

The Continent



**The plunder of
Tigray: Guns,
gold and the UAE**

ILLUSTRATION: NEBIYU GEBEREMICHAEL



COVER Tigray produces most of Ethiopia's gold. The war got in the way of profiteering. But the moment it ended, disaster capitalism descended. Bands of ex-combatants are digging up the hillsides. Former generals have commandeered bigger mining sites. And for gold traders in the UAE, it's yet another lucrative source of untraced African gold. For the local population, the chaotic gold rush is yet another threat to their homes, farmlands, livelihoods and even lives. *Read more on page 16.*

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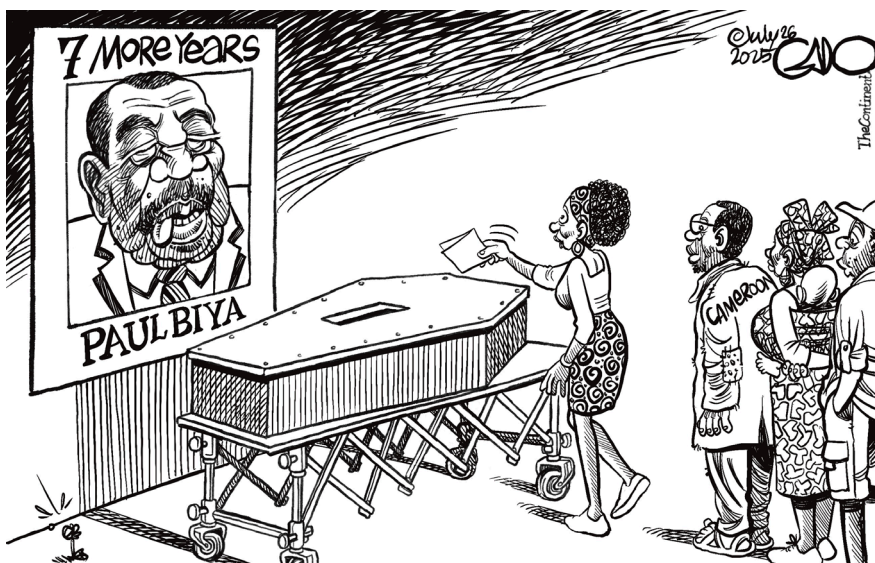
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Welcome to Season 19!

Yes, we are back to help save democracy, maintain quality headline standards, and preserve life on earth. We promise you newspapers packed with news, illustrations, photos, judicious use of sarcasm, and other shiny stuff. We'll also launch our clothing line. It's all very exciting, which clearly warrants our use of the exclamation mark.

The Museum of Memory: What we remember, what we forget, and how we do either shapes our minds and our relationship to the present. In a limited series this season, one reporter and eight artists will profile and reflect on eight African monuments and the chapters of our histories that they document.

THE WEEK IN BRIEF



CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Militia leaders jailed

Two former leaders of a Christian militia in the Central African Republic have been convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona were sentenced to 15 and 12 years respectively for their roles in attacks on Muslim civilians during the 2013-14 civil war. The violence followed a 2012 coup led by a mainly Muslim rebel coalition, sparking reprisal attacks by Christian militias.

SUDAN

Islamists eye comeback

Sudan's former ruling Islamist movement is positioning for a political return by backing extended army rule. Ahmed Haroun, chair of the National Congress Party and one of four Sudanese wanted by the International Criminal Court, told *Reuters* he sees elections as a path back for Islamists. Dominant under Omar al-Bashir, the party has shifted from hardline Islamist ideology to one of power and wealth accumulation but is still influential and sides with the Sudanese army.

NIGERIA

Senator Natasha still barred from Parliament

Nigerian senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan has been barred from accessing Parliament despite a court ruling backing her return, the *BBC* reports. Akpoti-Uduaghan had accused Senate president Godswill Akpabio of sexual harassment, only to be suspended for six months in March. She has linked the suspension to her accusation, but senate leadership said it was because of “unruly and disruptive” behaviour during a legislative session. Civil society groups have called for a transparent investigation into her claims.

BUSINESS

French far-right mogul strengthens megaphone

Canal+ has received conditional approval to buy MultiChoice in a \$2-billion deal, creating Africa’s biggest media group. South Africa’s Competition Tribunal set conditions, including local ownership, support for local content, and investment in small businesses. The deal gives Canal+ access to 46-million subscribers and greater reach in Anglophone Africa. Critics warn of editorial risks, pointing to Canal+ owner Vincent Bolloré’s past use of media to push far-right, pro-French views. The sale must be completed by 8 October 2025.



PHOTO: SIMON MAINA/AFP

Fears for tears: Kenyan rights activist Boniface Mwangi at a court appearance.

KENYA

Mwangi charged with amassing blanks

Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi was this week charged with unlawful possession of ammunition in a case stemming from his alleged role in street protests against the government. The charge sheet said Mwangi unlawfully possessed three canisters of tear gas. Authorities had initially indicated they were looking to charge him with terrorism. Mwangi is now free on bail. The rights group Amnesty International said in a statement that legal action against Mwangi appears to be “part of a broader effort to intimidate lawful dissent”.

MOROCCO

Central bank books seat on crypto bandwagon

Morocco's central bank is exploring a central bank digital currency for peer-to-peer and cross-border payments, says Governor Abdellatif Jouahri. Unlike decentralised cryptocurrencies, this one would be state-controlled, *Reuters* reports. Though crypto has been banned in Morocco since 2017, underground use persists. The bank is working with the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Egypt's central bank to assess the currency's impact and potential for cross-border transfers. A draft law on crypto assets is already being reviewed by the finance ministry.

SOUTH AFRICA

Gupta mansions may be sold for 'bargain' price

South Africa has provisionally accepted just one bid for three luxury Johannesburg mansions owned by the Gupta brothers – key figures in a corruption scandal that rocked the country. *Bloomberg* reports the properties, worth a combined \$3.6-million, were auctioned on Thursday but may sell at a "bargain price", said auctioneer Clive Lazarus. The Guptas used the homes to fête top politicians and businessmen. The sale aims to recover funds after their company filed for bankruptcy in 2018.



NIGER

How'd our space stone rock up in the USA?

