattle to another region for grazing space but we ended up clashing with the Zarma and

Territorial conflict: Drought is prompting Fulani herdsmen to graze their cattle on the land of agrarian farmers. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



he almost lost his life. The only alternative is to leave this bewitched country,” Abou says. He says a *porteur* – a human trafficker – will help him and his brother cross to Benin, then onwards to the Canary Islands in Spain.

They would join a steady stream of West Africans taking that dangerous journey to Europe. In the first six weeks of this year, 11,704 migrants reached the Canary Islands, leading the Spanish interior ministry to estimate that 70,000 would have entered by the end of 2024, up from just under 40,000 in 2023.

Niger has stopped cooperating with the European Union to stop migrants: in November, the new military government led by Brigadier General Abdourahmane Tiani repealed a 2015 anti-migration law.

But not everybody can pay a *porteur* to migrate. For the poorest families, the choices left are even more heartbreaking.

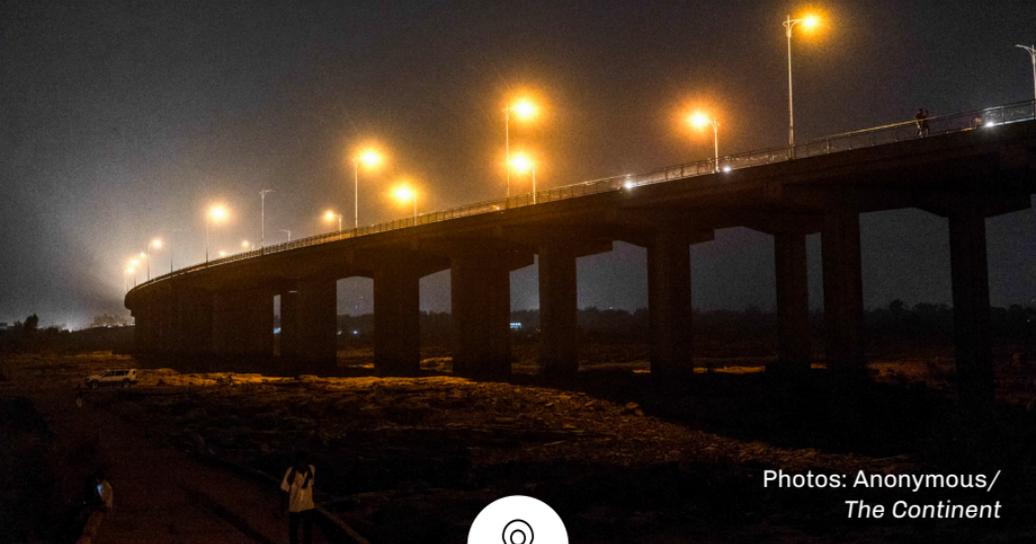
A farmer with 15 children and two wives says he gave up his two daughters,

aged 15 and 17, for marriage. “Our farm used to help us put food on the table. But now everything has fallen apart. I think my daughters will be better taken care of when married and it will alleviate our suffering,” he says.

Niger has one of the world’s highest rates of child marriages – 75% of girls are married before their 18th birthday and 28% before they are 15, according to advocacy group Girls Not Brides.

A fisherman on the river that separates Benin and Niger sees much of the despair around him as rooted in inaction about climate change. He wants African governments to do more than simply attend environmental summits.

“Very good speeches are read and commitments are made, but are not followed up on. Why always wait for the West and those big polluters to help us?” he says. “They can start small with their own resources and improve the situation while waiting for the foreign powers.” ■



Photos: Anonymous/
The Continent



TRAVEL

Baby it's dark outside

Nights are dark and quiet in Bamako, thanks to power struggles and struggling power companies. But along the river the music plays on.

Diak Sinaly* in Bamako

Nights in Bamako are getting hotter, which isn't helped by frequent power outages that can last for up to two days. The droning sounds of generators drown out the music in my neighbourhood.

Over the past two years, the public electricity utility, EDM-SA, has struggled to keep the lights on, amid allegations of corruption that led to the suspension of energy minister Lamine Seydou Traoré. He, and several company executives, now face embezzlement charges. They deny wrongdoing.

