

The Continent



ILLUSTRATION: YEMSRACH
YETNEBERK AND GADO



COVER: Togo's Faure Gnassingbé has held executive power for 21 years. Before him, his father ruled for 38, making the Gnassingbé family one of Africa's longest-serving political dynasties. Last year, constitutional changes created a new office that could allow Faure to remain in power indefinitely. The reforms sparked protests. The state's response was extraordinarily violent. But the crackdown did not end there. Several survivors give recurring accounts of torture inside military detention, alongside lasting psychological trauma and continued intimidation after their release. *The Continent's* investigation found that what has mostly been reported as a constitutional and administrative manoeuvre carried a profound human cost, borne by those who challenged power (p13).

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

The third issue of *The Atlas*, our new international newspaper – published in partnership with Coda Story – is due on Thursday 30 July. The cover story is locked in – you'll never look at the night sky in quite the same way again. *The Continent* subscribers get it automatically.

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

THE WEEK IN BRIEF

SOUTH AFRICA

Reporting SA xenophobia to ICC

Two Ghanaians have asked the International Criminal Court to investigate attacks on foreigners in South Africa, arguing the violence amounts to crimes against humanity. Anti-migrant campaigns have forced foreigners to abandon their homes and leave South Africa in fear. Their petition accuses the government of failing to prevent or punish attacks. The foreign ministry dismissed the move, saying the country already has laws to protect against discrimination, *Reuters* reports.

NIGERIA

Dirty cops try to shake down anti-graft boss

Four police officers accused of running an illegal checkpoint to extort motorists picked the worst possible driver to stop: the head of Nigeria's anti-corruption agency. Musa Aliyu, the head of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission, says the officers forced him to withdraw 53,000 naira (\$38) after threatening him with charges for a traffic offence. Instead of a payday, the officers ended up in custody and could lose their jobs, the *BBC* reports.



PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP

Get outta here: An activist protests against the US Ebola quarantine centre in Nairobi.

KENYA

Government 'ignores' Ebola court order

Rights groups accuse the Kenyan government of ignoring a court order blocking a United States-backed Ebola quarantine centre in the country. This follows reports that seven American aid workers evacuated from the Democratic Republic of Congo are being quarantined in Kenya. Humanitarian group Samaritan's Purse said its workers are staying in military tents for 21 days, *AP* reports. The group says the workers have no Ebola symptoms, and did not specify where in Kenya their workers were quarantined. But local media has reported that military tents at Laikipia Air Base are hosting them.



MAURITANIA

Over 140 migrants dead or missing after sea run

At least 143 people are dead or missing after a boat travelling from Gambia to Europe drifted at sea for more than three weeks, the United Nations refugee agency says. The vessel reached Mauritania last Saturday with 38 survivors and several bodies on board. Mauritania's coastguard said the boat had run out of fuel. Gambia is a major departure point on the Atlantic route, where tens of thousands of people attempt to reach Spain's Canary Islands. The UN Refugee Agency has described this route as one of the world's deadliest.

ANGOLA

Plotters pinched for stirring political pot

Two Russians – political consultant Igor Ratchin and translator Lev Lakshtanov – have been jailed for 11 and eight years respectively in Angola, the *BBC* reports. Authorities say the pair were part of a Russian influence network linked to Africa Politology, which emerged from the defunct mercenary Wagner Group. Prosecutors say they tried to stir anti-government protests and influence elections. Both men denied the charges, saying they were working to establish a Russian cultural centre. Two Angolans were also tried; one was acquitted and the other given a suspended sentence.



PHOTO: FILIPE AMORIM/AFP

Back for more: President Carlos Vila Nova of São Tomé and Príncipe has been re-elected.

SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Second term secured

São Tomé and Príncipe's President Carlos Vila Nova has won a second five-year term after securing more than 55% of the vote. He avoids a runoff with challenger Nito Viegas D'Abreu, who was backed by ADI, the country's largest party, *Reuters* reports. Vila Nova ran as an independent after falling out with ADI following his dismissal of Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada. That move was later ruled unconstitutional. It's a lot to keep up with, but voters are less confused – they appeared more concerned with jobs, rising living costs, and reliable electricity than political intrigue.

SUDAN

Chemical weapons accusation 'baseless'

Sudan has rejected new sanctions imposed by the United States over allegations that its military used chemical weapons, *Anadolu* reports. The Sudanese government called the claims "baseless" and demanded Washington provide evidence. The sanctions took effect on Monday, restricting US exports and limiting Sudan's access to international financial assistance, while exempting humanitarian and food aid. Khartoum says the US bypassed international verification procedures, and denies developing or using chemical weapons.

