

The Continent



The unmaking of
Zambia's democracy

PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI/AFP



COVER: Zambia's civic space has been slowly narrowing. In May, the country's parliament pushed through a legislative blitz that saw 77 bills passed in record time. Many of those new laws expanded state power and gave state authorities more space to control public gatherings, track personal data, and constrict free speech. It all came to a head two weeks ago when the country went to the polls as President Hakainde Hichilema sought a second term. Barely 24 hours later, state security forces raided the residence of Hakainde's challenger for the top job. By the end of that raid, one opposition leader was dead and more were arrested or fled into hiding. This week, on the last day that a presidential petition challenging his victory could be filed, the courts were closed and soldiers were stationed outside to literally cordon off court buildings. These scenes are unprecedented in Zambia – and people are worried (p13).

Inside

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READING IS RESISTANCE

Forward this paper to someone who is curious.

This week's cover image depicts a supporter of Zambian president-elect Hakainde Hichilema wearing an election poster as a tie in Lusaka on 16 August 2021, after his first victory in his bid for the top job. The president was declared winner of the latest election last week, securing a second term, but things are tense. (Photo by Marco Longari/AFP)

THE WEEK IN BRIEF



PHOTO: PRÉSIDENCE DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE GUINÉE

Battle bros: Guinean President Mamadi Doumbouya, surrounded by special forces.

GUINEA

Friends like these, who needs enemies?

President Mamadi Doumbouya has dismissed 173 military personnel for “desertion”, including Michel Lamah, an officer who helped him to seize power in a 2021 coup. The shake-up comes months after Doumbouya won a disputed presidential election, *Business Insider* reports. Lamah was part of the elite unit commanded by Doumbouya during the overthrow of president Alpha Condé. In recent months, Guinea’s civic space has narrowed, with media outlets shut and protests banned. The shake-up is seen as Doumbouya’s attempt to prevent challenges to his leadership.

SOUTH AFRICA

Licence to science

South African scientists could face prison for failing to register with a state-backed regulatory body under proposed legislation before Parliament. The bill would make registration with the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions mandatory for scientists who provide professional services or advice, particularly outside academia. The council says the measure is intended to protect the public and environment, but some scientists told *Nature* they were unaware of the proposed jail term. About 21,000 scientists are currently registered with the body.

MAURITIUS

Credit where it’s due

As the continent seeks to reduce borrowing costs and challenge the dominance of Fitch, Moody’s, and S&P Global, an Africa-wide credit ratings agency is set to be launched in October. The African Peer Review Mechanism will launch the agency in Mauritius, *Reuters* reports. African states have long accused the major ratings agencies of unfairly downgrading the continent. The agencies reject claims of bias, saying they apply the same criteria globally.

NIGERIA

A grim business is booming

Kidnappers made nearly \$6-million from ransom payments between July 2025 and June 2026 in Nigeria, according to security consultancy SBM Intelligence. Over 7,800 people were abducted, a 66% jump from the previous year, with more than 1,000 killed. Confirmed ransom payments more than tripled, but SBM said many go unreported. Insurgent group Boko Haram accounted for about 90% of recorded ransom payments, with kidnappings more widespread in the northwest. The surge has disrupted



PHOTO: LIGHT ORIVE TANIMOTONYE/AFP

Stay safe: Niger State governor Mohammed Umaru Bago greets school children in Minna.

education and further eroded public trust in the government ahead of elections in January.

TANZANIA

If there's smoke you're fired

Tanzanian Vice-President Emmanuel Nchimbi has stepped down, saying President Samia Suluhu Hassan “desires change”, *The Chanzo* reports. His resignation follows growing tensions within the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party and the suspension of the newspaper *Mwanahalisi*. The paper was accused of publishing unverified claims that Nchimbi was under pressure to quit. The crackdown has renewed concerns over press freedom in Tanzania, where journalists have faced arrests and restrictions for reporting on what the government considers politically sensitive issues.

SUDAN

Unplug your murderbots

The United Nations and the Red Cross are urging countries to restrict autonomous weapons, warning rapid advances in military technology are bringing “killer robots” closer to battlefields. The organisations highlighted conflicts in which drones and other new tech are increasingly being used, such as in Sudan. They warned that existing international rules are inadequate, and called for binding regulations to protect civilians before machines can independently select and attack human targets. Negotiators are expected to discuss the issue in Geneva in November.

PALESTINE

African forces to join Gaza garrison

Military officials from Uganda and Burundi visited Israel last week to discuss joining an international force to help to “secure” Gaza under US President Donald Trump’s peace plan, *AP* reports. Uganda’s parliament approved sending about 1,200 troops. Burundi has not committed troops, but “appears interested”, officials say. Morocco, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, and Albania also pledged personnel, but commitments remain well below the planned 20,000-strong force meant to monitor the ceasefire, train Palestinian police, and help to secure aid deliveries.

KENYA

Prerequisites of power

The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission says candidates for president, governor and parliament no longer need a university degree. The announcement follows a court ruling that found the requirement unconstitutional, *The Star* reports. The commission said the degree requirement cannot be enforced ahead of the 2027 elections. It had applied to the past three election cycles, as per Kenya’s 2011 Elections Act. The court noted fewer than 4% of Kenyans held university degrees. The electoral body says it may ask Parliament to set new minimum academic requirements.



PHOTO: YOWERI MUSEVENI

Home unbound: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Anita Among at a rally.

UGANDA

Among friends now, Muhoozi?