Fuel prices for generators rose steeply

under the sanctions imposed in response to the country's two military coups.

Indoors, the aircon is often off. I feel restless, frustrated and bored indoors.

So I gravitate towards Bamako's nightclubs. Despite the political crisis many have flourished across the Malian capital: Start Night, Bla Bla Club, Arobase, Ibiza, Byblos, Privilege, Exodus, Savama, Guina Dogon, Akwaba, Terrasse, Cinquantenaire. Often run by Lebanese nationals, they dot both sides of River Niger, on the outskirts of chic neighbourhoods like Badalabougou, ACI 2000, Golf and Korofina.

Inside, young urban Malians mix



and party with foreigners working with international agencies: Ivorians, Nigeriens, Burkinabè and others. The expat community is dwindling but still makes up a sizable chunk of the clientele.

I call an old classmate to my place, pull on a pair of blue jeans, a white t-shirt and white shoes.

Around midnight, when the air outside is cooler, we leave the house. The clubs have just opened their doors and the music is starting to peak.

My favourite spot is Ibiza, one of the biggest and most popular nightclubs in

Al Quds Avenue. I enjoy its combination of African, American, French and Arabic music. It puts on special concerts for Valentine's Day and International Women's Day, and offers discounted pizza and soda combos every other night.

However, even nightlife is dimmed by power outages. The streets have become darker, often lit only by Chinese-made solar lamps illuminating shops and the lights of vehicles.

Nightclubs have been forced to either adapt by buying generators or reducing their operating hours. Sometimes both,

because of the high costs of fuel and generator maintenance.

EDM-SA's own generators reportedly need about a million litres of fuel per day, which costs about \$1-million. Last May, the transitional government gave the company \$10-million for fuel. Not much changed except for the mounting calls for the energy minister to resign. The night economy continues to darken.

At the club, I get a soft drink, which I sip for most of the night, and catch up with my friend over the loud music.

Many clubs sell alcohol, which some drink in secret as Mali is a majority Muslim country and alcohol is forbidden. Others smoke. People dance, gravitating towards each other as the rhythm flows.

Mali is known for its oral historians, jalis/jelis, griots and the kora – the west African harp. There is also the Ngoni (a

lute), the Bala (a xylophone), and the desert rhythms of the Tamashek. These sounds continue to influence Malian music.

The extraordinarily rich confluence of these sounds is a legacy of the Mande empire of the 10th to 15th century that spread from present day Senegal to Niger.

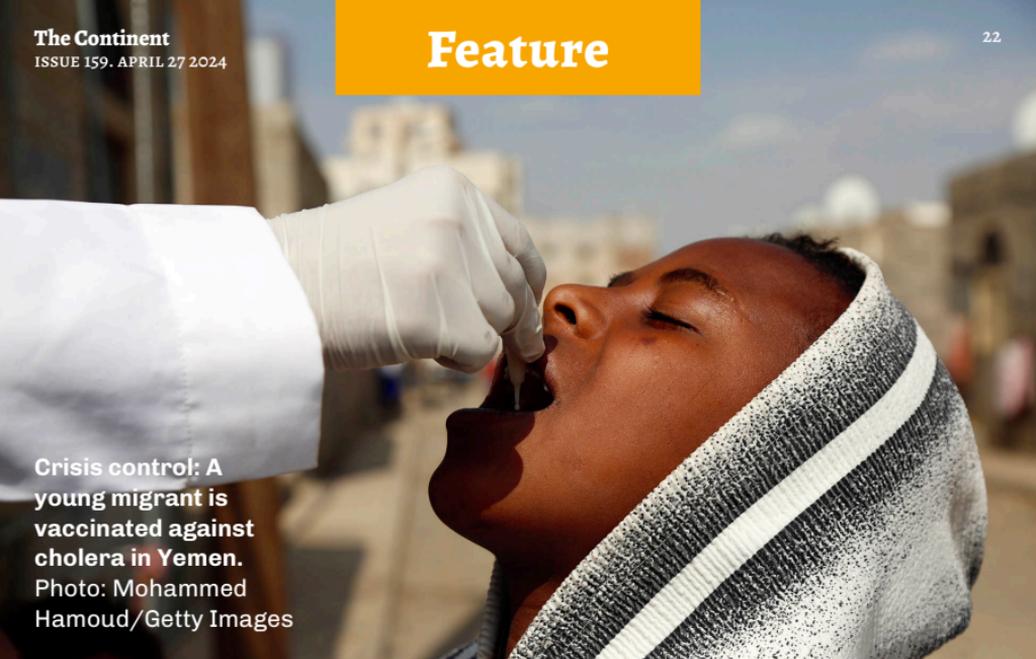
In the club, popular artists like Sidiki Diabate dominate the airwaves but they also increasingly play Afrobeats, amapiano or Bongo Flavour.

