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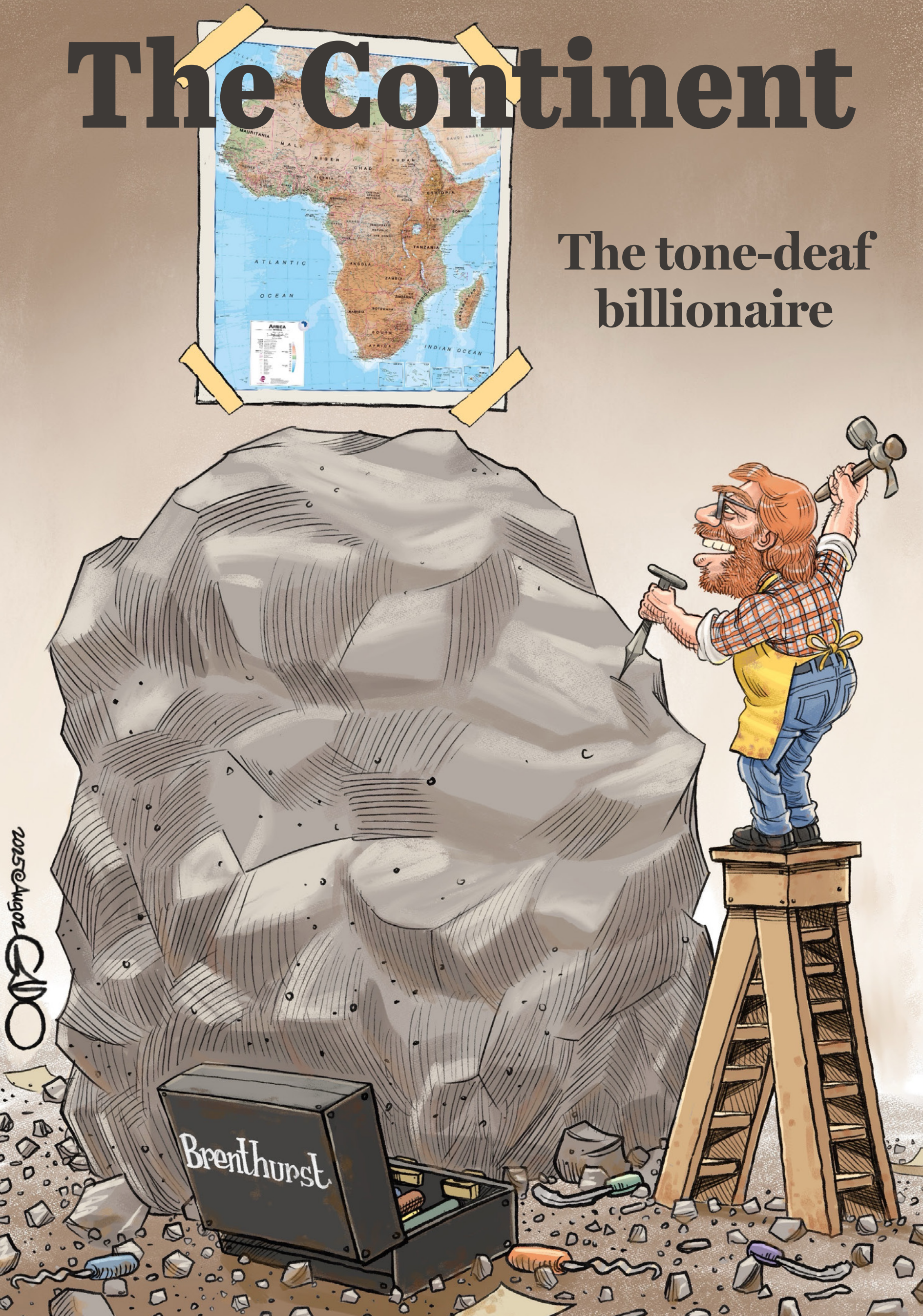
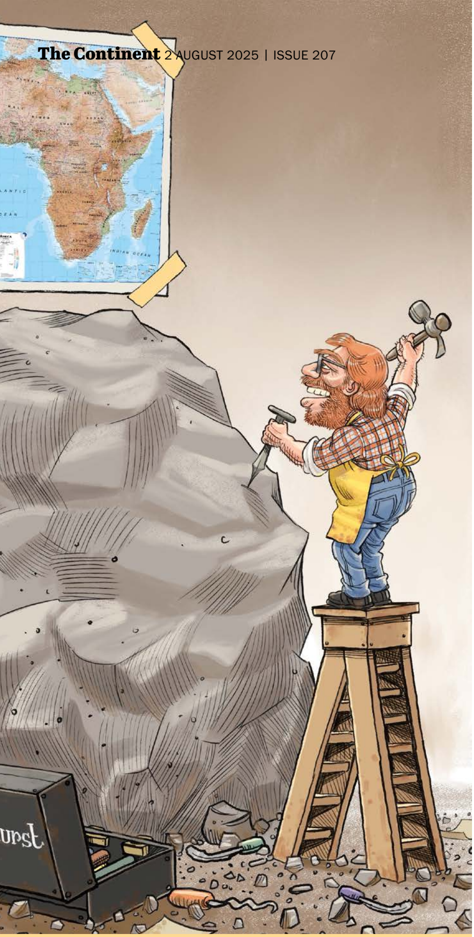
The Continent

The tone-deaf billionaire





COVER One of Africa's richest men attempted to influence political fortunes in Africa through his Brenthurst foundation. Then, without warning, last month the Foundation suddenly shuttered its doors. *The Continent*'s International Editor Simon Allison witnessed how the foundation wielded extreme luxury like a weapon: to entice, to compromise, to influence. But to what end? *Read more on page 13.*

Inside

The Museum of Memory: Our world is littered with monuments. Some seek to rewrite history. Others celebrate particular memories. They all speak to power, or the lack thereof. In this limited series, *The Continent* is reflecting on eight African monuments and the chapters that they document. This week, we're in Bulawayo (p22).

THE WEEK IN BRIEF

MAURITIUS

Making Tour de France history, island-style

With a second-stage victory in Guéret on Sunday, Kim Le Court-Pienaar became the first African woman to wear the yellow jersey at the Tour de France Femmes. The 28-year-old rider is also the first Mauritian – male or female – to compete at cycling's top level. Just 18 months into her professional career, she rides for WorldTour team AG Insurance-Soudal and was the first African to win a Monument in women's cycling.