Former parliamentary speaker Anita Among has been released from house arrest after President Yoweri Museveni ordered that she not be prosecuted for graft allegations, the *Uganda Observer* reports. Army chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba said his father had decided to “forgive” Among, despite her offices being searched and assets seized in May. The timing is hard to ignore. Kainerugaba, widely seen as a frontrunner to succeed his father, has been driving Among’s persecution. Her sudden reprieve raises new questions about who is in and who is out as Museveni’s succession gathers pace.

CAMEROON

Takes one to know one

Samuel Eto'o is backing embattled Fifa president Gianni Infantino, calling criticism of him "political manoeuvring" ahead of next year's election. The former Cameroon star says Infantino has "helped our continent" by giving African teams more opportunities. Eto'o also weathered a spot of bother while running Cameroonian football. Fifa fined him in 2023 over a betting-related conflict of interest and he has also faced allegations of financial mismanagement, which he denies.

CRIME

Nowhere to hide

Interpol has concluded an eight-month operation targeting money laundering and cyberfraud networks. The operation spanned 22 countries and has led to 58 arrests. Many were in South Africa, where authorities made 39 arrests after raiding seven Jo'burg sites where romance and investment scams were being carried out. Police seized over \$2-million and blocked 257 bank accounts. Interpol also warned of growing sextortion targeting minors, as well as the use of "crime as a service" providers to outsource misdeeds.

LIBERIA

Would 'Jewel of denial' be too on the nose?

Jewel Howard-Taylor is in prison awaiting trial on drug trafficking and other charges after a court rejected her request to remain in hospital for treatment. Howard-Taylor, who served as vice-president from 2018 to 2024, was arrested on 19 August at Roberts International Airport as she attempted to leave Liberia. According to *Africa Report*, her lawyers deny the allegations, saying they are politically motivated. Investigators say the case is linked to a transnational cocaine-trafficking network. Last month, authorities seized and destroyed



PHOTO: JEWEL HOWARD-TAYLOR

about 4.2-tonnes of cocaine, valued at roughly \$317-million.

NEWS

SOUTH AFRICA

Go fish: Shell can't scour sea floor no more

The top court has thwarted the giant's latest bid to snoop for oil and gas, in a judgment that privileges community rights.

KIRI RUPIAH

LAWYERS for Shell laughed at the belief that ancestors live in the ocean – but this argument became part of a landmark Constitutional Court judgment.

For communities along the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape their spiritual connection to the ocean was central to their opposition to a planned oil and gas exploration of the area by Shell and its partner, Impact Africa.

Human rights lawyer Pooven Moodley said the court's recognition of traditional knowledge was significant. Moodley is the director of Natural Justice, a human rights and environmental law nonprofit.

"Shell lawyers laughed at this argument," Moodley told *The Continent*. "The three judges took it really seriously."

The court did not have to accept the communities' spiritual beliefs, Moodley said. Instead, it recognised these beliefs



PHOTO: PAUL BOTES/THE CONTINENT

Coast is clear: Natural Justice executive director Pooven Moodley updates the Xolobeni community.

hold weight and must be considered when making decisions that affect them.

The legal battle began after Impact Africa's exploration right, granted in 2014 and renewed in 2017 and 2021, was challenged by Wild Coast communities and environment groups. Shell acquired a 50% interest in the project in 2021.

It planned to use seismic air guns to map the ocean floor for potential oil and gas deposits. Communities argued they had not been properly consulted and that the project threatened their livelihoods, fishing, culture, and environment. The high court ruled the exploration right unlawful in 2022. The appeal court agreed, but let Shell apply for its renewal.

The Constitutional Court has now rejected the claim, ruling that Shell could not benefit from an unlawful process and that people's rights could not be an afterthought – and setting a precedent for future oil and gas projects. ■

TANZANIA

Mega dam might bring mega problems



PHOTO: EGYPT STATE INFORMATION SERVICE

KIZITO MAKOYE IN RUFJI

LAST Saturday President Samia Suluhu Hassan inaugurated a 2,115-megawatt hydropower project to improve electricity supply in Tanzania.

The \$2.82-billion project, the country's largest power plant, aims to stimulate investment, boost industrial production, and create jobs.

However, there are environmental concerns. The reservoir lies within the wider Rufiji basin, where conservationists warn regulating the river's flow could disrupt downstream ecosystems, fisheries, and farming.

The World Wide Fund for Nature Tanzania warned that changes to the river's flow could affect the ecology of Nyerere National Park – one of the largest protected areas on the continent – as well as the livelihoods of about 200,000 people.

"The dam gives Tanzania a rare opportunity to turn reliable power into industrial growth," Samuel Wangwe, senior researcher at Tanzania's Economic and Social Research Foundation, told *The Continent*. "But the electricity must reach productive sectors and the environmental costs must be properly managed." ■

BOTSWANA

How now, Moscow cash cow?

Gaborone is desperate for closer ties with Moscow to shore up an economy under pressure. Risky, though.

KELETSO THOBEGA IN GABORONE

BOTSWANA is looking to strengthen its ties with Russia through partnerships in minerals, energy, and technology as it seeks to diversify an economy heavily dependent on diamonds and beef.

The world's second-largest diamond producer by volume is under pressure as competition from lab-grown diamonds weakens demand for natural stones. Tariffs from the United States have added to the strain, ranging from 15% for locally polished stones to as much as 50% for stones processed abroad.