One of my favourite Nigerian songs starts playing and I get up for another drink. The music picks up pace.

As long as we're in here, you wouldn't know how dull and dim it is outside. ■

**The writer and photographer wanted their names protected for their safety*





Crisis control: A young migrant is vaccinated against cholera in Yemen. Photo: Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images

The grass isn't greener across the sea

Red Sea migrants are landing in Yemen's cholera crisis – and then being blamed for it.

Haitham Alqaoud in Aden

After a 10-hour journey at sea, crammed into a boat with 40 others, a 16-year-old Oromo boy arrived feverish and utterly exhausted on Yemen's shores. His sea journey had started in Djibouti, his land journey in Ethiopia.

The boat crew and owners abandoned their passengers at the coast and disappeared back into the sea, leaving them to walk inland into southwestern Yemen until they reached an area called Albasateen. There, "I became violently ill with diarrhea and vomiting," the boy said.

A Yemeni man found the boy collapsed, and took him to a hospital in the port city of Aden, where he was diagnosed with cholera and placed in isolation until he recovered.

Battered by civil war since September 2014, The country's health and sanitation services have collapsed, triggering multiple cholera outbreaks.

About 2.5-million people were infected with cholera in Yemen between 2016 and 2021, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Then, in the last three months of 2023, the disease surged



Risky repast: A child fetches water at a camp for African migrants in Aden, Yemen. Photo: Saleh Obaidi/AFP

in southern and eastern Yemen.

This part of the country is on the increasingly busy migration route used by people making the journey from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf's petrostates in search of a better life. The International Organisation for Migration says 97,210 African immigrants arrived in Yemen by boat in 2023. Many walked into southern Yemen's cholera surge. By the end of 2023, migrants were estimated to constitute about 80% of the people catching cholera in that part of the country.

Scapegoats for ravages of war

But in Yemen, where anti-Black prejudice is commonplace, authorities and other citizens see the cholera-migration dynamic, or at least speak of it, the other way round: they say migrants aren't catching cholera in Yemen, they're bringing it in.

"Predictably, a pattern of scapegoating and stigma towards migrants has emerged," said Lola Ibrahim, executive

director of the Migrant, Immigrant and Refugee Rights Alliance.

Dr Ahmed Al-Bishi, who heads Aden's health and population office, said that "the outbreak began with the arrival of African migrants from Lahj and Byan province in late 2023".

It's difficult to distinguish anti-migrant anxieties or prejudice from reliable public health analyses. While cholera outbreaks have been common in Yemen since 2016, none have been reported in Djibouti, the last port of departure for many of the migrants. At the same time, many start their journeys in Ethiopia which has faced sporadic outbreaks since August 2022.

But associating migrants with cholera colours how migrants are treated in hospitals and elsewhere.

"We frequently receive reports of harassment and discrimination from [the refugee] community. This can manifest in different ways such as being deprioritised for basic services," said the UN Refugee Agency's representative in Yemen, Maya Ameratunga.

"The health centre I went to offered inadequate care and treatment. The doctors displayed an aversion towards me, seemingly due to my Ethiopian origin," said Hamza Adis, who left Ethiopia in November 2023 and was overwhelmed by cholera symptoms during his trek from Bab al-Mandab to Aden.