Niger is investigating how a meteorite found in its Agadez region was auctioned in the United States for over \$5-million, *TRT* reports. The government suspects the sale may involve illicit trafficking. The 24.5kg Martian meteorite, discovered in 2023, is the largest rock from Mars ever found on Earth. It was sold by Sotheby's in New York – however, the identity of either the buyer or the seller was not revealed, fuelling speculation over how such an important item was removed from its nation of origin.

UNITED STATES

Prophylactics for Africa sent to be incinerated

Nearly \$10-million worth of US-funded contraceptives are being sent to France for incineration, after Washington rejected offers to deliver them to low-income countries, *Reuters* reports. The stock includes implants, pills, and IUDs, most intended for Africa. The US will spend \$167,000 to destroy them. Aid organisations offered to ship the supplies but were turned down. A source told *Reuters* the Trump administration acted to prevent the products from reaching organisations that promote abortion.

OLIGARCHY

Oppenheimer lobby group shuts its doors

One of the richest families in Africa has abruptly shut down its in-house lobby group. For two decades, the Brenthurst Foundation – ostensibly established to “strengthen Africa’s economic performance” – has forged connections between the Oppenheimer family and political figures in Africa and across the world. The foundation was particularly influential in opposition spaces across Africa, providing support to parties in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Uganda, among others.

GAZA

Journalists starving as they cover starvation

BBC News, *AFP*, *AP*, and *Reuters* have raised alarm over the worsening conditions for journalists in Gaza, saying many now face starvation. The outlets said local reporters – vital for coverage as Israel has barred foreign journalists from the territory – endure the same dire conditions as those they report on. Gaza’s health ministry says 45 people have died from malnutrition since Sunday. Aid groups, including Mercy Corps and the Norwegian Refugee Council, warn “mass starvation” is spreading



PHOTO: AFP

Edge of survival: Palestinians wait to receive a hot meal at a charity kitchen in Khan Yunis.

as food, water and medicine sits blockaded outside Gaza’s borders.

NEWS

MOZAMBIQUE

Mondlane faces terrorism rap as Chapo goes back on his word

LUIS NHACHOTE IN MAPUTO

MOZAMBICAN prosecutors confirmed this week that opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane will be tried for five criminal offences, including incitement to terrorism, over his role in last year's post-election protests in Mozambique. The development comes despite meetings between Mondlane and President Daniel Chapo, which had suggested a thawing in Mozambique's post-election wrangling.

Mondlane has accused the attorney general's office of being used as a tool for political persecution. "I'm ready for any eventuality; there is nothing greater than my god-given capacity to resist," he told *The Continent*.

When he went to the attorney general's office to receive the charge sheet on Tuesday, police closed traffic along the only road leading to the building and dozens of officers were deployed with riot gear, including a water cannon.

The escalation came a day after Mondlane returned from a trip to Europe. Amid heavy policing, supporters welcomed him at the airport and lined the streets to central Maputo. Police fired

tear gas to disperse the crowds.

The government has denied interfering in the case. "The president of the republic is not in command over the judiciary," said Inocêncio Impissa, spokesperson for the Council of Ministers.

Mozambique has faced unrest since the disputed October elections, in which Mondlane rejected the victory of Chapo, the ruling Frelimo party's candidate. Protests and strikes followed, leading to clashes in which scores of people are reported to have been killed.

Mondlane accuses Chapo of failing to honour their agreements, which included compensation for victims' families, medical access for the injured, the release of detainees, and assistance in registering Mondlane's new party. ■



PHOTO: ALFREDO ZUNIGA / AFP

Resistance: Opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane says President Chapo has reneged on agreements.

TUNISIA

Bumper harvest at risk of rot

There is nowhere to store all of the breadbasket's grain.

DAWEJA AWEDNI IN BÉJA

AFTER FOUR consecutive years of drought, Tunisia's grain harvest is on track to be the largest in recent memory. By last week, 1.1-billion kilogrammes of wheat and barley had already been harvested, with the total expected to reach 1.8-billion kilogrammes – triple last year's yield.

This could meet more than half of Tunisia's grain needs, critical for a country seeking to reduce dependence on volatile international grain markets, and grappling with a lethargic economy.

However, this agricultural triumph may yet come to naught. The same plentiful rain that delivered the abundant harvest threatens to rot the grain, as Tunisia's storage infrastructure is inadequate and dilapidated.

Shukri al-Dajbi is a farmer in Béja, northern Tunisia, where fertile soils once fed an ancient empire, leading it to be known as the "granary of Rome".

"The wheat and barley harvest is everything to us ... we watch our crops

for months with love and fear, knowing that any loss will devastate our families," said al-Dajbi, who is the head of Béja's farmers' union.

The farmer recalls that back in 2019, unexpected rain washed away 1.7-million kilogrammes of wheat stored in the open air, a catastrophe they fear could recur this year.

The country's grain silos only have a capacity of 508-million kilogrammes, less than a third of this year's expected harvest. "We need emergency measures, renting private warehouses, especially in provinces with limited facilities," said Mohamed Rajaibia of the Tunisian Farmers Union.

Beyond its economic significance, wheat holds deep political and strategic significance not only in Tunisia, but across North Africa. Access to affordable bread is a cornerstone of regime legitimacy in the region.

Leaders often maintain bread subsidies to avoid public unrest, as food insecurity has historically been a spark for protest and instability.

Yet this delicate political balance is increasingly threatened by the unpredictability of climate change, making long-term food security harder to achieve. ■

This article is published in collaboration with Egab

NIGERIA

Student harassment signals regional disdain for civic freedom

HUSSAIN WAHAB IN OYO

THE UNIVERSITY of Ibadan has suspended three student leaders who held up “Fees Must Fall” placards to protest a tuition fee hike of up to 1000%. Their two-year suspension from class and student union activities has been criticised as a dangerous attack on academic and democratic freedoms.

The students – Ayodele Aduwo, Nice Linus and Mide Gbadegesin – protested at the university’s student union inauguration ceremony last July.

University security responded by dragging them from the event, assaulting them and then handing them over to the Nigerian Army. Since then, university management has subjected the students to “bizarre disciplinary hearings”, said Amnesty International in a statement that condemned the harassment.

“We’ve been put under surveillance, intimidated, and ostracised,” Gbadegesin told *The Continent*. “But our conviction keeps us going.”