Last week, President Duma Boko reiterated plans to open an embassy in Moscow, echoing a statement by International Relations Minister Phenyo Butale earlier this year. Russia has an embassy in Botswana, but Botswana has no corresponding mission in Russia – an “anomaly”, the president says.

Economist Maatla Kgasa argues that closer ties with Moscow reflect the pragmatism required of smaller countries. “Botswana relies only on beef and diamonds – it cannot afford ideological purity.”

Butale told *The Continent* Botswana was paying the price for its dependence on a single mineral commodity, with mounting fiscal pressures. He said co-operation with Russia could extend beyond minerals to climate resilience, agro-processing, and resource management.

But the closer ties with Moscow come as Botswana navigates an increasingly delicate relationship with Washington. Preferential access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act is scheduled to expire on 31 December 2026.

“Botswana relies only on beef and diamonds – it can’t afford ideological purity.”

Russia also presents risks closer to home. Botswana nationals have been recruited through deceptive job schemes, only to end up on the front lines of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

This week, Butale warned citizens to “avoid foreign military recruitments”, and urged them to verify overseas job offers with the relevant authorities. ■

Reading is resistance



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FEATURE

First, do not get harmed: Doctors in danger

Nigeria's medics are being beaten and threatened by the very people they are trying to save. They need the government to act – or they will leave.



PHOTO: SODIQ ADELAJUN / REUTERS

Brought to heal: A porter helps a patient ahead of a nurses' strike over the lack of government support.

ABDULKABEER TIJANI IN LAGOS

KHALIL-RAHMAN Abdullah had been a doctor for barely two months when a group of men stormed into his hospital brandishing machetes and bottles.

It was 2023 and Abdullah was working in Lagos, Nigeria. A man was rushed in with a wound to his scalp and cuts across his arms and feet. Abdullah and his colleagues stopped the bleeding,

stitched his wounds, administered painkillers, and admitted him to the emergency ward while they waited for orthopaedics. Then dozens of the patient's friends and relatives arrived and attacked – because they thought the doctors were doing nothing.

The incident scarred Abdullah. Now, he is wary of patients' families, seeing them as potential threats. He's not alone.

"The first thought is to assume you

are talking to an unreasonable person,” Abdullah told *The Continent*. “The first thing you want to do is protect yourself.”

Three years later, such threats have become part of working life for doctors across the country. The Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors recorded 30 assaults over the past year. Abdulmajid Yahya, one of the association’s secretaries, says the true number is likely far higher.

“Enough is enough,” Yahya said, describing an incident in which a patient slapped him mid-examination. No action was taken against the assailant.

Research suggests a larger problem. A review of workplace violence against healthcare workers in Africa found nearly nine in 10 Nigerian health workers surveyed had witnessed violence against a colleague.

And the healthcare system is already under strain. Nigeria has about 55,000 doctors serving more than 220-million people – one doctor to 4,000 patients.

A General Medical Council report shows Nigeria has lost 4,600 doctors to the United Kingdom since 2023. The phenomenon is called *japa* – a Yoruba term meaning “to flee”: young professionals leave for the UK, the United States, Canada, or the Gulf in search of safer, better-paid work.

Abdullahi says workplace safety featured prominently in a 2025 review of the drivers of medical emigration.

Psychologist Oluwayemisi Olaoluwa says repeated exposure to violence, or even the threat of it, affects healthcare workers’ mental health and clinical

judgement.

Doctors who have experienced an assault often develop chronic anxiety, disrupted sleep, and persistent hypervigilance. Severe cases can result in post-traumatic stress disorder.

The association of resident doctors is demanding legislation to criminalise assaults on health workers, compensate the victims, and require hospitals to provide security. Thus far, the state has done little to close the accountability gap: perpetrators are rarely persecuted.

One case at University College Hospital in Ibadan stands out: after a patient’s relative assaulted a doctor, he was brought before a hospital panel and published an apology in a national newspaper. A rare exception, Yahya says.

Olaoluwa argues prevention must also address public understanding. Patients need clearer information about what medical workers can and cannot control. A power outage during surgery is an infrastructure failure, not a doctor’s. Rather than resorting to violence, patients should file formal complaints or seek legal redress. ■



Careful: Nurses and other healthcare workers in Nigeria are increasingly wary of patients.

NEWS



A democracy under strain

The elections were supposed to settle Zambia's political contest for the next five years. Instead, it is facing an unprecedented post-election crisis.

PAMELA KAPEKELE IN LUSAKA

ON 13 AUGUST, Zambia held its general elections. President Hakainde Hichilema was seeking a second term, against an opposition movement led by National Reconciliation Party for Unity and Prosperity leader Brian Mundubile.

The day after the elections, government security forces raided Mundubile's residence and arrested four members of the party, claiming they were planning an insurrection.

During the raid, Mutotwe Kafwaya – an opposition leader and former

cabinet minister – was shot and killed. Authorities initially denied reports of his death before later admitting that 11 people had been arrested at Mundubile's residence.

According to Amnesty International, the authorities confirmed his death only five days later, during which time his family had been left without official information about his location and condition.

As the votes were coming in, Mundubile claimed victory. Then the electoral commission suspended counting for six hours owing to reports

of violence. Soon after, Hichilema was declared the winner, with 60% of the vote.

Hichilema and his supporters said that if the opposition wanted to challenge the result, it should go to court.

Zambian law gives parties seven days to challenge a presidential election result.

But on the last day it was possible to file papers, the judiciary's chief administrator, Nalishebo Imataa, announced in a memo that staff should not come to work because of an alleged security threat. All courts were closed, with soldiers stationed outside, and cordoned off as though they were a crime scene.