Adis was so frustrated by the care at the hospital that after receiving intravenous fluids he left for a friend's home in Aden's Al-Basateen area, enduring a difficult recovery. He survived his ordeal in Yemen – not all African migrants are so lucky. ■

How many political parties do we need?

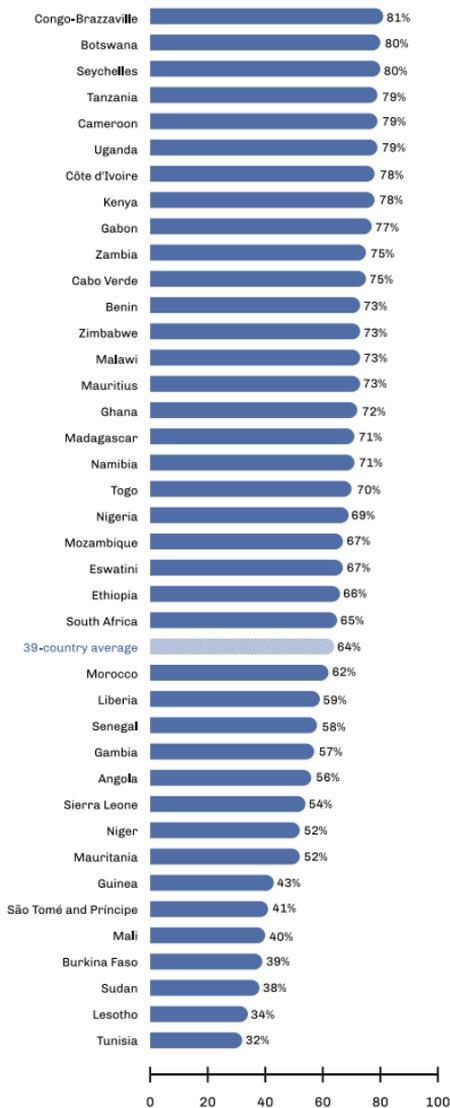
If we're going to have an election, what's a good number of parties to invite?

More than one, surely. Almost two thirds (64%) of adults whom Afrobarometer surveyed in 39 African countries agree that “many political parties are needed to make sure that [people] have real choices in who governs them.” A third (34%) disagree, saying political parties just foster division and confusion.

Demand for multiparty competition is strong even though 60% of Africans think that it “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict. But fewer than half of respondents want party competition in Tunisia, Lesotho, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Mali, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Guinea – most of which have experienced recent political turmoil.

Feelings about multiparty competition do vary considerably over time: Compared with surveys from 2011/2013, we see double-digit increases in support in Eswatini (+31 percentage points), Botswana (+18), Kenya (+17), and Senegal (+17). But many have lost their taste for party competition in Lesotho (-36 points), Niger (-20), Mali (-18), Burkina Faso (-17), and Guinea (-14). ■

Support for multiparty competition | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



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.

How to tell a bedtime story in South Africa

Refiloe Moahloli has mastered the art.

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

RSVPs for the Daring Dragons Book Evening (“Come dressed as your favourite dragon!”) at Roosevelt Park Pre-Primary School, in one of Johannesburg’s leafier northern suburbs, were trickling in at about the usual rate. Then the school revealed the identity of the guest reader. Suddenly, it could barely keep up with demand.

If you are a child under eight in South Africa, or the parent of a child under eight in South Africa, then Refiloe Moahloli is something of a rock star. She is the author of a series of beloved children’s books that have captured the imaginations of kids across the country, including *How Many Ways Can You Say Hello*, *We Are One* and, most recently, *A Friend For All Seasons*.

Like all the best children’s authors, she tells fantastical stories while conveying universal truths about friendship, love and happiness. Happiness is something that Moahloli brings refreshing complexity to, in *A Friend For All Seasons*. A character, Gugu, figures out that she can be both happy and sad at the same time – and that this is perfectly normal.