“Our universities are turning into centres of repression,” said Aduwo. “If your ideas don’t align with management, you’re treated like an outcast. But this



PHOTO: STUDENTS UNION GROUP

Fierce: Students protest against the targeting of student leaders following #FeesMustFall protests.

only deepens my commitment to fight for students’ rights.”

Requests for comment from the management of the University of Ibadan, including vice-chancellor Professor Kayode Adebawale, went unanswered.

At Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto last year, a student press outlet was shut down and union elections were cancelled. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, student journalists were harassed after reporting on poor hostel conditions.

Yinka Olaito of the Africa Foundation for Young Media Professionals described the suspension as a dangerous signal that freedom of expression was under increasing threat not just in Nigeria but across the broader West Africa region. ■

'I am a king in Congo'

Corruption allegations have long swirled around Israeli billionaire Dan Gertler, who made most of his money through mining deals in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Leaked documents obtained by the Platform for the Protection of Whistleblowers in Africa, and published by *Bloomberg*, offer the strongest evidence for this yet. In them, Gertler himself gives testimony about paying an associate of former president Joseph Kabila to distribute money in local communities – just as Gertler was winning lucrative mineral deals. In Gertler's own words, this made him “a king in Congo”. Gertler has denied any wrongdoing. ■

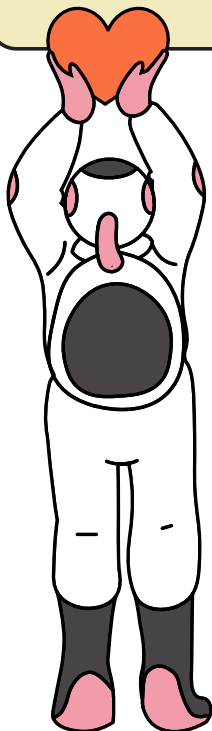


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SPORT

Pedigree meets new money in Wafcon final

FIRDOSE MOONDA

EVERY TIME Nigeria has reached the final of the women's Africa Cup of Nations – affectionately abbreviated to Wafcon – they have won. And Nigeria has reached the final nine times in 15 editions of the tournament.

On Saturday, in Rabat, the Super Falcons will appear in yet another final. Standing in the way of their tenth trophy, however, is Morocco.

The hosts might not have Nigeria's pedigree, but they have made up for this with unprecedented investment into the women's game. This includes a two-tier professional domestic league and has resulted in the country making back-to-back Wafcon finals. The team's stars – like Fatima Tagnaout, with her distinctive multicoloured braids and Nouhaila Benzina, the first woman to play with a headscarf in the international game – have become national icons.

Nigeria will have a small and passionate group of supporters in attendance, but most of the 21,000 seats at the Olympic Stadium will be filled by Moroccan fans who believe their time has come.

Both Nigeria and Morocco played at the last Women's World Cup in 2023 and both made it to the round of 16, alongside defending Wafcon champions South Africa. That was seen as a firm indication of the growth of the African game, and the competitiveness of this tournament has solidified that perception even further.

Nigeria will have a small and passionate group of supporters. But most of the 21,000 seats at the Olympic Stadium will be filled by Moroccan fans who believe their time has come.

Tanzania, the lowest-ranked contenders who sit 137th on the Fifa charts, took the lead against title-holders South Africa and held them to a 1-1 draw. The next-lowest, Democratic Republic of Congo (ranked 109), scored first against Morocco, and almost gave the home team an almighty scare as they took the scenic route to the final.

Morocco drew against a much-fancied Zambian side, who have the two



Net win: Morocco's players cheer during the shoot-out at the end of their Wafcon semi against Ghana in Rabat on Tuesday. Ghana held Morocco in a 1-1 deadlock until Morocco ultimately prevailed 4-2 on penalties.

PHOTO: ABDEL MAJID BZIOUAT / AFP

highest-paid women footballers on the continent in Barbra Banda and Racheal Kundananji (both of whom play club football in the United States) and were taken to the brink by a Ghanaian team tipped as future champions.

After extra time in the semifinal, Morocco and Ghana were locked at 1-1 before Morocco prevailed 4-2 in a penalty shoot-out. Morocco's progression will not take the shine off a Ghanaian side who are brim-full of talent. Their headline players, midfielder

Alice Kusi and goalkeeper Cynthia Konlan, are based in Saudi Arabia.

For all the sides that have not triumphed in this edition of Wafcon, another opportunity is just around the corner. The current tournament was postponed from last year due to scheduling conflicts, which means the next iteration will be in March next year. Morocco will host again. The stakes next year are even higher, as the semifinalists of the 2026 tournament will all qualify for the 2027 World Cup in Brazil. ■

KENYA

Dear Leader, and the grand gestures of religion

Promoted as symbols of national pride or piety, often announced in austere times, grand religious projects quickly become political liabilities – and monuments to mortal hubris.

CHRISTINE MUNGAI IN NAIROBI

KENYA'S PRESIDENT William Ruto offered “no apologies” earlier this month for planning to build a \$9-million megachurch on State House grounds. He said he would be using his own personal funds to finance the project.

The Daily Nation broke the story by publishing architectural designs showing a large building with stained glass windows and capacity for an estimated 8,000 people.

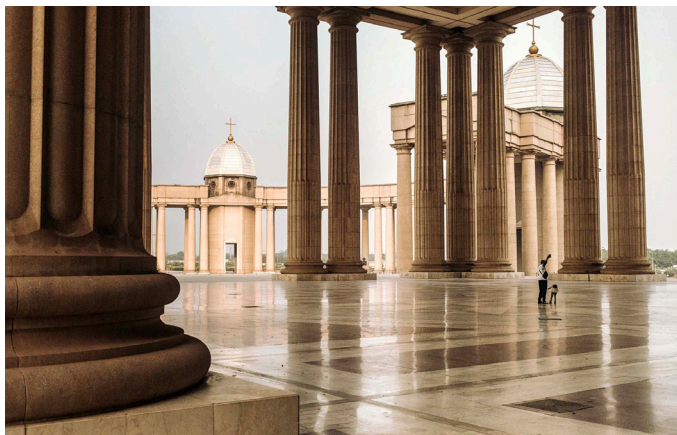
The project has caused widespread uproar and is being challenged in court. A petition filed by lawyer Levi Munyeri argues that it violates the Constitution, which holds that there will be no state religion in Kenya, by putting a grand structure of Christianity at the seat of executive power. Munyeri argues the plan was not approved by Parliament nor by the Kenyan people, and that Ruto's argument that he will use his own money to build it, “whereas bizarre, does not cure the unconstitutionality”.