"We have never faced a situation like this before," veteran opposition politician Muhabi Lungu told *The Continent*, describing the closure of the courts as "tragic" and "horrifying".

He said the opposition alliance had prepared an election petition and invited international observers to witness the filing. But when they arrived at the high court, it was closed.

"We don't know who gave the instruction to shut down the courts," he said. "Why was the court the only institution threatened?"

The opposition lawyers then emailed the petition to the Chief Justice Dr Mumba Malila, who has publicly acknowledged receiving it. He described



Detained: Opposition presidential candidate Brian Mundubile has turned himself in after days in hiding.

their method of transmission as “highly irregular”, but stated he was forwarding the petition to the country’s highest court for consideration of whether it should be accepted as properly filed.

Under court rules, even if a petition is submitted electronically, it must be lodged at the court registry and processed by staff. But this was not possible because the courts were closed.

A day later, the chief justice released a statement saying that no petition had been received by the court and that Hichilema’s inauguration should proceed as scheduled on 1 September. The judiciary statement was signed by a deputy director of communications, not the chief justice himself.

Opposition leaders are now asking the African Union to intervene before the president’s swearing-in, arguing that constitutional and judicial mechanisms for challenging the election had been disabled.

But the problems began long before the election.

Legislative blitz

Before being elected president in 2021, Hichilema campaigned against what he described as abuses of state power under previous administrations. However, once in power he has increasingly faced international and domestic criticism for resorting to authoritarian practices, including arbitrary arrests of political rivals, journalists, and activists.

In May, Parliament pushed through a record 77 new bills, including 10 in the first week of the month alone. Many of

those laws expanded state power and targeted civil liberties. One bill allowed the government to regulate gatherings of as few as seven people; two new cyber laws were passed, significantly expanding state powers to track personal data under the guise of preventing cybersecurity threats and identity theft.

He has increasingly faced criticism for resorting to authoritarian practices, including arbitrary arrests of political rivals, journalists, and activists.

That same month, days before RightsCon – the world’s largest digital human rights and tech conference – was scheduled to start in Lusaka, Zambian authorities cancelled it.

The government blamed pressure from Chinese diplomats because of Taiwanese activists attending. However, local analysts said blaming China served as a perfect excuse to conceal broader, domestic democratic backsliding and efforts to constrict free speech before the elections.

Adding to the bizarre pre-election political climate, a Zambian magistrate’s court in September 2025 sentenced two men to two and a half years in prison for attempting to use witchcraft to “assassinate” Hichilema. Local legal experts criticised the case as a waste of time and resources.

For the opposition, the current situation is more urgent – and existential.



Deflect and swerve:
Zambian police officers on patrol in Lusaka on 15 August, following the country's general elections.

PHOTO: GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/
AFP

The governing party has won 160 constituency seats, compared to 76 for the main opposition party and 20 for independents. One constituency result remains outstanding and another will be rerun after the death of a candidate.

Meanwhile, six lawyers connected to the opposition alliance have either been arrested, detained, or gone missing. Presidential challenger Mundubile and his running mate, Makebi Zulu, were reported to be under international protection at the United Nations in Lusaka. On Thursday, Mundubile surrendered to the police after spending almost two weeks in hiding.

Political analyst Dr Neo Simutanyi argues the electoral commission must be genuinely independent, saying there must be greater transparency at polling stations and reforms allowing results to be captured electronically at the point of voting.

But recent events are creating a

climate of fear.

"We are entering a phase of fear very soon," Simutanyi warned. "People will stop talking. Some will run away from the country."

That is a striking warning for a country that has long been regarded as one of the region's more stable multiparty democracies.

So far, the AU has not intervened and did not respond to questions from *The Continent*.

The immediate test is whether the government will allow the unresolved questions surrounding the election, Kafwaya's death, the arrests, and the courts' closure to be investigated through credible institutions.

The longer-term test may be even harder: whether Zambia's institutions remain strong enough to hold a powerful government accountable.

"We need healing," Simutanyi said. "People are bitter." ■

Coffee with The Continent



INTERVIEW

Welcome to Coffee with *The Continent*, where we chat to smart people with smart ideas. You're all invited. This week, our guest is **DR GILLES YABI**, an economist, political analyst, scholar, and the founder and head of the West African Citizen Think Tank.

VENUE* A busy café, with music in the background, on a sunny day, with a view of the Atlantic and surfers – either in Dakar or Cotonou. “There are many coffee shops in Dakar where I meet friends and work from. I prefer to work there rather than at home or the office. I need to be able to see the ocean.”

DRINK Coffee, just black. “It’s part of my everyday life. I always need to have coffee to feel fresh and energetic.” Yabi thinks he may be addicted – he drinks several cups a day.

READING He buys books, but hasn’t had time to read in years. “There’s always something more urgent to do.”

OTHER MEDIA “I listen to podcasts and watch documentaries, news, and debates on YouTube, mostly while doing dishes or other tasks.” He’s busy, but taking things in this way keeps him informed

about what’s going on in the world.

MUSIC Yabi has several hours-long playlists of different genres, including salsa, Naija music, ndombolo, rumba, music from Cabo Verde, Haitian kompa, and more. He loves to dance!

MONUMENT** For Yabi, the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar captures the tension between symbolism and practical need. He doesn’t particularly like it and understands the criticism of its cost, particularly in a country with more urgent priorities. The money, he says, might have built libraries or internet-access points across Senegal. Yet he also acknowledges that the monument has become a public landmark, tourist attraction, and venue for cultural life. Yabi also thinks the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg is well worth visiting. “All Africans should have the opportunity to go there.”