Moahloli’s books are rooted in a vision of South Africa that feels at once familiar



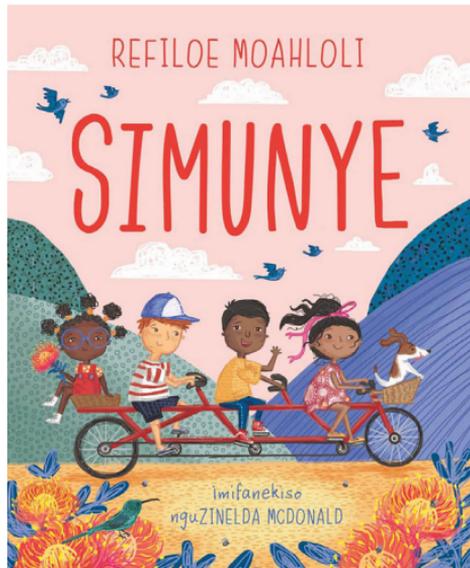
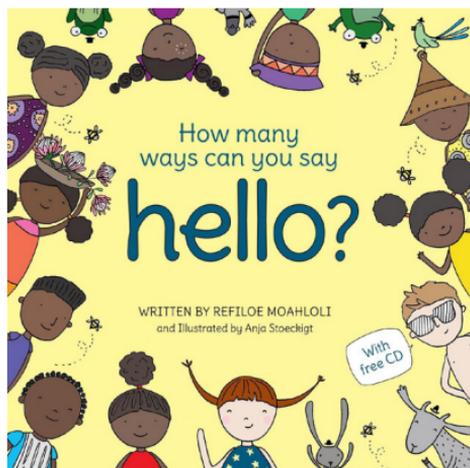
Saying hello: Refiloe Moahloli's books are adored by kids – and their parents.

and aspirational. Jacarandas bloom in spring, boys play cricket with tin cans and characters speak multiple languages.

Her politics are not far from the surface, which is perhaps part of the appeal. In *How Many Ways Can You Say Hello*, the protagonist, a little white girl, is given homework: to learn how to greet in all of the country’s official languages. It is homework from which plenty of

parents could benefit, too. “At the very least we should be able to greet others in their mother tongue,” Moahloli tells *The Continent* at the Roosevelt Park reading this week, in between book signings.

Moahloli grew up around books, at her home and her school in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape. She remembers being asked to read in front of her class in primary



school, and falling in love then – not just with stories themselves, but with telling stories. She held on to this dream even as life pushed her in other directions: Moahloli studied IT, got a job with a mobile phone operator and worked in India for several years.

It was on her return, while watching a young niece struggle to stay in touch with isiXhosa, her home language, that she decided to write a book for children that reflected the reality of growing up in a multicultural, multilingual environment. The result was *How Many Ways Can You Say Hello*, published in 2017. It was an instant bestseller.

It was on her return that she decided to write a book for children that reflects the reality of growing up in a multicultural, multilingual environment.

“I had to study the art of writing, and read a lot of children’s books. I fell in love with the art of it, the beauty of it, the magic of it, and I’ve been blessed to have talented illustrators to work with,” Moahloli says.

In return, a generation of children have fallen in love with her characters and their stories, which have been translated into Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sesotho.

“When they say mother tongue, it’s literal. There’s a visceral connection to that first language that your parents speak. When you can read in that language the connection is deeper, stronger, closer, it further helps to create that connection with reading and the joy that comes with it,” she says. ■



Hunter's helm sharpens his Netflix spear

Mandla Dube brings slick, stylish action to streaming screens in his welcome shift from fact to fiction.

Wilfred Okiche

Preparation meets opportunity in *Heart of the Hunter*, the latest spectacle by South African filmmaker Mandlakayise Walter Dube.

In 2016, Dube demonstrated a capacity for tackling scale in his storytelling with the biopic *Kalushi*. His 2022 Netflix action flick *Silverton Siege* took creative licence to reimagine a little-known sociopolitical event of 1980s South Africa.

In a change of pace, *Heart of the Hunter* operates completely in the realm of fiction, although one that borrows buzzwords like state capture from real-world discourse.