Hot cross bungalow: An architect's mock-up of how President Ruto's proposed church will look.

A road too well travelled

Other African leaders have pursued grand religious projects – often with mixed results. In Ghana, former president Nana Akufo-Addo pledged to build a \$400-million cathedral in gratitude for his electoral victory in 2016. Although originally promoted as funded by donations, at least \$58-million of public funds have already been spent on the project. Eight years after construction started in 2017, all there is to show for it is a gigantic hole in



Pillars of the community:
Visitors take in columns of the Yamoussoukro Basilica, in the administrative capital of Côte d'Ivoire.

PHOTO: ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP

central Accra, as Ghana grapples with its worst economic crisis in a generation.

In Côte d'Ivoire, former president Félix Houphouët-Boigny went even further, commissioning the world's largest church in his hometown at enormous public expense. The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro, modelled as a replica of St Peter's in Rome, cost an estimated \$300-million when it was built in the 1980s – equivalent to almost \$1-billion today – and was financed largely with state resources. It is the largest Christian church in the world.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko constructed the luxurious Chapelle de la Miséricorde in Gbadolite, using state resources as part of his broader transformation of his hometown. Now, it lies in ruins, like most of the abandoned grand monuments of the Mobutu-era.

In Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika commissioned the Great Mosque of Algiers, the largest in Africa and third

largest in the world: only those in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia are larger.

It was inaugurated last year by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, and features a prayer hall for 120,000 worshippers, the world's tallest minaret (at 265m), libraries and museums. The project cost between \$900-million and \$1.5-billion and was entirely state-funded. Delays and cost overruns have found the state facing criticism for prioritising religious prestige over pressing social needs.

Morocco's King Hassan II commissioned a grand mosque and named it after himself. Built with a mix of state funds and compulsory contributions from Moroccans, including direct salary deductions, it caused widespread public discontent.

Inaugurated in 1993, the Hassan II Mosque is now a defining symbol of Casablanca. Topped with a 210m minaret, the world's second tallest, it has capacity for 105,000 worshippers. ■



PHOTO: MICHELE SPATARI/AFP

INVESTIGATION

Tigray's plundered gold is being laundered through the UAE

There's money to be made in Tigray, which produces most of Ethiopia's gold. But billions of dollars are being lost to an illicit trade run by ex-generals and smugglers bound for the Emirates.

KALEAB GIRMA AND ASHENAFI ENDALE

IN SHIRE, Tigray, just off the town's main road, there is a bustling market where informal miners sell gold directly to buyers. It gets busiest around 3pm, when both buyers and sellers hear back from their sources elsewhere what gold is going for on world markets. People can pay with cash or cheque. But the best deal is for large buyers: they can take the

gold on a delayed payment basis, paying only after smuggling it abroad.

One day in March, when journalists visited the Shire market for this report, a gram was going for 14,000 birr (around \$106 at the time) in Shire. This price was 25% higher than the government-set price, and within world market prices which hovered between \$100 and \$110 in March. Kelali, a former soldier-turned-miner, said the Shire prices were

tied to markets elsewhere, particularly Dubai.

This is curious because in Ethiopia – while individuals and entities can be licensed to participate in local gold transactions – the central bank is the only legal exporter of gold.

In the United Arab Emirates, however, travellers do not need to declare carried gold unless its value exceeds 60,000 Emirati dirhams (\$16,335). This loophole allows an informal gold trade to thrive. A dealer with a buyer's licence in Ethiopia can take the yellow metal off Shire sellers on delayed payment terms, smuggle it into the UAE and then sell it for cash in Dubai's retail gold trade.

A post-war economy

Kelali, who asked to be identified by his first name only, is one of thousands of former combatants of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) who, after the region's brutal 2020-22 war with Ethiopia's federal government, had no access to structures or resources for a return to civilian life. "The war destroyed Tigray and our old way of life. There was nothing the military leadership could offer us in return for our sacrifice or for our future," Kelali said.

Tigray produces most of Ethiopia's gold. In the absence of post-war opportunities, ex-TDF fighters were allowed to form mining cooperatives – typically bands of 25 people – and allocated plots of the region's gold-rich land. "We mine the gold using traditional manual methods. Then we sell it at local markets," said Kelali.

Refugees, internally displaced persons and local youth joined in.

According to a 2024 report by local law firm Khermed, there are more than 100,000 artisanal gold miners in Tigray.

Kelali said that Tigrayan generals operate much larger sites.

Before the war, the federal government had issued more than 90 mining licences in Tigray. Two years ago, the Tigray administration asked the mines ministry to revoke 27 of them, including those for gold, saying that the companies had failed to start operations. By this time, Tigrayan generals and their ex-TDF combatants had already taken control of many of the sites.

The generals gave the less-rich lands to low-level soldiers, but kept the larger gold deposits for themselves, said Tedros Kahsay, an ex-TDF combatant. Kahsay now works as head of security for an international NGO which has clearance to enter some of the bigger sites.

Journalists who tried to visit major gold sites in Rahwa, Hitsats, Meli, and Mato Bula for this report were denied permission. The sites are heavily militarised. Guards use reflective signals and warning shots to scare off approachers, restricting outsider access to international NGOs delivering humanitarian aid supplies.

"Our company holds mining licences for the Da Tambuk and Mato Bula sites. However, we have been unable to access them for the past several years. While the federal government is supportive, the regional administration has not cooperated," said Teketsel Tsige of East

Africa Minerals, a Canadian company which hoped for around \$70-million in profit from its licences in Tigray.

Teketsel said the sites are currently occupied and operated by illegal miners. “Many of them are former TDF combatants, whom the regional authorities have organised and allowed to mine on our licensed properties. Both artisanal and mechanised illegal mining are taking place.”

That has become the order of the day. “There are numerous illegal groups currently in control of mining sites across Tigray. These actors operate without any form of licensing, yet they dominate the sites through armed force, particularly targeting gold extraction,” said Fisaha

Miresa, a director of the Tigray Mining Bureau. “This situation is widely known. They have heavy machinery, including excavators, and operate the gold mining sites around the clock.”

Multiple sources interviewed for this story said that once legal access to the mining areas was denied, formerly licensed miners pivoted to informal arrangements, collaborating with military generals, ex-combatants and local landowners to maintain a stake.