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

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

Know better, do better

DR GILLES YABI was born in Benin and received his tertiary education in France. “It’s still the case that many people from Francophone countries whose parents were educated to university level aspire to study abroad – especially in France,” he says. “You have this idea that to have a good education, you must travel.”

Yabi came to economics almost by accident. He was unsure of the career he wanted to pursue, and was interested in everything from science to literature. He eventually chose the field after discussing it with his parents.

Later, development and international economics gave him a way to study Africa through its economic structures. But academic economics soon began to feel too narrow.

While completing his PhD, Yabi joined *Jeune Afrique* in Paris, where he learnt to write and think differently while covering politics, conflict, and wider African affairs. It was there that he discovered the International Crisis Group’s reports.

He was impressed by their depth and applied to work there after finishing his PhD. Yabi moved to Dakar in 2004, starting as a junior analyst at the International Crisis Group, before rising to senior analyst, and then West Africa project director.

His desire to understand the continent led him to found the West African Citizen Think Tank (Wathi) in 2014. The organisation aims to help “break down



PHOTO: WATHI

the walls that West Africans have built within their own societies”, and to work “concretely, patiently, and resolutely” towards collective progress for the region and the continent.

The name Wathi is a variation of “waati” in Bambara, meaning time. It’s a fitting name for an organisation focused on thinking and acting together to change both the present and the future.

Yabi’s idea for Wathi grew from wanting to do something useful for Benin. His work at the International Crisis Group taught him that African countries are shaped by the same complex forces as all countries, including history, culture, internal politics, regional dynamics, and international influence.

Yabi sees the return of coups to West Africa as part of a longer historical failure. Many African states are still young, and their institutions were

shaped by colonial disruption and external influence, leaving them unstable, often unsuited to local needs.

But he also points to what countries have failed to build since independence: strong education systems, shared civic values, and real economic progress. Even today's military rulers, he argues, are products of these weak systems. For Yabi, the coups are not sudden events but the accumulated cost of neglected institutions, poor education, and unmet basic needs, particularly in rural areas.

Fixing this won't be easy.

"There won't be shortcuts: it's difficult to change such dynamics in just a few years," he says. "We had a democratisation process in West Africa in the 1990s. We had big national conferences, like in Benin in 1990, that opened up democratisation processes."

"People appreciated this increase in freedom, but at some point they realised this wasn't translating into an improvement in the quality of their lives, or in the economy," he notes. "That's what we're observing now. Some people are embracing military regimes and coups because they feel democratic governments did not deliver for them."

Yabi says demographics play a role.

"Many people – the majority in the region – never experienced the era of autocracy," he says. "They're not aware that we've already had military rulers and nationalist leaders, that we've already heard speeches like those of [Burkina Faso junta leader] Ibrahim Traoré."

For him, this is another failure of

education: schools have not passed on enough historical and political knowledge. External actors pursue their own interests, he notes, but African countries also need pragmatism, geopolitical literacy, and a clear understanding of power if they are to negotiate better outcomes.

Wathi's work extends beyond written analysis. Its weekly podcast, *Les Voix(es) de Wathi*, began as a collaboration with Radio France Internationale and remains part of its efforts to make knowledge more accessible.

"We've already had military rulers and nationalist leaders ... we've already heard their speeches."

For Yabi, this is important because disinformation is one of Africa's most urgent political challenges. Wathi's response is to create spaces in which people with real expertise can explain complex issues clearly, without turning debate into attack.

Transformation also begins with the ordinary work of making states function better. If citizens must spend days obtaining basic documents, he argues, then the problem is not only grand politics, but everyday administration.

"We want to be able to do great things for our continent, but it starts with small things – daily things. If we're not able to run small businesses and local administrations to deliver services to citizens, how can we do great things?" ■

PHOTO ESSAY

No, you're getting carried away!

GHANAIAN casket craftsmanship is well known the world over – custom-made coffins shaped like objects that depict the deceased's profession, status, or aspirations. But they have a much longer history.

In southern Ghana, figurative palanquins called *akpakai* have long

played an important role in Ga culture. These ceremonial carriers, used by chiefs and other traditional leaders, are carved in the shapes of animals, objects, or family symbols. Each design reflects the identity of a family or clan and carries spiritual meaning.

Traditionally, family members would



The king of Aykem, carried on his chair of state in 1902. Palanquins were widely used across Ghana, but figurative palanquins are used exclusively by the Ga people. PHOTO: HERITAGE IMAGES



A 1962 photograph shows the Teshie mantse seated in an eagle-shaped akpakai.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF REGULA TSCHUMI ARCHIVES

be buried under the floors of their houses. This was so that the spirit of the deceased could find their way home.

During colonial rule, this and many other traditional practices were outlawed. Instead, authorities enforced Christian practices and families were forced to bury their deceased in cemeteries.

The distinctive figurative forms of the palanquins gained popularity as coffins in the 1950s, particularly after Ghana gained independence in 1957. Skilled craftsmen such as Ataa Owuo and Seth Kane Kwei helped to develop the tradition.

The object depicted might be a family

totem, such as a lion, eagle or leopard. Or it may just be an elaborate design of something the deceased would have liked to be remembered for.

Today, some funerals are accompanied by dancers whom the family hire to entertain mourners. But some people disagree with this practice as they consider it inappropriate and too boisterous.