Adapted from Deon Meyer's popular 2003 novel of the same title (*Proteus* in Afrikaans), and supported by the immense purse strings of Netflix, where Dube is signed to a production deal, *Heart of the Hunter* is visually appealing and works as a finely executed exercise in genre filmmaking. The stunning vistas of the Western Cape region are the picture-perfect background for this tale of politics, patriotism, espionage and retribution.

Zuko Khumalo (Bonko Khoza) thinks he's done with working in the shadows as a black-ops hitman. He wants to start a family with a young woman, Malime (Masasa Mbangeni), and her little boy Pakamile (Boleng Mogotsi) who both adore him. This attempt at domestic bliss is cut short when a figure from the past shows up at his doorstep, precipitating our hero's return to the killing fields, doing what he does best.

In the opening scene, Dube sets the tone for the rest of the film. A shadowy figure clutching a huge spear attacks his opponent from behind. A well-choreographed fight sequence follows expeditiously. It is the first of a series of hand-to-hand combat sequences that litter the film and highlight Dube's flair for action. He delivers the goods.

Unlike *Silverton Siege*, *Heart of the Hunter* is not bogged down by historical anchors, and any politics that make an appearance are mostly background noise, leaving Dube able and willing to zero in on the conventions of the genre to deliver a sleek, stylish action thriller. ■

THE QUIZ

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"It's time we had a frank discussion about currency names."



Photo: Peter Adams/
Avalon/Universal Images
Group via Getty Images

- 1_** Name the third-largest canyon and largest green canyon (pictured) in the world. (Hint: it is located in South Africa.)
- 2_** Kassim Majaliwa is which country's prime minister?
- 3_** What colour is the left panel of the Ivorian flag?
- 4_** Which African country's currency is the dirham?
- 5_** Which non African country's currency is the dirham?
- 6_** The Rwandan pound is the name of Rwanda's currency. True or false?
- 7_** Is Eswatini a constitutional or absolute monarchy?
- 8_** Is Lesotho an absolute or constitutional monarchy?
- 9_** Name the biogeographical region and transition zone between the Sudanian savannas and the Sahara.
- 10_** True or false: Equatorial Guinea is part of the Sahel region.

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

All the goings-on going on around the world have left a lot of us feeling decidedly bleak about the state of things. And when the goings-on get tough, it can be tough to go on. Fortunately, however, there is inspiration to be found in our midst, and the fortitude and triumphs of others can really help us tough things out.

But then who, exactly, should we look to, to reignite the glowing embers of joy in our lives?

Our first thought was Kenyan rugby-star-turned-chef Dennis Ombachi. The joy he brings to his cooking almost had us strapping on our own aprons in the kitchen – but then UberEats texted “We miss you” and before we knew what was happening we were sprawled on the couch with empty polystyrene containers strewn around and Dennis judging us from a paused YouTube video. “Not done!” he seemed to say.

Chastened, we turned instead to Kenyan runners Alexander Mutiso Munyao and Peres Jepchirchir, who won the London Marathon last weekend, as well as one of our actual real-world friends from Kenya who also took part. Running is a true, tried and tested way of boosting one’s mood after all. So we

pulled on our running gear, laced up our trainers, strapped on our head bands and off we dashed – ready for endorphins and dopamine to work their mood magic.

Alas, we only got as far as the fridge. Which was empty, so UberEats won again.

Thwarted, we found our thoughts drifting to others like us – grumpy, frustrated and overfed. What do *they* when they’re feeling down, we wondered.

Do they wake up and think, “I feel sad today, how about I send my critics to the front lines of my favourite war?”

That would mean they really do find joy in the misery of others. (Our German’s a bit rusty but we believe the technical term for this is “schadenLOLs”.)

But no, that couldn’t possibly be the case. If it were, then they would be delirious with joy from one moment to the next.

Playing games with friends might cheer us up? Seems to work for Rishi Sunak, who always seems so chipper despite knowing that even his mates think he’s rubbish and that his career as a prime minister will be over before the year is out.

He loves playing games – with the lives of refugees and asylum seekers, mainly – and seems to be positively ecstatic at

Cheer up, or suffer the consequences!