The extent of illegal mining has surpassed the regional government’s capacity to contain, Fisaha said.

Getachew Reda, who was Tigray administrator until April, said last year that the amount of gold smuggled is



Heading out: Tigray Defence Forces fighters prepare for deployment.

PHOTO: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP

three to four times what the region legally sells to the central bank.

Tigray sold 12,210kg to the central bank in the first 10 months of 2024/25. Based on Getachew's estimates – which align with assessments by industry insiders – around 36,600kg of gold, worth \$2.5-billion at official central bank export prices, may have been smuggled. Ethiopia's official gold exports fetched \$2-billion in that period. Tigray's entire annual regional budget is \$100-million.

Habibi, come to Dubai

What is happening now in Tigray looks a lot like the gold economy of Sudan, notably in Darfur and Kordofan. Sudanese people took to artisanal gold mining in large numbers in the 2010s during the economic crisis triggered by the breakaway of South Sudan, where most oil reserves were located.

The UAE emerged as a top export destination for this gold, and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group came to control Darfur and Kordofan. The civil war, in which the UAE is accused of funding the group, is driven in part by the fight to control those gold flows.

The informality of the UAE's gold sector allows violent or illicit actors to continue to profit from gold mining. A recent report by SwissAid found that, between 2012 and 2022, 2,569 tonnes of African gold (worth about \$115-billion) was imported into the UAE without being declared for export.

Ghana lost up to \$11-billion in undeclared gold exports, largely produced by informal miners and

exported to the UAE, the report found.

Illegal gold mining has also ravaged mountainsides in Tigray, and miners are polluting rivers with mercury and other metals. They are also causing further displacement.

Tsion is a 37-year-old mother from Hitsats in Asgede Woreda, Tigray who was forced off her ancestral land in March 2024. An excavator appeared at her doorstep one day, accompanied by a group of foreigners escorted by armed TDF members.

"They told me they needed the land for mining. I refused and they imprisoned me," she said. She was released a week later to find her farmland dug up and destroyed.

Clashes have broken out after local residents resisted attempts to seize land, or when disputes over profit-sharing erupted. In a particularly deadly clash that occurred in August 2024 in Rahwa village, witnesses say that more than 20 people were killed. The violence reportedly erupted after local labourers demanded a greater share of the gold proceeds from their foreign employers.

In Sudan, the civil war that broke out in 2023 – funded in part by the proceeds of the illicit gold trade – has resulted in the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

And in Ghana, informal mining – called *galamsey* – has destroyed about 4,726 hectares of land, the *BBC* has reported. ■

Reporting for this story was supported by a grant from Transparency International, and is being co-published with 100Reporters

OBITUARY

Muhammadu Buhari

1942 - 2025

SAMUEL BANJOKO IN LAGOS

NIGERIA OFFERS its very best to a very tiny percentage of its people. Muhammadu Buhari was an example of that privileged minority.

Born on 17 December 1942, Buhari witnessed Nigeria's every turn. He was 18 in 1960 when it became an independent nation and 21 when it became a republic. At 24 he was a commander in the army when Nigeria suffered its first military coup and went into civil war.

In 1975, when Buhari was 33, Nigeria adopted regional governance, which saw him become one of the earliest state governors. At 34 he became a federal commissioner for petroleum and natural resources and went on to be the first chairman of the state oil company.

At 41 he led a coup, installing himself as president. In his 50s, he chaired the Petroleum Trust Fund. At 73, after three failed attempts, he was elected president of Nigeria in 2015. He died in retirement at 82 in a nice London hospital.

For all they are given, Nigeria's lucky minority gives little back, most Nigerians would say. In that too, Buhari is a good example. The most frequent result of the chances he was given to serve Nigerians was devastation and retrogression.

The millions of Nigerians who came

of age during his most recent presidency will forever live with the traumatic memory of its most defining event: the night of 20 October 2020.

For another president, the 2020 #ENDSARS protests could have been an easy and quick way to secure popularity among a predominantly young population. The demand was simple: stop the brutality of one notorious security unit that had long overreached its mandate. Nigerians hardly ever ask much of their government.

Governments before Buhari had set a template for delivering crumbs: a committee would be set up to deliver a report that would be ignored, or a suspension or dissolution of something or someone that would invariably be reversed when things calmed down.

Not Buhari. He was the patriot who had a long military career fighting in the civil war to keep Nigeria united. The sensible hero who defended the country from external aggression when he defied orders and took the Chadian incursion of 1983 back to N'Djamena's doorstep.

To embrace that past of an illustrious military career, many voters were perhaps too young and urbane to care for the real details of war. The Biafran War and its starvation of millions



ended 40 years ago and was recorded in newspapers this generation is too young to have read.

Months into Buhari's second presidency, the 2015 Zaria massacre of 1,000 civilians happened – but it was to Shiites far away from the young urban population whose main experience of brutality was the SARS police unit.

Then in #ENDSARS, his response went from zero to 100 in a matter of hours – from threats to gunning down those who gathered on the Lagos road in front of the Lekki toll gate. A night that broke the spirit of a generation.