ZAMBIA

President in my pocket

Campaign group Global Witness has accused a Canadian company of secretly funding President Hakainde Hichilema's party in exchange for tax breaks worth \$771-million. The group accused First Quantum Minerals of backing the United Party for National Development and benefitting from changes to mining tax rules between 2022 and 2025. First Quantum denies the accusation, saying reforms were needed to keep Zambia competitive and attract investment. Ahead of polls next month, there is renewed scrutiny of political funding and foreign influence in Zambia's mining sector.

SOMALIA

Covid fraud-accused extradited

Somalia has handed one of its citizens to the US to face charges in a \$250-million Covid-19 fraud case, nearly four years after he was indicted. Abdikerm Abdelahi Eidleh is accused of stealing money from a programme meant to feed children during the pandemic through fake meal sites and falsified invoices, *Business Insider* reports. US prosecutors accuse him of being one of the scheme's ringleaders. More than 70 people have already pleaded guilty in what is one of the largest fraud cases in US history.

TANZANIA

Pirates seize second tanker in Gulf of Aden

A Tanzanian-flagged oil tanker has been hijacked by suspected Somali pirates after departing from Yemen. The MT *Asana* was reportedly seized by armed men and taken to waters off Somalia's Puntland region, *Gulf News* reports. This is the second hijacking off the coast of Yemen since May, when the MT *Eureka* was seized near Qana. Two other ships were boarded by pirates in the Indian Ocean in April. Security experts warn reduced naval patrols have made ships in the Gulf of Aden increasingly vulnerable to hijackings.

ETHIOPIA

Protests against 'forced' conscription

Thousands marched in Addis Ababa this week to protest reports of forced military recruitment in Tigray, *AFP* reports. Human Rights Watch accuses Tigrayan authorities of abducting men and boys – some as young as 15 – for military service, which the Tigray People's Liberation Front denies. Tensions between Tigray and Ethiopia's federal government continue to rise, raising fears of new conflict. The last war, between 2020 and 2022, killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions.



PHOTO: AMANUEL SILESHI/AFP

Up in arms: Protesters wave Ethiopian flags during a rally in Addis Ababa.

NEWS

UNITED NATIONS

Will Sall's big dream prove his own UN-doing?

In this tough job market, what's an ex-president to do?

KIRI RUPIAH

ON MONDAY, former Senegalese president Macky Sall met with Russia's foreign minister as part of Sall's campaign to succeed António Guterres as secretary-general of the United Nations next year. But in Africa, he is struggling for endorsement.

Sall believes his 12 years leading Senegal and his stint as African Union chair leave him well-placed to lead an increasingly divided world.

The ex-president met his successor, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, last Friday as part of diplomatic consultations for his UN bid. Faye, who was imprisoned during Sall's presidency and has criticised his leadership, apparently let that slide and endorsed him.

Sall left office after trying to delay the country's 2024 presidential election, a move that incited protests and threw the country into an unprecedented constitutional crisis. His administration

also faces allegations that it understated the country's debt, claims that he rejects.

Those controversies have complicated his campaign. Sall's candidacy was submitted by Burundi, which holds the African Union's rotating presidency. It was only on Tuesday that Senegal publicly endorsed his bid.

"His record, whatever one makes of it, may matter less to this contest than how he came to be nominated," Geneva-based international lawyer Unyime Eyo told *The Continent*. "The effort to win continental endorsement was pushed through a fast, opaque procedure that collapsed in March 2026 when more than 20 member states broke the silence to object. By that measure Sall is not an AU-endorsed candidate."

Faye, who was imprisoned during Sall's presidency and has criticised his leadership, apparently let that slide and endorsed him.

His chances appear slim: the role tends to rotate through regions, and this time favours a candidate from Latin America and the Caribbean. Strong contenders include former Chile president Michelle Bachelet, Costa Rica's Rebeca Grynspan, Argentina's Rafael Grossi and Ecuador's María Fernanda Espinosa. ■

GHANA

Hell and high water

YUSUF OMOTAYO

TORRENTIAL rain in Ghana killed 34 people and left about 500 displaced in the past few weeks. Experts warn that things will get worse.

The country recorded 140mm of rain in 24 hours, the highest rainfall recorded in a single day since 1995. Roads and buildings were submerged in the ensuing flood.

It's not just Ghana. In recent weeks, countries along the Gulf of Guinea have seen heavy rain and flooding, including in Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. In Nigeria's Abia State, floods have led to soil erosion and the collapse of buildings.

Scientists at World Weather Attribution warn rainfall of similar magnitude is now expected once every two to four years, as global temperatures are 1.4°C warmer than at the beginning of the industrial period.