The caskets can take 10 days to be handcrafted, adding to the logistical challenges of the funeral.

Their craftsmanship has been recognised internationally and the coffins have featured in prominent exhibitions. ■



Artist Ataa Oko Addo and his wife posing behind a coffin in the form of a battleship in the Greater Accra region, 1957. PHOTO: COURTESY OF REGULA TSCHUMI ARCHIVE



Daniel Oble Mensah, 54, owner of the Hello Design Coffin Workshop in Accra, works on a guitar-shaped coffin commissioned for a deceased guitarist. PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP



Top: Relatives mourn next to the pen-shaped coffin of the late Ghanaian teacher Samuel Commey Tetteh during his funeral ceremony in Paanor.

Bottom: A crab-shaped casket, designed for a deceased fisherman, is pictured near the Erico Carpentry Shop in Accra. PHOTOS: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP





A mobile phone-shaped coffin, referencing the profession of the deceased – a phone shop owner – is pictured at the Erico Carpentry Shop.



Coffin makers Derrick Anang, 23, and his brother Lawrence, 26, carry a piscine coffin crafted for the funeral of a fisherman at the Kane Kwei Carpentry Workshop in Accra.

PHOTOS: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP

REPORT

ZAMBIA

Smallholders draw the short straw

Last week, *The Continent* highlighted the failures of a commercial-agriculture model pushed by Agra. In Zambia, it influenced the highest levels of agricultural policy. Now, farmers trapped in a cycle of dependency want a way out.

BARNABAS ZULU IN LUSAKA

WHEN THE Alliance for a Green Revolution (now Agra) launched in Zambia in 2007, it focused on improving localised crop breeding and distributing seeds and fertiliser to farmers. In 2014, the country introduced a national agriculture-investment plan to augment that support.

That scheme ended in 2018 after criticism owing to a push for chemical fertilisers and commercial hybrid seeds, which worsened smallholder dependence and created a maize monoculture farming model.

In the two decades Agra has operated in Zambia, yields for maize remain disappointing. That's according to a new report by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa.

This is despite the country increasing fertiliser use to 71kg per hectare – the highest of any of the Agra countries. But maize yields declined 7% from 2018 to 2024 and increased only 14% since 2006.

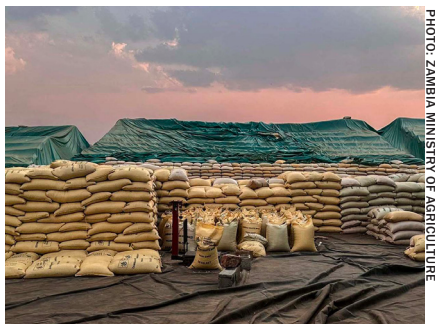


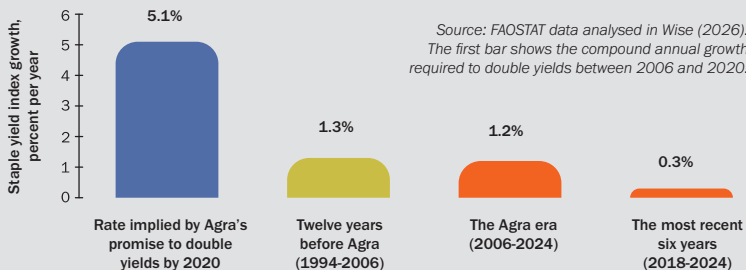
PHOTO: ZAMBIA MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE

Corn wall: Maize is stacked, following harvesting and transport to storage facilities in Zambia.

"All those incentives failed to generate a productivity boom, but they certainly fed extensification," states a working paper by Timothy Wise of Tufts University. The land under maize cultivation expanded 82% since 2006.

In 2021, Zambia launched a new agricultural plan focused on small-scale farmers, livestock, and nutrition. By this time, Agra consultants were helping to shape national policy, favouring private supply chains and commercial markets.

In 13 Agra countries, staple yields grew more slowly under the programme than before it



Yield autonomy

During a 2024 workshop, local groups raised questions about the focus on private companies and narrow crop supply chains over broader agricultural needs, the report states.

According to the Zambia Alliance for Agroecology and Biodiversity, a ministry of agriculture representative could not answer these questions. Instead, an Agra consultant responded, implying the organisation wrote the framework that became Zambia's national policy.

Part of these policies' impact has been a rise of up to 75% of the agricultural budget deployed to Agra-related programmes. Yet, smallholders complain these programmes favour big players, while they remain in a cycle of dependency.

In nearly two decades in Zambia, Agra points to some progress. According to its 2024 annual report, the organisation reached more than a million farmers, supported more than 5,000 agro-dealers, and formalised its status in Zambia by signing a host country agreement.

For farmers, this has not necessarily improved things. Rural poverty was 76.7% in 2015, rising to 78.8% by 2022. Four in ten small-scale agricultural households were living in poverty in 2022.

Chisamba farmer Benny Hamaundu said higher fertiliser costs and payment delays mean it is tough to make progress.

"Even when we supply maize, we are not paid on time by the Food Reserve Agency," he said. "By the time the money comes, it goes towards loans to restart the cycle."

The Continent contacted Agra with detailed questions. The organisation said it was preparing a comprehensive report to provide a "fuller assessment" of its work, lessons of the past 20 years, and future direction, and did not want to provide "partial answers" before completing it.