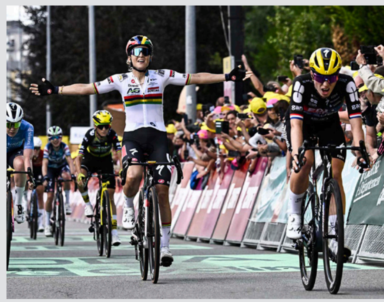


PHOTO: JULIEN DE ROSA/AFP

***On a roll:** Mauritius cyclist Kimberley Le Court Pienaar, left, celebrates finishing the stage next to Dutch rider Demi Vollering.*

BANKING

Sahel bloc to fund new investment bank

Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso plan to allocate 5% of national tax revenues to a new investment bank. The aim is to reduce their dependence on foreign donors, *Bloomberg* reports. The military-led governments left Ecowas earlier this year to form the Alliance of Sahel States. The bloc has since announced plans to co-develop mining, energy, and infrastructure projects as part of a broader push for regional autonomy.

UFOS

Come on you guys it's just rocket science

Australians flooded social media with videos of what many believed were UFOs over Queensland and New South Wales on Wednesday. The mystery was soon solved: astronomer Jonti Horner confirmed the sightings matched the path of a Chinese Long March 8A rocket, *BBC* reports. It was delivering satellites for China's internet network. The sightings came on the same day Australia's first-ever rocket launched – and crashed just 14 seconds later.

TANZANIA

Outsiders banned from setting up shop

Tanzania has banned foreigners from 15 types of small businesses, including salons, retail shops, food stalls, and mobile money kiosks, to protect local jobs. Violators face fines of up to $3,900 or six months in jail, and may lose their visas or residence permits. Tanzanians who help foreigners operate banned businesses also risk penalties. The move could affect about 40,000 Kenyans working in Tanzania and reintroduces work restrictions within the East Africa Community.

MALAWI

Vice-president sets his sights on his boss's job

Malawi's Vice-President Michael Usi has entered the race against President Lazarus Chakwera in September's election. If cleared, it will mark the second time a sitting vice-president has contested the presidency. Usi is running for Odya Zake Alibe Mlandu, a breakaway from the UTM, part of Chakwera's ruling coalition. In Malawi, the president cannot dismiss the vice-president – a setup that mirrors Kenya's tense 2018–2022 standoff between Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto.

In July 2025 Senatorial elections, Burundi's ruling party CNDD-FDD won all the seats. This comes hot on the heels of winning all the parliamentary and local elections earlier in June. Now President Évariste Ndayishimiye controls 100% of all the political levels of the government ahead of the 2027 elections.

PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI / AFP

Off the ballot: *Maurice Kamto, leader of the Cameroonian opposition party Movement for the Rebirth of Cameroon (MRC).*

CAMEROON

Opposition leader appeals election ban

Cameroonian opposition leader Maurice Kamto is challenging his disqualification from October's presidential election. He filed an appeal with the Constitutional Council on Monday. Kamto was barred from this year's election when Cameroon's electoral oversight body said that his party had already submitted a 2025 candidate. Kamto's supporters say that other parties have fielded multiple candidates without issue. Kamto is widely seen as the main challenger to 92-year-old President Paul Biya, the world's oldest serving head of state, who has ruled Cameroon since 1982.

DRC

Kabila 'M23' trial begins

A military court in the Democratic Republic of Congo has opened a treason trial against former president Joseph Kabila. His charges include murder, torture, rape, and plotting to overthrow the government, *AfricaNews* reports. Authorities allege that he backed M23 rebels who control parts of the eastern DRC, which he denies. He is being tried in absentia. After leading the DRC for 18 years, Kabila was succeeded by President Félix Tshisekedi in a widely criticised election overseen by Corneille Nangaa, who now heads the DRC rebel coalition that includes M23.

NIGERIA

Hostages murdered after ransom payment

Kidnappers killed at least 35 of the people they abducted from Banga village in Nigeria's Zamfara state, despite ransoms being paid. Local officials told the *BBC* that armed gangs took 56 villagers in March and demanded $655 per captive. Only 18 were freed and survivors say hostages were executed in front of them. Among those held, three pregnant women gave birth. None of the babies survived. The Zamfara government condemned the killings as "barbaric," vowing justice. A 2022 law banned ransom payments but families said they had no other choice.

BORDERS

Soldiers killed in 'surprise' Uganda-South Sudan border skirmish

A deadly clash along the Uganda–South Sudan border has left four to six soldiers dead, according to conflicting reports from both countries. A South Sudanese official claims five of their troops died in the "surprise attack" on Monday. Uganda's army says three South Sudanese soldiers were killed after they crossed into its West Nile region and refused to leave, leading to a shoot-out that injured a Ugandan soldier. Responding to the shootings, the spokesperson of the South Sudan army referred to "recurrent border-related disputes". Both militaries have promised to investigate.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Ouattara ran and ran and ran again. Now he's going to run some more.

President Alassane Ouattara announced he will run for a fourth term in October, *AP* reports. The 83-year-old changed the Constitution to allow his third term in 2020, citing the death of his chosen successor, Amadou Gon Coulibaly. His main rival, Tidjane Thiam, is barred from running because he previously held dual citizenship. Ouattara claims his leadership is needed amid security and economic challenges. Critics say his move adds to the West African government's crisis of legitimacy, which has fuelled multiple military coups in the region.

FOSSIL FUELS

DRC subjects gorilla habitats to oil drilling

Despite earlier conservation pledges, the DRC government has launched a licencing round for 52 oil blocks, which cover more than half its territory, to oil and gas drilling, including critical gorilla habitats. A new report by Earth Insight says 64% of the 124-million hectares up for auction is pristine forest, home to endangered species like bonobos and lowland gorillas.

PHOTO: ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP

Betrayed: *A baby Grauer's gorilla, a critically endangered species, rests in its mother's arms.*

NEWS

SUDAN

RSF targets health workers as hunger and disease intensify

THE RAPID Support Forces paramilitary group is responsible for two thirds of all recorded attacks on health workers since war broke out in April 2023, according to conflict data analysts Insecurity Insight.

That's out of a total of 631 recorded incidents of violence or obstruction against healthcare workers. At least 160 have been killed, including doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, with attacks rising sharply since April 2025.