CONTINENTAL DRIFT
Samira Sawlani

the prospect of shipping people off to Rwanda now that Parliament has passed his law proclaiming Rwanda to be a safe space. Boosted by the joy of that success he is rumoured to be preparing legislation decreeing that up is in fact down, that sugar is salt, that Taylor Swift is better than Beyoncé, and that Britain is still a global power to be reckoned with.

Arts and crafts are said to do wonders when it comes to lifting one's mood. If that's truly the case, then Togo's President Faure Gnassingbé must be in a really good space right now, after all the tinkering with the Constitution he's been doing in his garden shed.

Faure inherited the presidency in 2005 after the death of his father, who had held the position for only 38 years. So sad. But what joy must lie ahead: Just in time for next week's parliamentary elections, lawmakers in the country have approved constitutional amendments which effectively sees the country shift into a parliamentary system that critics say will see Gnassingbé pivot into a ruling position without pesky notions of "presidential term limits" spoiling the fun.

But absolute rulers can't *all* be inspirational. In fact, if there is one group who are responsible for *inducing* bad moods in others, it's the Coupdashians who are always happiest when confounding others. The latest to bear their brunt is the good old US of A. Last month Niger's military junta said it was revoking a pact that allowed the American military to operate from a base in Niger, and called for them to leave the country.



Pivot: The 'reforms' of Togo's President Faure Gnassingbé appear designed to keep him happy for decades to come.

Photo: Togolese Presidency/X

You'd think that the US, with its reputation as keen students of war, should have seen this coming, but it must have been too distracted by its own war *on* students this week, as the best response it could muster was to ask Niger to hang on a moment, can we at least talk about this?

Niger said sure, we'll talk – to Russia! (Ruh roh, as they say in the cartoons.)

This week's column comes to you from Kenya, where heavy rains and flooding as a result of El Niño have caused chaos in the capital, Nairobi. Lives have been lost and homes and livelihoods destroyed.

Many Kenyans have called out authorities for their lack of preparedness and slow response, and rolled up their own sleeves to collect and donate supplies, coming together in heavily affected areas to support each other. It's a reminder of the importance of community – and an example to governments the world over, who delight only in failing their people again and again. ■

Opposition may not oppose – and might be murdered

Political challenges to the absolute rule of Eswatini's king are not permitted, and will be punished.

Mlamuli Gumedze

Opposition parties in Eswatini face a greater problem than those in much of the rest of the continent – they are not even allowed to contest elections.

The country has effectively been a no-party state under the control of the king for 51 years. Rivals to the king's dominance, such as the People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo), Swaziland Youth Congress and Swaziland Solidarity Network, were proscribed under the Suppression of Terrorism Act of 2008.

Aspiring opposition leaders, activists and protesters face severe intimidation and death.

Those killed include former Pudemo leader Siphon Jele, killed in 2010, and advocate Thulani Maseko, a human rights lawyer, gunned down in front of his wife and two children in 2023.

Although Maseko's assassination was condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, nothing has been done to secure justice for his family or to end King Mswati III's repressive reign. Instead, the government has rubbed salt in the wounds.

In an attempt to further intimidate

critics of the government, Maseko's wife, Tanele Maseko – herself a widely respected gender activist – was detained, interrogated and stripped of her passport and phone at a border post between South Africa and Eswatini in March.

This latest incident was sadly not an isolated one. The government has been making defamatory remarks and spreading disinformation about Tanele for months in a blatant attempt to try and shift the blame for her husband's brutal murder.

These efforts are designed to scare and fragment opposition to Mswati, which has been rising due to high levels of corruption and economic hardship.

Unfortunately, the international community has played into the king's hands, failing to hold him accountable.

One has to ask: If democratic states will not stand up for human rights in a country as small and economically marginal as Eswatini, what hope is there to stop the rise of authoritarianism elsewhere? ■

Mlamuli Gumedze is a youth activist and was formerly the President of the Swaziland National Union of Students. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa



THE BIG PICTURE

Desert hues: Motorists drive through Benghazi in Libya, after sands blown in from the Sahara turned the sky orange across north Africa, over the Mediterranean and in southern Greece.

Photo: Abdullah Doma/AFP



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