Elsewhere, Agra has rejected the idea its work is simply input-driven, saying its current strategy emphasises sustainable farming, resilience, markets, policy, and country-led transformation. ■

REPORT

SENEGAL

Breaking the rules of the green revolution

While other countries struggled with a decline in staple yields, Senegal halved hunger – using less fertiliser – by backing local crops and giving farmers more power.

BORSO TALL IN DAKAR

THIRTEEN African countries targeted by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (known as Agra) have experienced stagnant staple yields and increased hunger over the past two decades, even as they adopted the organisation's policies.

Senegal took a different path. Its staple-yield index rose 73%, while using half as much fertiliser.

That contrast is highlighted in a new report by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa that examines Agra's impact. It credits Senegal's performance to supporting the crops farmers already grew, investing beyond fertiliser-intensive staples, and giving farmers a voice in agricultural policy.

Groundnuts, one of Senegal's main cash crops, are central to that story. Farmers continued to rotate them with cereals such as millet and sorghum, rather than shifting wholesale towards maize monoculture.

In addition, these legumes create their

own nitrogen. These factors result in richer soils, dense in nutrients.

Senegal still heavily subsidises agriculture, which accounts for about a third of its agricultural budget. In 2020-21, roughly half of a \$100-million programme went to seeds and 40% to fertiliser. That included support for groundnuts, cowpeas, rice as well as maize. Wider policy included millet, sorghum, livestock, horticulture, fisheries, and agroecology.

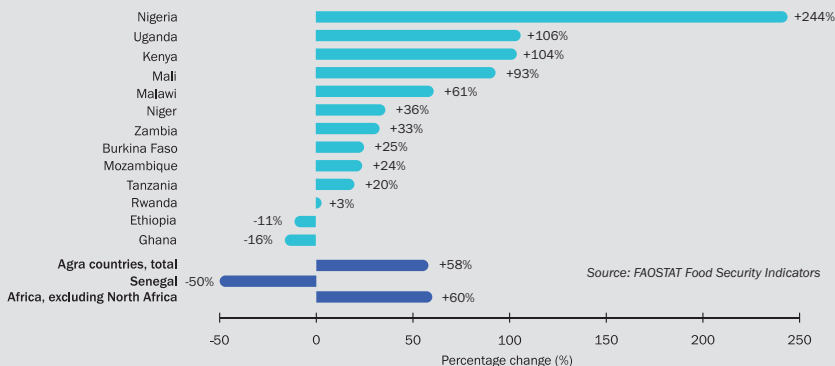
Farmers in Senegal have a formal role in shaping policy. Since 2004, agriculture has operated under a legal framework developed with rural organisations, recognising family farms as central to modernisation.

That consultative approach is sometimes described through the Wolof concept of diisoo: resolving problems through dialogue.

In June, farmers, seed producers, industrial buyers, and state officials met in Kaolack to negotiate minimum prices.

"Our dialogue with the state is frank. Our technical teams submit realistic

Percentage change in the number of undernourished people 2004-2006 to 2022-2024



proposals before any legislation is drafted,” Sidy Bâ, researcher and spokesperson for the National Council for Rural Consultation and Co-operation told *The Continent*.

Selective seeding

Senegal is also trying to reduce its dependence on imported grain. A government decree requires white flour to contain 20% locally grown cereals.

Moustapha Sall, owner of Boulangerie Jaune in Dakar, worked with the Senegalese Institute for Agricultural Research to develop locally adapted wheat. They tested 585 varieties, eight of which were certified – the first such wheat seeds in Senegal’s history.

But the country still faces environmental pressures.

In Ganjool, Saint-Louis, saltwater intrusion has damaged farmland and water supplies. Market-gardener Ndeye Fadiamar Fall said technical

interventions have allowed her co-operative to keep farming.

“In the past, women had to draw water manually – an impossible task with this degraded soil,” she said. “Solar boreholes and water towers have allowed our co-operative to survive.”

Senegal has not rejected the green-revolution model entirely. Its groundnut basin has long relied on commercial monocropping, hybrid seeds, subsidised fertiliser, and mechanisation. The result has been declining soil fertility, deforestation, and indebtedness. And it still imports about \$1.9-billion in food a year, according to the report.

The country’s agricultural transition remains uneven.

But its experience suggests Agra’s model isn’t the only way. Senegal’s gains came from adapting agricultural policy to what farmers already grow, diversifying production, and giving farmers a greater say in policy. ■

DATA

Nigeria’s kidnapping crisis

IN 2014, Boko Haram shocked the world when it abducted 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria. Since then, the country’s kidnapping crisis has only escalated. At least 21,600 people were reported kidnapped between 2019 and 2024. Many more abductions go unreported.

A decade after the Chibok incident, how do Nigerians view the kidnapping epidemic?

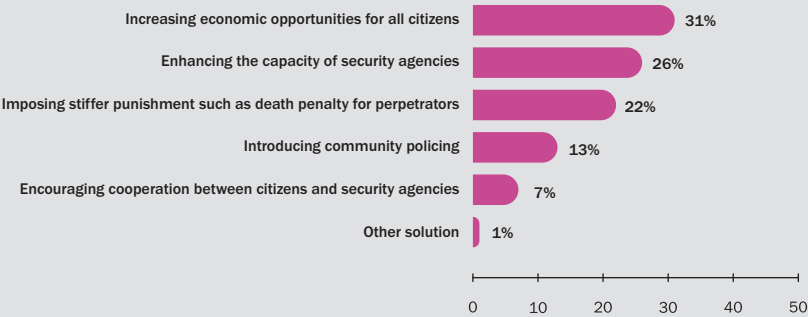
Asked which is the most important safety threat in their community, respondents are most likely to say kidnapping (26%), followed by theft and burglary (23%) and robbery (15%). More than two-thirds (69%) say safety levels are worse than five years ago.