This is driving a collapse in healthcare, as Sudan's hunger crisis worsens. More than 637,000 people are now in catastrophic, life-threatening hunger, Care International reports. In East Darfur, 13 children died of malnutrition in June at Lagawa camp, home to 7,000 displaced people. In El Fasher, activists say people are now dying of starvation under a siege by the paramilitary group that has gone on for 15 months.

The rainy season, which began last month and usually lasts until September, threatens to worsen conditions. The heaviest rains are expected in the coming weeks, and the resulting floods are expected to cut off large swathes of Darfur and Kordofan until October, making it nearly impossible to deliver food or medical aid. In the Rahad locality of North Kordofan state, heavy rains on Monday displaced around 550 people and damaged or destroyed more than 170 homes.

As supplies vanish, the price of food is soaring. The *Sudan Tribune* reports that staples like millet are too expensive for people to buy. Families in the region are reportedly turning to ambaz – animal feed made from sesame and bean husks – for survival.

Heavy rains on Monday displaced around 550 people and damaged or destroyed more than 170 homes.

Sudan's civil war started in April 2023, when Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of the paramilitary group, decided that only one of them could have power. Estimates of the death toll go as high as 150,000 people, with the International Rescue Committee saying as many as 15-million of the country's 50-million people have been forced from their homes. ■

ANGOLA

Petrol price protests turn deadly again

TOMAS TEIXEIRA IN LUANDA

PHOTO: JULIO PACHECO NTELA / AFP

Fuel throttle: *Angolan anti-riot police officers stand in formation as protesters gather in Luanda.*

AT LEAST 22 people have been killed and nearly 200 injured this week in Luanda after minibus taxi associations went on strike, demanding lower fuel prices in the oil-rich country.

The government raised the retail price of fuel in early July from 300 to 400 kwanza, following a reduction in fuel subsidies that had been straining public finances. According to *Reuters*, these subsidies cost the country 4% of its GDP last year.

The protests began on Monday at major taxi hubs in Luanda, where passengers were forced to disembark from minibuses. By that evening, demonstrators had set tyres ablaze to block main roads, and several shops had been vandalised. Protesters called for better governance and for President João Lourenço to step aside.

According to the interior minister, more than 1,200 people have been arrested for vandalism, with 66 shops looted and 24 vehicles destroyed. Most of the fatalities were civilians believed to have died from gunshot wounds.

Encouraged by the International Monetary Fund, Angola has been gradually removing fuel subsidies since 2023, when a petrol price hike also triggered deadly protests. The rise in fuel prices has also driven up the cost of food, in a country where the average monthly wage is just 70,000 kwanzas ($75).

"Angolan people are peaceful, but we can't support hunger and corruption forever," historian Sebastião Ferreira told *The Continent.*

Lourenço told *CNN Portugal* protesters were using petrol prices as a pretext to undermine the government, while the ruling MPLA said the unrest was aimed at tarnishing independence celebrations. Angola is marking 50 years of independence this year.

The minibus taxi associations have vowed to resume the strike if their demands are not met. ■

KENYA

Dadaab's youth turn to drugs amid despair and stagnation

The camp was a symbol of refuge. Now its residents are trapped in limbo and some are finding solace in drug use.

YUNIS DEKOW IN DADAAB

THE SPRAWLING Dadaab refugee complex in semi-arid northeastern Kenya used to be a symbol of refuge. Created to house people after the collapse of Somalia's government in 1991, it is now home to half a million people from around the region.

Once people do manage to get there, they can become stuck, especially if they are young. Caught between childhood and adulthood, they navigate a liminal space neither fully integrated into Kenyan society nor able to return to a stable Somalia.

With no legal right to work in Kenya and few paths to higher education, if any, many feel trapped.

Drug and substance abuse is reportedly on the rise. Healthcare workers in the camps say they are witnessing the fallout firsthand. The most commonly abused substances include khat, cigarettes, hashish, alcohol, prescription painkillers, and psychotropic drugs.

"When we look around today, what we see is a youth population in despair," said Mohamed Abdullahi Jimale, a long-time refugee in Ifo camp. "They are educated, but idle. Talented, but without purpose. And when there's no hope, drugs fill the void."

Ali Jama (not his real name) is 24 and has been using hashish and alcohol for more than three years. A high school graduate in 2020, Ali once dreamed of becoming a teacher.

Today, he spends his days wandering the dusty alleys of the camp, gambling using his phone and begging for money to feed his habit. "I know I'm on the wrong path, but I feel stuck. I didn't choose these circumstances."

Mohamed Warsame, now 27, is a former addict who once roamed the same streets as Ali. He is now sober, but he says that without long-term investment in education, mental health support, and job creation, the problem will persist.

"You can't just tell young people to say no to drugs," Warsame said. "You have to give them a reason to live – and a reason to dream again." ■

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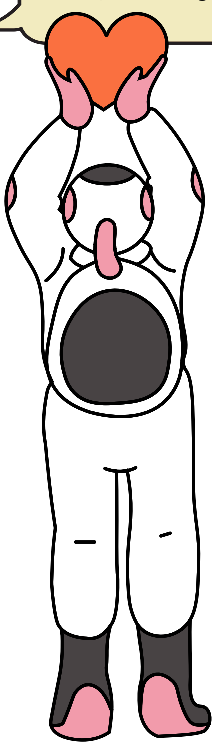

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ANALYSIS

Brass tacks beats boss tax in Africa's quest for equality

Four men are richer than half of all other Africans combined. Taxing them more feels like a no-brainer – but a lot needs to be fixed before that would truly address wealth inequality.

KIRI RUPIAH AND LYDIA NAMUBIRU

JOHANN RUPERT and Nicky Oppenheimer in South Africa, Nassef Sawiris in Egypt and Aliko Dangote in Nigeria are collectively worth over $57-billion. That's more than the total wealth of 750-million Africans, according to Oxfam's latest inequality report. That statistic has made headlines across the world.

Oxfam suggests higher taxes on the wealthy. People working to fix this inequality have repeatedly said the problem is more complicated, and needs a more nuanced fix.

For starters, Oxfam's research defines Africa's "ultra-rich" as people who earn $80,000 and own $300,000 in assets. They are the continent's 1%. At Oxfam's threshold, the 1% would include Africa's emerging middle class: professionals, mid-size entrepreneurs and diaspora returnees, says Juste Nansi, a Burkinabé political sociologist.