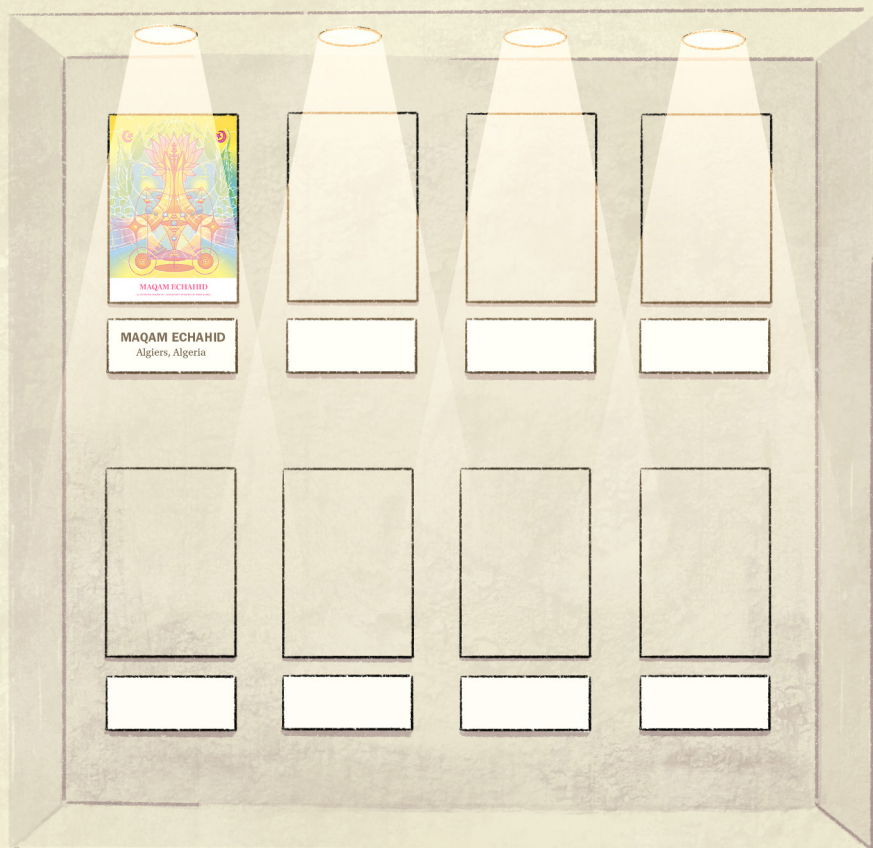
Despite being called a “reformed democrat” (as opposed to the unabashed military dictator of 1983–85), Buhari never really let go of his anti-Igbo bigotry. A year into his democratic presidency, he launched Operation

Python Dance in the South East, where secessionist ambition still bubbles up. To his mind, this was to “treat them in a language they understand,” a reference to the anti-Igbo violence of the Biafran War. Twitter deleted the Buhari post with that reference, leading him to ban the platform in Nigeria for two years.

Those who are inclined to be generous to Buhari will say his administration invested in infrastructure, revamping railways, building the Second Niger bridge and signing the \$2-billion Siemens power deal to upgrade the country's electricity service.

That being said, government debt also rose 291%; much of the rail network is severely underutilised and the national electric grid has collapsed 105 times in the past 10 years.

But let us not speak ill of the dead. ■



LIMITED SERIES

The Museum of Memory

HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

CURATED BY SHOLA LAWAL
ART DIRECTION BY WYNONA MUTISI



PHOTO: DUKAS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Maqam Echahid

ALGIERS, ALGERIA

LOCATED IN the Al Madania neighbourhood on the eastern edge of Algiers, Maqam Echahid – the Martyrs’ Memorial – towers over the city, overlooking the bay.

Three massive, concrete palm fronds converge 92m into the sky, cradling an “eternal” flame between them. Each leaf, guarded at the tip by a soldier, symbolises a different pillar of Algerian life: culture, agriculture, industry.

The monument was unveiled in 1982 to mark the 20th anniversary of Algeria’s independence from France. It was designed by Bachir Yellès, an icon of contemporary Algerian art. Yellès collaborated with other artists

– including Polish sculptor Marian Konieczny, who designed monuments for victims of Nazi Germany.

The history commemorated by Maqam Echahid is recent and brutal.

After conquering the Ottoman-ruled Arab nation of Al Jazā’ir in the 1830s, France annexed the region – absorbing it into France rather than governing it as a colony. Some 1.6-million French settlers – called *pie-d-noirs* or “black feet” – moved in. Algerian locals moved the other way, to France, mostly for menial work.

The white settlers quickly became the dominant class. Arabs were treated as lowly subjects and could only acquire

French citizenship if they renounced Islam. For the proud, mostly Muslim population, giving up that identity was a non-starter. Many felt deep resentment towards France and settlers. Racial tensions spurred calls for independence.

On 1 November 1954, rebel fighters or *maquisards* of the liberation front independence movement attacked military locations in Algiers.

Ahmed Ben Bella, a former soldier who fought for France, was one of the rebel leaders. France imported elite soldiers from the metropole to suppress the rebels and recruited thousands of locals, called *Harkis*, to “rat hunt” rebels in Arab neighbourhoods.

In France, a deadly parallel war broke out between rival rebel factions who had built cells there. In Parisian slums, each group bombed the other’s hangouts in cafés and dingy hotels. Some 3,500 to 5,000 people were killed in France, according to varying records.

The fighting in Algeria was brutal. Military targets were fair game for the liberation front, but so were civilian settlers. In one account, rebels attacked the city of Phillipville, present-day Skikda, killing any Europeans on sight, including women and children. French soldiers retaliated, rounding up and executing suspected rebels without trial.

The crackdowns were so brutal that even French people began to denounce their government. Not long after, a coup toppled the wartime government and led to anti-war president Charles de Gaulle taking power.

Algeria was declared independent on 3 July 1962, with Bella becoming the first president. By then, between 500,000 and a million soldiers and civilians had been killed. Most settlers fled to France, as did Algerian Jews and the *Harkis*, who were seen as traitors. The liberation front still dominates today. Its green, white and red flag became the national colours.

Franco-Algerian relations are still tense, and that shows in how Algerians remember their martyrs.

Visitors to Maqam Echahid have the option of also visiting the National Moudjahid Museum beneath it, as well as its open plaza, which regularly hosts concerts, events, and exhibitions. Nearby, the Bois des Arcades forest offers shaded relaxation spots and wonderful views.

Locals, however, often visit the monument to beg Allah for mercy in the afterlife and read verses of the Qur’an to aid their passage, writes researcher Miloud Boukhenoune in a 2021 paper, adding that some even weep, as they relive the shocking cruelties of the war. ■

Illustration note by Algerian illustrator Amine Benali: *Maqam Echahid is not only a monument, it's a sovereign interface. A sacred technology built into the skin of the land, silently syncing body, avatar and symbiote into one conscious signal. Through it, I learn to see my past, my now, and my next as one continuum. To be Algerian is to remember while building. To imagine while grounding. To heal while designing. I stand here not just to witness history, but to co-author the next code.*



MAQAM ECHAHID

ILLUSTRATION: MAQAM OS – SOVEREIGNTY INTERFACE BY AMINE BENALI

DATA

Engaged, but not together

FROM KGOTLAS in Botswana to the Gadaa system practised by Oromos and others, Africa has a rich history of participatory democracy. But how engaged are Africans in modern politics?