A high proportion of Nigerians – one in three (33%) – say they know someone who was kidnapped in the last five years.

Most (89%) say the government is doing a poor job of reducing crime, and a large majority (69%) say security agencies are handling abductions badly. Only 20% would turn to the police first if they were concerned about their family’s safety. People would rather go to community or traditional leaders (38%) or neighbourhood watch groups or vigilantes (27%).

Reflecting the complexity of the kidnapping problem, respondents are split on how to solve it, as the chart depicts. ■

Most important solution to the kidnapping problem | Nigeria | 2024





FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



Pleasure principle

Teenage mischief and self-exploration make for a bold, bright and breezy feature.

IN THE mood for a pleasant surprise? Check out *Black Burns Fast*, the invigorating debut feature by Sandulela Asanda. This delightful teenage coming-of-age tale is set (mostly) in an elite girls' boarding school in South Africa.

It's an expansion of Asanda's 2022 short, *Mirror Mirror* – and made all the more unique for its focus on a heroine who is working through the realisation she might be queer.

Studious Luthando (a winning Esihle

Ndleleni) is the poster-perfect student. Her background as a Black scholarship recipient also means that she has to quietly smile through microaggressions from well-meaning educators when they trot her out as proof their elite community can be inclusive.

While Luthando presents cookie-cutter outwardly, her inside world is bursting with verve and colour. Asanda, together with cinematographer Pierre de Villiers, plumbs her heroine's imagination, delivering her findings visually in bright, beautiful jolts. These range from flights of fancy on a spaceship when things get awkward, to bells and stick hearts going off when a potential love interest enters the picture.

Said interest is Ayanda (Muadi Ilung), a privileged girl with a taste for danger who shakes up Luthando's world and sparks a reckoning within herself.

Black Burns Fast has the hallmarks of a typical young-adult genre piece but none of it feels shoehorned in. Asanda is too dynamic to deliver a reheated experience and her film centres female pleasure as her characters discover their bodies and match them with their feelings.

This breezy energy runs out of steam in the final act but with its queer, lived-in worldview, flamboyant edits, snappy one-liners ("You can take a man, but you can never take him seriously"), *Black Burns Fast* proves durable as it rejigs and expands the young-adult canon. ■

The Quiz

- 1 What is Mozambique's official language?
- 2 What is Mali's capital city?
- 3 What was Tanzania's name before it gained independence?
- 4 Which country is Ibrahim Traoré the president of?
- 5 True or false: Lake Victoria is one of the African Great Lakes.
- 6 What is the demonym for people from Burkina Faso?
- 7 In which city is Statue de Kasa-Vubu (pictured)?
- 8 Joseph Kasa-Vubu was the first president of which country?
- 9 Who is Botswana's president?
- 10 Who won Zambia's recent general election?



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

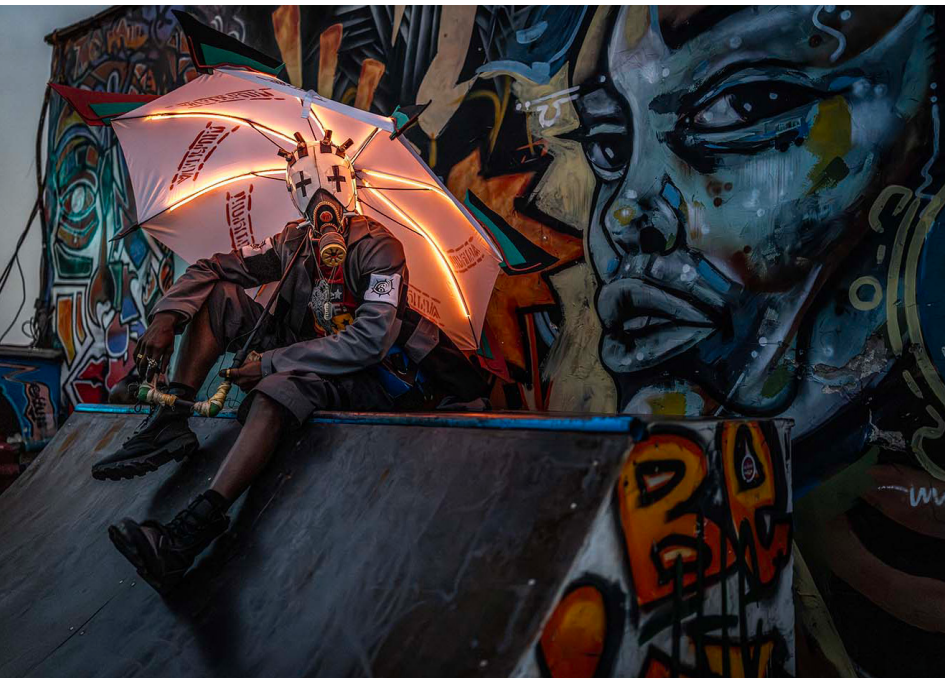
"A few more high scores like this and I'll get me a fancy statue too, right? Some day my plinth will come!"

PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI/AFP

Big Pic

Engineer: Julius Mokaya, 34, cosplaying as Enjin, a character from the manga *Gachiakuta*, ahead of the Otamatsuri convention in Nairobi earlier this month. Over 4,000 fans of anime, video games and manga attended the con this year.

PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP



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