The report recommends an extra 10% income tax on top of the roughly 33% already in place. Christian Hallum, its lead author, told *The Continent* that raising wealth and income tax on Africa's 1% could be the beginning of meaningful reform to significantly reduce inequality.

PHOTO: JOHN D MCHUGH/AFP

Clockwise from top: *Johann Rupert, Nicky Oppenheimer, Nassef Sawiris and Aliko Dangote.*

Similar conversations are taking place across the world.

There the distinction on who is ultra-rich is more straightforward. In the US it takes an annual income of at least $730,000 to make the 1%, according to *CNBC*. In 2021, Knight Frank, the global property management firm, said the 1% threshold required net assets of $4.3-million in Ireland, $3.4-million in Hong Kong, and $1.6-million in the United Arab Emirates.

The African middle class "are already compensating for the failures of public systems by privately financing education, health, and security for their families". Put simply, they are already paying Black Tax.

According to Nansi, more nuance is needed. "Taxation must be progressive – yes – but it must also be contextually intelligent and politically sustainable." He notes that the African middle class included in that 1% "are often the very individuals who are already compensating for the failures of public systems by privately financing education, health, and security for their families and communities." Put more simply, they are already paying Black Tax. Nansi warns that steep tax hikes could push people to move their money elsewhere in the country, or to a tax haven.

Added to this, Hallum said their research found that more than half of all taxes collected by African countries came from consumption taxes like VAT "that fall disproportionally on the poorest households".

Steep taxation is easier said than done

This doesn't mean that Africa doesn't have ultra-wealthy people. There just aren't that many. According to the Knight Frank research, of the more than 2.3-million people in the world who are worth more than $10-million, a touch under 20,000 are in Africa.

And you need a working state to collect more tax. Oxfam's Hallum noted that, on average, African countries have just one tax auditor for every 13,000 taxpayers, which helps make widespread evasion possible.

A review in Rwanda found that only one in five of its dollar-millionaires filed a personal income declaration in 2018. A more recent review in Nigeria found that more than 99% of the country's ultra-rich were not tax compliant. And that's before tax consultants come in to help the people who can afford them get around tax laws when they *do* file.

There is also a deeper problem: Weak state institutions that struggle to collect taxes are also bad at delivering services. Repeated protests in countries like Kenya, focused on taxes, show what happens when people do not see what they are getting for their taxes.

Nansi says the answer may lie beyond hiking taxes: "African cultural solidarity already compensates for public service failures. What if we could formalise and scale these mechanisms?" This could include things like local bonds that promise a return to private individuals or businesses when they co-invest with the government in schools, hospitals, infrastructure and the like. ■

FEATURE

Even for the Oppenheimers, money can't buy love – or power

Jonathan Oppenheimer is heir-apparent to Africa's third-largest fortune. The Brenthurst Foundation was his attempt to turn that money into political influence. In July, after a screaming match at its head office, Oppenheimer shut it down. It had failed to deliver value for money. *The Continent*'s International Editor **Simon Allison** witnessed first-hand how the foundation wielded extreme luxury like a weapon – to entice, to compromise, to influence – while seemingly failing to understand that politics is about more than just private jets and presidential photoshoots.

BY SEVERAL ORDERS of magnitude, the richest man I ever met was Jonathan Oppenheimer. Now 55, he is the eldest son in the fourth generation of the mining dynasty that began with Ernest Oppenheimer in the early 1900s. The family is worth $10.4-billion, according to *Forbes*. Almost all of that money was made from gold and diamonds dug from beneath southern African soil.

The first time I met him was at the 2017 edition of the Tswalu Dialogue, held at Tswalu Kalahari. This is his personal safari lodge, and is the largest privately-held game reserve in South Africa.

The dialogue brought together about two dozen participants, all of whom were flown by private plane to the reserve's airstrip.

The guests were chosen because of their perceived ability to shape Africa's future. As the *Mail & Guardian*'s Africa Editor at the time, they decided this included me.

It was among my most surreal reporting experiences. I had lunch one day sitting next to former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe. On the next day, it was Nick Carter, the then-head of the British army. I made small-talk with former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo over drinks. The other guests were ambassadors, ministers or mining bosses, with at least one arms dealer in the mix, and a few attachés who looked suspiciously like intelligence officers.

On the opening night, Jonathan Oppenheimer gave a welcome speech. He invited us to appreciate the majesty of our surroundings, and explained how

Generational wealth: *Jonathan Oppenheimer founded the Brenthurst Foundation in 2004.*

Tswalu Kalahari has flourished in recent years, even as the rest of the Northern Cape – among South Africa's poorest provinces – battled a crippling drought.

Then he told a joke. It went something like this: When the drought bites, and the families who live around Tswalu can no longer afford to keep cows, they sell the cows and buy goats. When they can no longer afford the goats, they buy chickens. And when they can no longer afford the chickens, they sell their land to the Oppenheimers.

Most of the audience laughed dutifully; others exchanged wide-eyed glances across tables laden with silverware and crystal glasses.

This is a family that built its wealth on the labour of millions of young black men being funnelled underground, where they spent the prime of their lives working for a pittance in back-breaking conditions, destroying not just their lungs but also the social fabric of the communities from which they were drawn.

Much of that labour was in service of the Oppenheimers' personal fortune, and the taxes from their vast mining operations funded various colonial and apartheid-era regimes.

These power dynamics were symbolised, perhaps unwittingly, by an art installation in the lobby of the Oppenheimers' offices in Johannesburg. Visitors were greeted by a giant bust of Ernest Oppenheimer, surrounded by smaller busts of unnamed African tribal leaders positioned to gaze in supplication upon him.

In modern South Africa, the Oppenheimers remain close to political power – as a major donor to the ruling ANC and other major political parties – but are no longer at its centre.

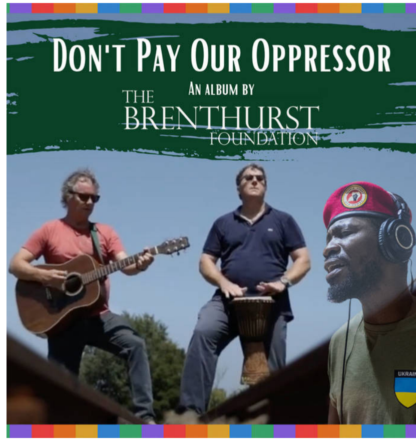
Generational shift

Unlike his recent ancestors, Jonathan has shown little affinity for either business or mining, so much so that he was passed over for the board of directors of Anglo-American, the company founded by his great-grandfather. In person, he's socially awkward and diffident – someone who might have preferred teaching history in a high school to being born a billionaire.