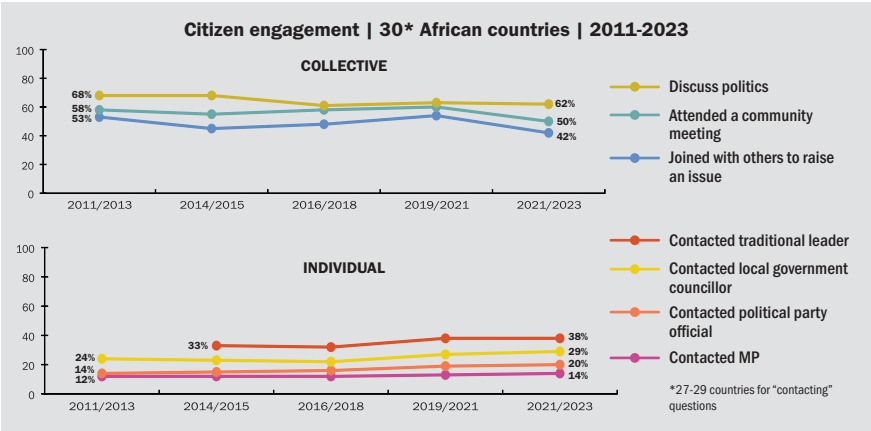
Afrobarometer has tracked changes over time in how involved citizens are in political and community affairs. What we find is intriguing: While Africans are taking less civic action, they are contacting representatives more about their concerns.

Between 2011 and 2023, the share of citizens who get together to raise an issue dropped by 11 percentage points. Attendance at community meetings is also down (-8 points), as is the share who

say they talk to family and friends about politics (-6). Possible factors behind these declines include increasing urbanisation, supplanting of in-person activities by online interactions, and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet over the same period, the shares of citizens who report reaching out to a leader have risen for political party leaders (+6), traditional leaders and local government councillors (both +5), and MPs (+2).

Afrobarometer's new *African Insights 2025* report includes more data on what citizen engagement on the continent looks like. The next two articles in this column will delve further into it. ■





REVIEW

JACQUELINE NYATHI



To live, to die and to tell

Should we protect the
world from our pain, and
our pain from the world,
or share it far and wide?

IN TRANSLATION, the idiomatic expressions and mannerisms of the original language can sometimes interrupt the reader's flow. But if that happens in the first pages of Tierno Monénembo's new novel, keep going.

The tale of the woman who will be known as Véronique Bangoura is enthralling. On one of her daily jaunts with her wheelchair-using husband, Véronique meets Madame Corre, who recognises the language she speaks as originating from Guinea. Madame Corre wants Véronique to tell her story — why she's in Paris and how she came to be (as Madame Corre mistakenly believes) a personal care assistant to the man in the wheelchair.

Madame Corre, you see, has her own painful history to share, and suspects Véronique does too. From this shared place of pain the women bond and come to understand one another across their seeming divide.

The Lives and Deaths of Véronique Bangoura weaves its story around the atrocities that happened in Guinea under Sékou Touré from 1956 to 1982.

In the moving retelling of of Touré's brutality through the lives (and many deaths) of Véronique and Madame Corre, Monénembo brings what would otherwise be a distant news story and past history to the present experience of the reader.

Once any initial struggle with style in translation passes, the rhythm of this work begins to resonate, along with the singular voice of Véronique — an outstanding character who has survived a complicated past and escaped it through a series of unlikely events. ■

CULTURE

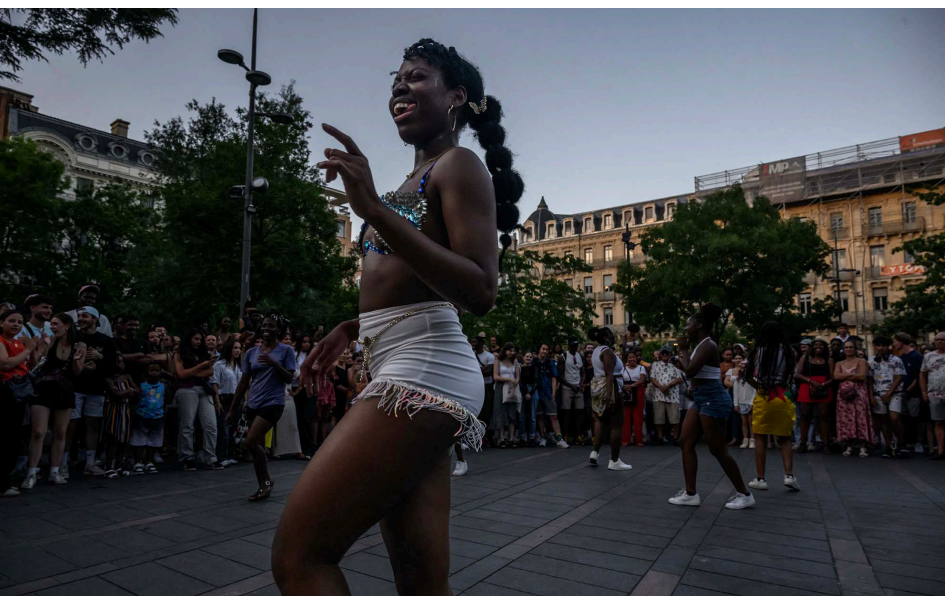


PHOTO: ED JONES/AFP

Fête de la Musique goes global

From Paris to Abuja, Dakar, Lagos and Jo'burg,
a night of African sounds and rhythms

HANNAH UGURU IN PARIS

IN 1982, the French government launched a Make Music Day to bring free and accessible music to the streets of Paris. The day is now known globally as World Music Day and celebrated on 21 June every year.

Any and everyone can perform or join the crowd. Over the years, it has grown from a French affair to one of Europe's largest music events, with partygoers

coming from as far afield as the United States and the Caribbean.

Next stop, Africa? Yes, please.

Afro-diasporic sounds that are increasingly shaping the Paris musical scene dominated this year's edition, pulling the vibe of Fête de la Musique further from a local celebration to a global crossroads. Music by Black Francophone acts like Aya Nakamura, MHD, Théodora, Dadju and Naza echoed across the country this year.



The world, our stage: The Fête de la Musique in Paris on 21 June.

PHOTOS: ROMAIN PERROCHEAU/AFP

Fête de la Musique thrives on the energy of open streets and spontaneous celebration rather than grand stages or elaborate infrastructure. In the 11th arrondissement, widely considered the epicentre of Parisian nightlife, streets were packed with revellers swaying to Ndombolo rhythms, Afro Trap beats and the grooves of West African Afrobeats.