Emmanuel Ameyaw, a project manager at the Africa Centre for Nature-Based Climate Action, told *The Continent* that developed countries must do more to cut emissions, while providing climate finance and technical support to vulnerable African countries for resilience and adaptation. "Africa should not be left to bear the escalating costs of a crisis it has contributed the least to creating," he said. ■



PHOTO: ZOOMLION

Sunk cost: Flooding in Accra, Ghana, after 140mm of rain fell over the course of a single day.

Reading is resistance



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VENICE

Gayton vs Goliath: 'Elegy' in Venice

To experience Gabrielle Goliath's work in person is its own rejoinder to the politics of prejudice that prevented it from being shown at this year's biennale.

THERESA MALLINSON IN VENICE

THIS January, Gayton McKenzie, South Africa's minister of sports, arts, and culture, unilaterally withdrew artist Gabrielle Goliath's work from representing the country at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

A furore over freedom of expression ensued. McKenzie provided a laundry list of reasons for his decision. At one stage he claimed Goliath's work was sponsored by a foreign government (not true). Later on, he wrote that it failed to "promote cohesion and nation-building".

But one fact stands out: the minister is a self-declared Zionist, despite the South African government's official pro-Palestinian stance. And this iteration of Goliath's ongoing video installation, *Elegy*, specifically engages with the genocide in Gaza.

Goliath took the minister to court in February, but lost the case on a procedural point. The artist and her

team are currently appealing the judgment, with a court date yet to be determined.

Meanwhile, a consortium of partners stepped in to ensure *Elegy* would make it to Venice, if not the official biennale.

The eight panels that comprise *Elegy*'s video installation show African women singers, all dressed in black. Each of the performers steps onto a low podium and holds a single note, B natural. When a woman steps down, she is replaced by another, sustaining the same note in a haunting loop.

The work is an embodiment of remembrance and repair – specifically addressing gender-based violence in South Africa as well as the Ovaherero and Gaza genocides in Namibia and Palestine, respectively.

That it is being shown in Chiesa di Sant'Antonin adds extra layers of resonance. At its best, a church is a sacred space, providing a quiet place for reflection; the perfect venue for *Elegy*. On another note, given the Catholic



Nevertheless: A consortium of partners stepped in to ensure *Elegy* made it to Venice. PHOTO: LUCA MENEGHEL

Church's harsh treatment of women over the centuries, as well as the Crusades from the 11th to 13th centuries, the venue itself is in dialogue with Goliath's artwork, a stark reminder that both patriarchy and so-called holy wars are the church's legacy too.

On the afternoon when *The Continent* visited the exhibition, there was a steady trickle of visitors. They came from Canada, Czechia, Italy, Portugal, and the Netherlands, among other countries. The visitors' book displayed many more nationalities, including a healthy sprinkling of South Africans, from a Pheladi from Limpopo to Genevieve from Johannesburg.

For some visitors, experiencing *Elegy* was a chance encounter, an unexpected dose of culture added to their summer holiday. But many viewers specifically

sought out the show after reading about its controversial exclusion from the biennale.

One of these was Scott Kroeker from Canada. He spent the good part of an hour in quiet contemplation, absorbing Goliath's work. On leaving the church, Kroeker began to tear up. He told *The Continent*: "Music or sound is a medium that is more engaging than just watching something. One note has its own linearity – a line of continuity – but many voices in an unbroken pattern is ... very powerful."

As the *Elegy* promotional text states: "The South African pavilion [for the biennale] was silenced. Not our voices." ■

Elegy runs in Venice until 31 July. It will show in London in October and move to Milan in January 2027

INVESTIGATION



Inside Togo's system of torture

One family has been in power in Togo for nearly six decades. Wanting more last year, the Constitution was tweaked to give Faure Gnassingbé indefinite rule. People protested. The response has been extremely violent. **Hannah Uguru** spent months tracking down victims of a military detention system where torture, humiliation, and intimidation are wielded by masked enforcers.

FAURE Gnassingbé took over Togo's presidency in 2005 when his father died in office. The African Union described it as a coup. The United Nations estimated up to 500 people were killed in protests that followed, carried out in part by soldiers dressed in civilian clothing and working with ruling party militias.

In May 2024, Parliament abolished direct presidential elections and transferred executive power from the presidency to a new office with no term limits. A year later, Gnassingbé ceased to be president and was appointed President of the Council of Ministers, allowing him to remain the country's effective leader without facing another direct vote.

Again, people protested what they called a "constitutional coup" and again, the government cracked down.