In the early 2000s, as the family began to withdraw from the day-to-day running of De Beers and Anglo-American, Jonathan came up with a plan to extend its influence on the continent through a political foundation.

He called it the Brenthurst Foundation, after the family's lavish mansion in central Johannesburg. Several sources have said that this was implemented over the objections of his father, Nicky, who worried about making the family's political interests so explicit.

The foundation described itself as a think tank dedicated to "strengthening Africa's economic performance", and advocated fairly standard neoliberal, western-leaning policies. In practice it seemed more like a lobby group – although what exactly it was lobbying for was always slightly unclear.



Covering their tracks: *Album art for the Brenthurst Foundation's musical adventure with Bobi Wine.*

One foundation, many presidents

On its website, the foundation boasts of directing "numerous reform projects" with African heads of state, including in Rwanda, Mozambique, Eswatini, Malawi, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Ethiopia and Nigeria; and being involved "almost continuously at various levels of government in South Africa from the foundation's outset".

Its board included seven former African presidents or prime ministers: Olusegun Obasanjo, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Ernest Bai Koroma, Kgalema Motlanthe, Ian Khama, Hailemariam Desalegn and Moeketsi Majoro. Serving alongside them was Richard Myers, a former chair of the joint chiefs of staff in the United States; the aforementioned Nick Carter; and Rory Stewart, the UK's former secretary of state for international development and now a popular podcast host.

Brenthurst also maintained relationships with prominent opposition leaders across the continent, including Raila Odinga, John Steenhuisen, Tundu Lissu and Bobi Wine.

Wine, who was a reggae star in Uganda before turning to politics, produced an album with the foundation's director, Greg Mills, a veteran researcher. Tracks included *Jambo Express*, *Mama Afrika* and *Don't Pay Our Oppressor*. Mills contributed lyrics and djembe drums. He was also the public face of the organisation, with Oppenheimer rarely giving interviews or public speeches.

But even at its peak, the foundation's actual influence was always in question.

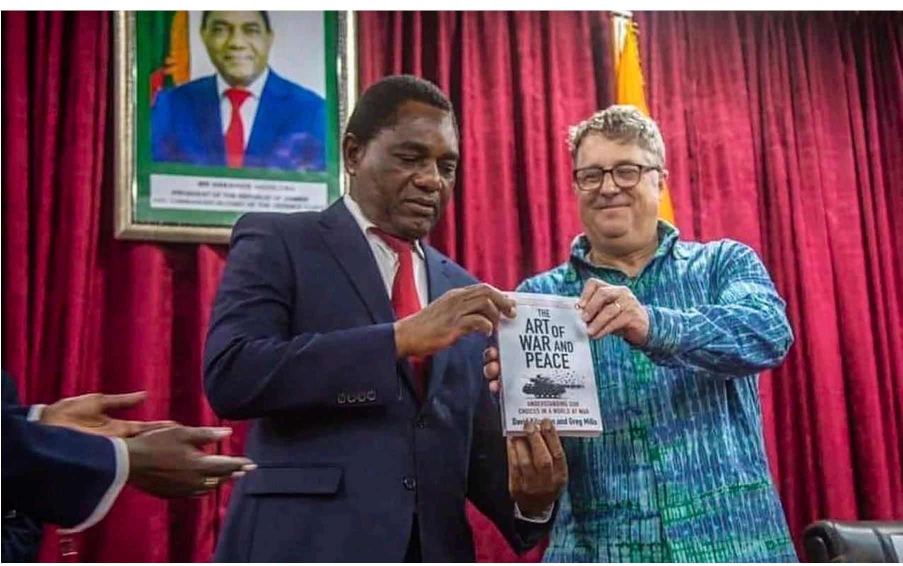
At the launch of *Making Africa Work*, which Obasanjo, a former board chair, co-authored with Mills, I asked which African countries were already making it work. Obasanjo responded without hesitation: Rwanda and Ethiopia. The book makes the opposite argument, however, singling out both as authoritarian regimes destined to fail.

I had read the book. Obasanjo, despite his byline on the cover, had not.

'Evergreen democracy'

Given how little he speaks publicly, it is hard to know much about Oppenheimer's worldview, or what he wanted the foundation to achieve. I got an unexpected insight in late 2019 at a Brenthurst conference in Mombasa.

A small plane took me from Moi International Airport to a fancy golf



Some Tzu: *Greg Mills, ex-Brenthurst foundation director, and Zambia's President Hakainde Hichilema.*

estate further up the coast, , where suites come with their own rooftop hot tubs. Desalegn, the former Ethiopian prime minister, sat opposite me on the flight.

One night, Jonathan Oppenheimer sat at my table and spoke at length about two subjects on his mind. The first was taxes. He believes in the theory of taxes – you pay the government, and the government gives you basic services in return – but thinks this social contract is broken in South Africa. "Why the fuck should I pay any tax? I shouldn't pay any fucking tax. You're in breach," he said. "You are stealing from me and giving me nothing in return. You are taking my money and giving me bullshit."

So far, so unsurprising: few billionaires like to pay tax. He became animated, however, when talking about his "radical solution" to the problem of poor democratic governance – something he described as "evergreen democracy".

The premise of his argument was that it is too easy for incumbents to lose out to challengers who make wild promises. Instead, he thought voters should first be asked whether they want to keep the current government in power. Only if they actively choose to remove the current government should an election be held. "If the incumbent guys manage the economy reasonably, they could be in charge for a hundred years."

The limits of wealth

In mid-July, the Brenthurst Foundation announced the retirement of its director, Mills, and its closure. A spokesperson said: "From helping individual leaders navigate moments of real crisis, to bringing international best practice policy advice to governments across Africa, we can be rightly proud of the impact the foundation has made."

Not proud enough, apparently. The decision to close it came after Jonathan Oppenheimer and Mills had a screaming match at the foundation's office in Johannesburg. Oppenheimer allegedly told Mills that the foundation had failed to deliver on his investment.