Black cultural exchange

Naomi Akimana, a Rwandan-Brit, had seen clips of past Fêtes de la Musique and made a point to attend with a friend this year. On the metro, they met two American tourists, Diana and Natalie. By midnight, they were dancing with unguarded joy in a street circle.

"This is so cool," said Diana. "We just stumbled upon this party by accident after asking Naomi where everyone on the metro was going, and we've been

following her and her friend all night. I'm so glad we found this."

Across the French capital, alleys, courtyards and boulevards: afrobeats, amapiano, ndombolo, afro-trap, dancehall, French rap, and zouk shared space with the flags of Haiti, Cabo Verde and Côte d'Ivoire, and other mementos from all corners of the diaspora.

This Black cultural exchange was also happening further afield. In Nigeria, MI Abaga and Johnny Drille headlined a free Make Music Lagos concert which drew thousands. Abuja, Ebonyi, Dakar and Johannesburg also put on concerts to mark World Music Day.

Together, the concerts offered a glimpse into a future where major cultural moments are no longer centred in the West but are a tapestry woven in real time across the globe – dynamic, and decentralised, but connected. ■

The Quiz

- 1 What is Algeria's capital city?
- 2 In which country is the Grande Mosquée de Conakry (pictured) located?
- 3 Who was the president of Nigeria from 2015 to 2023?
- 4 In which present-day country was the precolonial Kingdom of Orungu?
- 5 What are the two official languages of Eswatini?
- 6 Which two countries are in this year's Wafcon final?
- 7 Which country's women's national football team is nicknamed the Black Queens?
- 8 *Water No Get Enemy* is a 1975 track by which artist?
- 9 What is the name of Mozambique's currency?
- 10 True or false: Kumasi is Ghana's largest city.



HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to **+27 73 805 6068** and we'll send the answers to you!

0-3

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

4-7

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

8-10

"If a man is an Afrobeats legend *and* a political activist, does that make him a jolly good feller?"

PHOTO: PASCAL GUYOT / AFP

ANALYSIS

Generative AI versus African democracies

New tech poses grave threat to our hypermediated realities

CHINASA T. OKOLO

AFRICAN democracies face an unprecedented threat as generative artificial intelligence becomes increasingly accessible. It has already been used manipulatively around recent elections. A deluge of AI-generated electoral content swept through the campaigns for the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, marking it as a turning point. Some of the 24 elections that followed across the continent in 2024 saw more of the same.

AI-generated propaganda can fundamentally undermine democratic processes which are already plagued by traditional challenges. Ahead of the Nigeria election, fake endorsements from Hollywood celebrities, former US presidents, and prominent Nigerians flooded social media. Hours before voting, AI-generated audio clips circulated, purportedly revealing candidates' plans to rig the vote.

Ahead of South Africa's 2024 election, AI-generated videos popped up, including a deepfake speech by then-

US president Joe Biden threatening sanctions on the country if the ruling ANC party won.

AI propaganda has also been linked to military coups on the continent – before, during and after they occur.

Trying to counter public speculation that Gabon's then President Ali Bongo was too unwell to govern, his team released a video purporting to show him giving his 2018 State of the Nation address. "His" expressions in the video stood out for being unnaturally stiff, raising further questions about his fitness to rule and triggering a failed coup attempt in 2019.

In Burkina Faso, AI-generated content became something of a political staple following the September 2022 coup by Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

Right after the coup, AI-generated videos showing purported "American Pan-Africanists" expressing support for the new military regime circulated widely on social media. In recent months, propaganda videos have depicted Traoré making critical speeches – in English, which he is not known to speak fluently.

The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, a project of the US Defense Department, claims that 6 in 10 disinformation campaigns targeting Africa are foreign-sponsored, primarily by Russia, China, and Gulf states, and that West Africa has borne the brunt of them in recent years.

To date, African authorities and campaigners have largely relied on two mechanisms to counter this deluge of

manipulative content: encouraging self-policing from social media platforms, and fact-checking by a handful of groups and media outlets. Both are insufficient.

Social media platforms' safeguards, designed primarily for dominant languages like English, leave gaping holes in protection for African users and others across Global Majority countries. Even for languages that are safeguarded, measures employed by social media companies – such as forwarding limits and collaboratively labelling misleading posts – are easily circumvented.

Fact-checking – by organisations like Africa Check, Dubawa in Nigeria, and PesaCheck in Kenya – is a manual, time-intensive process that cannot match the speed at which AI-generated content spreads. Large tech companies like Meta, which could do it at a large scale, are deprioritising fact-checking.

How to roll back the fakes

This crisis will require co-ordinated pan-African action across three key areas: citizen education, regulation and technical solutions.

Citizen education on AI must expand fast. Governments and civil society must develop accessible programmes to train more people, particularly those with limited digital literacy, in identifying AI-generated content.

Regulatory frameworks must get stronger and continental. While 38 of 54 African countries have enacted data protection laws, comprehensive frameworks specifically addressing generative AI remain lacking.

Given the reports that most disinformation campaigns in Africa are foreign-sponsored, African nations must work together to identify and counter these sponsors and their agendas. This includes sharing intelligence, co-ordinating responses, and developing continental standards for AI governance.

Third, investing in technical solutions. African governments must support the development of AI detection tools tailored to local languages and cultural contexts. Current AI-assisted fact-checking systems, trained primarily on Western data, often fail to understand African cultural nuances and may misidentify legitimate content as disinformation, along with the inverse.

As these technologies become more sophisticated and accessible, their threat to credible democracy will only intensify. Success against this challenge will necessitate unprecedented cooperation between governments, civil society, academia, and technology companies. They must act now or the window for proactive action will close.

The cost of inaction will be backsliding on democracy, increased political instability, and further erosion of public trust – losses which far exceed the investment needed to build robust defences against AI-generated disinformation and propaganda. ■



Chinasa T. Okolo, Ph.D. is a fellow at the Brookings Institution. This analysis is published in partnership with Democracy in Africa

Big Pic

End of the road: In the Limpopo province of South Africa, initiates cheer as they return home after completing the koma rites. The rites, which include circumcision, are a key part of the region's culture.

PHOTO: LUCAS LEDWABA/AFP



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