Oppenheimer's spokesperson did not disclose the exact scale of that investment, or what exactly was expected in return. Mills did not respond to *The Continent*'s request for comment.

Oppenheimer and Mills had a screaming match in Johannesburg. Oppenheimer allegedly told Mills that the foundation had failed to deliver on his investment.

The conspiracy theorists on YouTube – with their takes on the "$10-Billion Family That Secretly Controls Africa" – are wrong.

The actual lesson from Jonathan Oppenheimer's experiment in trying to reshape Africa's political landscape is that money can buy access, but it doesn't necessarily buy real influence.

His mistake was to be so tone deaf that it took him more than two decades to figure this out for himself. ■

Simon Allison is the co-founder and International Editor of *The Continent*.

PHOTOS

Country & Eastern

ALL PHOTOS: FREDRIK LERNERYD/AFP

NASHVILLE OR Nairobi? That's a potato, potahto question when it comes to country music in East Africa. Hundreds gathered in the Kenyan capital on 26 July 2025 to celebrate International Cowboy Day, singing and line-dancing to local covers of classics by Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, Jim Reeves, Don Williams and others. Sir Elvis, Kenya's biggest country star, headlined the event. Kenyan interest in country music goes all the way back to the 1920s and 1930s, when locals first heard Jimmie Rodgers on early country and western records. Today, rising stars are bringing their own unique takes on this genre to the stage – and filling Nairobi clubs while they're at it.


NAH

LIMITED SERIES

The Museum of Memory

HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

CURATED BY SHOLA LAWAL
ART DIRECTION BY WYNONA MUTISI

Bulawayo's brass statue of Joshua Nkomo

ZIMBABWE

CREATED IN 1982 by North Korea's high-end Mansudae Art Studio, a towering statue of former Zimbabwe vice-president Joshua Nkomo stands at the intersection of 8th Avenue and Joshua Nkomo street in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city.

Sculpted in bronze, the face of the one-time rebel has the hint of a smile and his right hand forever grips a short walking stick. Combined with its concrete pedestal, the monument measures around 6m in height.

It was unveiled on 22 December 2013 by former president Robert Mugabe, with whom Nkomo had a complicated history. In Zimbabwe, 22 December is commemorated as Unity Day, marking the 1987 merger of Nkomo's Zimbabwe Africa People's Union (Zapu) with Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) to end the latter's bloody (and genocidal, some insist) campaign against the former's base. The merged party – Zanu-PF – is still ruling. Nkomo was Mugabe's vice-president from 1990 until his death in 1999.

The monument's maker, Mansudae Art Studio, has thousands of artists from North Korea's top art academies, and specialises in life-sized sculptures. It is one of the biggest art centres in the world

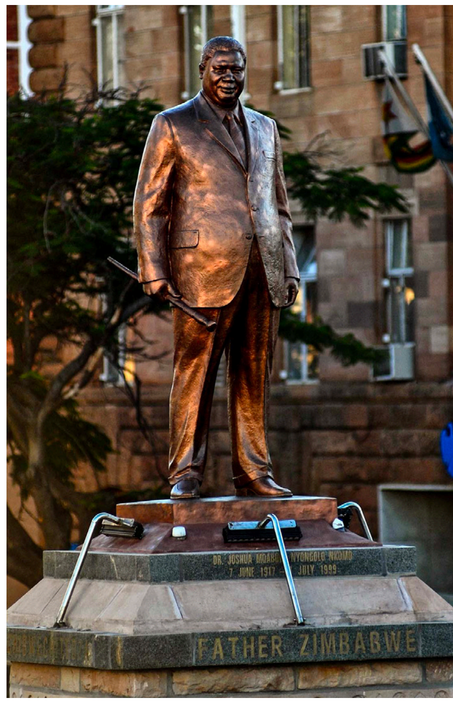


PHOTO: AFP

but its production of this particular statue was controversial for a few reasons.

Firstly, a local Ndebele artist initially got the bid to deliver the monument. But if it wasn't going to be the local artist, the people of Matabeleland would have chosen anyone but North Korean artists. In the region, home to Nkomo's people, the Ndebele, North Korea is mostly remembered for its role in training the 5th Brigade, a notorious unit of the Zimbabwean security forces.

A number of massacres in Matabeland and neighbouring Midlands province during Mugabe's anti-Zapu crackdown are attributed to the unit. The operation was codenamed "Gukurahundi" – the rain that washes away the chaff, in Shona. Targeting rebels and civilians alike, the 5th Brigade killed an estimated 20,000 people between 1982 and 1987.

Trouble between Mugabe and Nkomo started in the period immediately following the collapse of white minority rule. Their parties had worked jointly during the war against minority rule, despite deep ideological differences. Mugabe had more of the votes in the first elections in 1980 and so he was installed as prime minister.

However, Mugabe, who was from the majority Shona people, continued to be suspicious of Zapu. The party's members were largely Ndebele or Kalanga people from Matabeleland and loyal to Nkomo. The two parties' military wings failed to integrate into a single national army; and when Mugabe's administration claimed it found a cache of weapons belonging to Zapu, it sparked speculation that Nkomo was planning a coup.

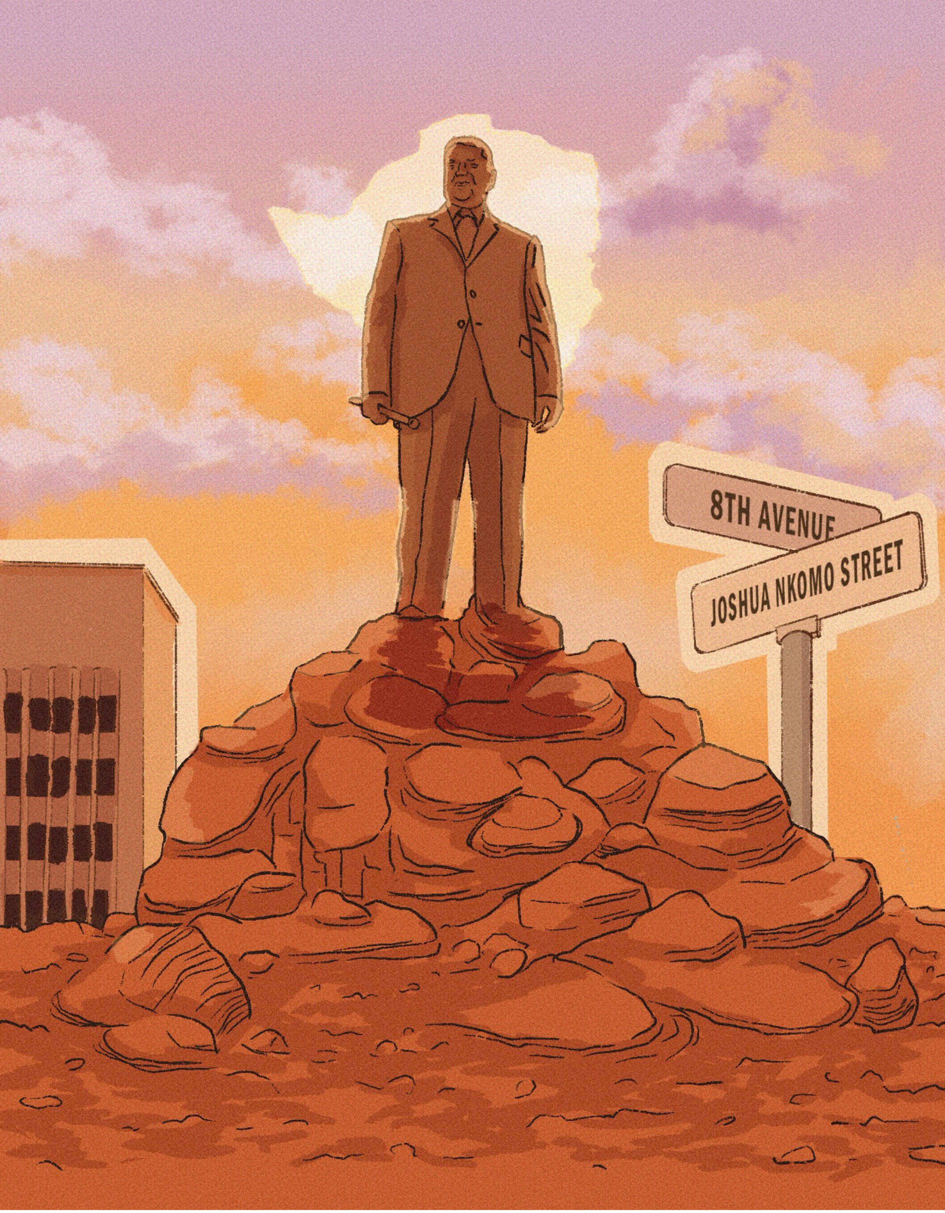
Beginning in January 1983, the 5th Brigade began a bloody crackdown in Matabeleland. People, particularly men, were rounded up, arrested, and taken to "re-education camps". In the worst cases, they were tortured and summarily executed. Thousands of women and children were forced out of their homes as the unit burned down houses and other property.

In 1987, Nkomo, who had fled the country four years earlier, was forced to return and sign the Unity Accord with Mugabe. This formed the Zanu Political Front (Zanu-PF) and ended the bloodletting.

When it was first displayed back in 2010, the statue was 3m high and its pedestal 1.5m. (Normally, pedestals are far taller than the monuments they carry). But Nkomo's family was having none of it: the buildings around the monument were too imposing for anyone to take it seriously, they complained. One critic called it a "statue without stature".

Today, Nkomo's up-sized statue in the middle of Bulawayo is hard to miss. Often, there's a small crowd around it taking photographs, particularly at low-traffic hours, or using the wifi hotspots which the city set up in its vicinity. ■

Illustration note by Zimbabwean illustrator Wynona Mutisi: *Popularly known by his moniker 'Umdala wethu', Dr Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo was also called a 'true son of the soil'. This descriptor was a slogan advocating for land reforms that sought to restore land ownership to the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. Land was believed to be a key driving influence in Nkomo's fight for liberation against colonial rule. I thought it apt to memorialise him as a literal interpretation of what he stood for* – mwana wevhu (son of the soil) – *a man rising up from the ground to usher in a new dawn in Zimbabwe.*



JOSHUA MQABUKO NKOMO

ILLUSTRATION: *SON OF THE SOIL* BY WYNONA MUTISI

DATA

Citizen engagement: Africa vs the world

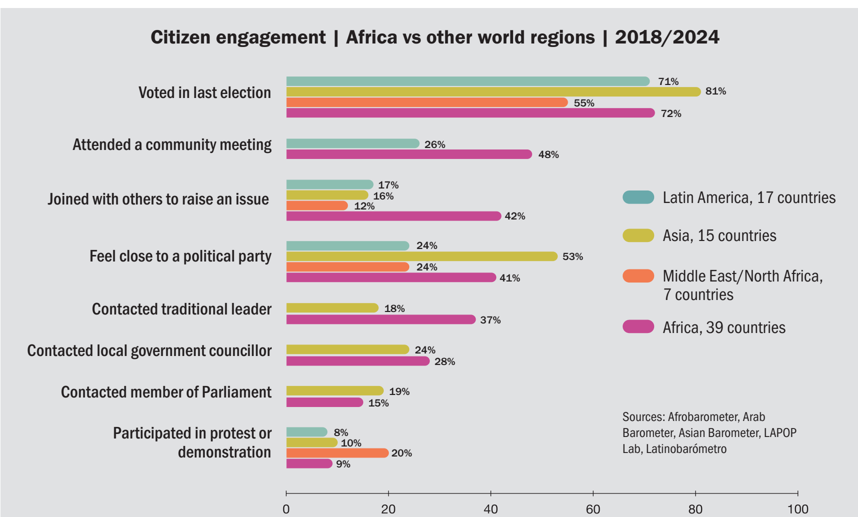
LAST WEEK we looked at how politically and civically engaged citizens of African countries are. This week we continue the theme by comparing African levels of participation with other regions of the world where we have data: Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East/North Africa (Mena).

Africans lead on a number of indicators: They are far more likely to attend a community meeting (48% vs 26% of Latin Americans), contact a traditional leader (37% vs 18% of Asians), and join with others to raise an issue (42% vs 12%-17% for the other three regions).

Compared to Asians, Africans are more likely to reach out to a local government councillor (+4 percentage points), but are less likely to contact a member of Parliament (-4).

When it comes to voting in the most recent election, Africa (72%) trails Asia (81%) but matches Latin America (71%) and beats the Mena region (55%).

But nobody touches the Mena countries on engaging in protest (20% – twice the levels in the other regions).



AFRO BAROMETER Let the people have a say

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.

REVIEW

WILFRED OKICHE

Shades of diminishing returns

One of Afrobeats' Big Three is showing signs of weakness.

PROLIFICACY is one Burna Boy's strongest suits. The Nigerian superstar – born Damini Ogulu – has put out a whopping six albums in the last seven years. But which was the last great one?

Could it be 2018's experimental *Outside*, released as he was on the verge of a transnational breakthrough? *African Giant*, which tipped him firmly into crossover status? Or his Grammy-winning *Twice as Tall* in 2020?

Burna Boy has since consolidated his global citizen status by putting out two more studio albums since then, yet we don't talk about them. Could the law of diminishing returns be setting in?

The title of Burna Boy's latest, *No Sign of Weakness*, is intriguing, hinting at the distinct assertiveness that marked his *African Giant* era. The record itself is less so, playing as a pale copy of *Twice as Tall*. The outlook of *No Sign of Weakness* is global, as is its audience – and its guests: Travis Scott, Shaboozey and Stromae.

Then there is the added curiosity of *Empty Chairs*, a left-of-field duet with Mick Jagger that sounds as incongruous as it reads.

Elements that made Burna Boy one of the more interesting artists working today are certainly present: Glorious melody (*Buy You Life*), genre-bending (*TaTaTa*), self-mythologising (*No Panic*) and brilliant sampling of classic tunes – on *Dem Dey* he even trades Fela Kuti for Lagbaja. The problem is it's all been done before, and better.

Hardly anything on the record sounds new or exciting. While *No Sign of Weakness* is considerably more refreshing than his last two records, for an act like Burna Boy – who often existed on the cutting edge – this isn't saying much.

This Burna Boy sounds stale and repetitive. Troubling that he doesn't consider these signs of weakness. ■

The Quiz

1. What is the world's longest river?
2. Évariste Ndayishimiye is which country's president?
3. What is South Africa's currency called?
4. Yoweri Museveni is which country's president?
5. Goma is a city in which country?
6. Masai Mara is contiguous with which two countries?
7. Daddy Lumba was a musician from which country?
8. Which country's women's national football team is nicknamed The Super Falcons?
9. Which country hosted both 2022 and 2024 Wafcon tournaments?
10. In which city are the ruins of the 16th century El Badi Palace (pictured) found?

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

"I'm *almost* 100% certain that the El Badi Palace is not made out of shortbread. You?"

PHOTO: ANDREW WOODLEY/ EDUCATION IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ANALYSIS

Cobalt gambit tests Kinshasa's mettle

Prices for the mineral have been on the decline; the DRC halted exports to shore them up. It seems to be working for now, but the strategy may yet backfire.

DUNCAN MONEY

THE WORLD needs cobalt in ever-greater quantities. The Democratic Republic of the Congo produces more of the metal than anywhere else in the world – 76% of the world's supply in 2024.

In February, the government in Kinshasa suddenly banned mining companies from exporting cobalt. Initially the ban was for four months but it was extended to September.

This is a kind of a test case: Can African countries take advantage of rising global appetites for critical minerals on their own terms?

Kinshasa's bet is that by controlling the supply of cobalt it can drive prices up. The decision, which caught the mining industry by surprise, came after a sustained price slide had driven down the value of cobalt. The DRC is also now the world's second-largest copper producer, but lots of places have copper. Nowhere else mines a lot of cobalt. Which should put the odds in Kinshasa's favour in this gambit.

Cobalt metal is in high demand at the moment because it is a critical component for batteries powering electric vehicles. The market for EVs is booming. If the world wants to build more, then it needs more cobalt. Another finger on the scale for the DRC.

Production of the metal is also much more in Kinshasa's control than almost any other metal. After copper, it is the country's second-biggest export.

Although sometimes lumped in as a "conflict mineral" with tungsten and tantalum, cobalt is mined well over a thousand kilometres from the restive parts of eastern Congo. It is produced in large industrial mines owned by major European and Chinese mining companies in southern DRC. Artisanal miners also produced some but were eventually discouraged by falling prices.

This is not the DRC's first time at this rodeo, however.

Back in 2022, the government prohibited all exports from the vast Tenke Fungurume Mine, blocking about 10% of the world's cobalt supply. This was during a tax dispute in which the government said that the mine owner, the Chinese company CMOC Group, owed $7.6-billion in unpaid taxes.

Groundwork: *Workers direct ore trucks in Tenke Fungurume Mine, one of the world's largest copper and cobalt mines, in southeast Democratic Republic of the Congo.*

PHOTO: EMMET LIVINGSTONE/AFP

But the export ban was lifted after CMOC agreed to pay $800-million. Still, better than nothing.

In the short term, the current export ban appears to be having the impact Kinshasa wants. Before the ban, cobalt prices had slid to a nine-year low of $21,000 a tonne. By May, the price was back up to $33,000 a tonne, and has remained at that level. Congo also reportedly initiated discussions with Indonesia, the world's second-biggest cobalt producer, about co-ordinating future export bans.

So far, so good. There are two potential problems though.

The first is that metal is not mined on its own. Cobalt deposits occur alongside copper, whose prices are up. Copper is the real big business in the DRC and good prices mean that some companies are increasing its production.

If you are mining copper, you are likely mining cobalt as well. That would mean that the companies are building up huge stockpiles of cobalt. When the export ban ends, this stockpile could flood the market and bring prices crashing down again. To stop this happening, the government might need to introduce quotas for exports when it lifts the ban.

The second problem is that if cobalt supplies run short or it becomes too expensive then people will try to use something else instead.

New batteries that don't require cobalt have already been developed. If they are widely adopted it will be a big problem for the DRC.

One person's loss is another's gain, though. What these new non-cobalt batteries need is lithium, and Zimbabwe, Africa's biggest lithium producer, is already planning an export ban of unrefined lithium in 2027. ■

DIA DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA www.democracyinafrica.org

Duncan Money is a historian with a special interest in mining. This analysis is published in partnership with Democracy in Africa

Big Pic

Wrap battle: Amateur Dambe fighters, hands roped up for striking, face off in Abuja, Nigeria. Once a highlight of harvest festivals in the Sahel, Dambe is now a league sport with big prizes and bigger crowds.

PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP

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