A coalition including Front Citoyen Togo Debout and Tournons

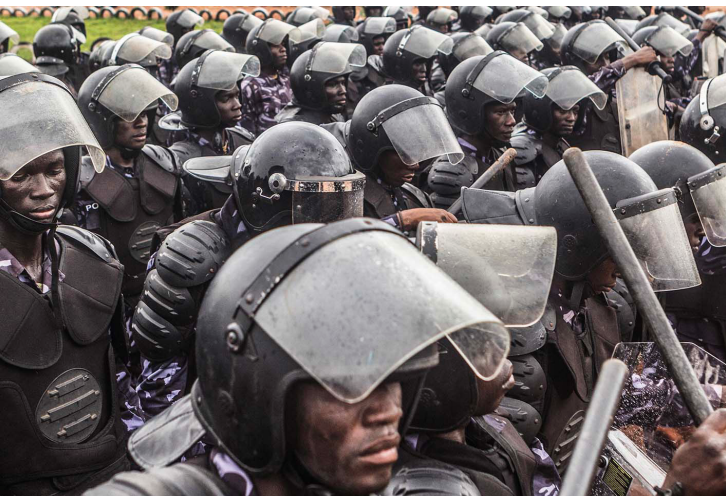
La Page Togo reported seven deaths, including two minors, and dozens of injuries.

Amnesty International documented beatings and allegations of torture in detention, while the other observers reported more than 80 arbitrary arrests.

After the violent response, the Ecowas Court of Justice looked at the legality of Gnassingbé's abolition of elections. In a January 2026 judgment, made public this June, it ruled that the changes violated the basic principles of democracy and amounted to an unconstitutional change of government.

The enforcers

For some detainees, the journey into military detention began not with uniformed officers but with les miliciens, plainclothes enforcers accused of identifying and assaulting government critics. Witnesses said



No assembly required:
Police cadets gather for crowd-dispersal training at the Davie police academy in Lomé, Togo.

PHOTO: YANICK FOLLY/AFP

the groups identified, assaulted, and, in some cases, handed protesters over to the gendarmerie for detention and interrogation.

The Continent spoke to some of the victims. Michel Tchiame, a gym coach, was among them. Arrested during demonstrations on 6 June 2025, he said gendarmes beat him in Lomé's main square before transferring him to the Djidjolé gendarmerie, a military detention facility.

There, he said, officers first doused detainees with cold water before soaking whipping cords to make them heavier. Several allegedly took turns flogging the prisoners' bare feet and buttocks while taunting them.

"I screamed and cried like a child. You have to have a strong heart to resist that."

Tchiame identified one of his alleged attackers as a soldier he had seen around Lomé for months before the protests, often out of uniform and in dark glasses.

Before the beating, Tchiame said, the man told him he would show him "the difference between a soldier and an athlete" – a remark Tchiame understood as a threat.

Amnesty International documented similar testimonies from other detainees held at Djidjolé.

One told the human rights NGO: "We were lying on the ground with six or seven officers around us. They poured water over us and hit us on the buttocks with cords. They hit the soles of our feet and asked us, 'Are you going to go out and demonstrate again?'"



Crackdown: A Souza Netime resident sits outside her home after police stormed the area looking for protesters in Lomé in 2017. PHOTO: YANICK FOLLY/AFP

Physical and psychological torture

The torture, Tchiame said, did not end with his release. "I'm wary of anyone suspicious. I'm often nervous. This morning, while doing sports, my heart was pounding. I had to stop for a moment."

Psychologist Daniel Lare*, who treated Tchiame between August and November 2025, said his symptoms were consistent with political violence: nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and "the fear of being watched". Lare said other protesters he treated after the June demonstrations presented similar symptoms.

"Togolese people are in a rare context where they are tortured, face violence, but cannot speak about their suffering because they will be imprisoned," he said. "So imagine the double suffering."

Amavi Katanga, a seamstress, described an experience that closely mirrored Tchiame's. Arrested and taken

to Djidjolé last June, she said men and women were held together in degrading conditions, with a single bucket for a toilet. Women were forced to ask male detainees to turn away before using it.

She said two gendarmes later beat her behind the building, one with a cord and another with a length of plumbing pipe. The following morning five officers handcuffed her, forced her to the ground and repeated the assault while a superior instructed them not to strike her head.

"They said it was Faure Gnassingbé who had given the number of people to arrest and how to torture them," Katanga alleged. "They made videos to send to him."

After Katanga's release, she said the threats continued on TikTok. This included messages warning that prison had "not taught her a lesson". Another said: "Continue with your nonsense... have pity on your parents at least", while yet another warned her to "be careful with this regime".

"Togolese people are in a rare context where they are tortured, face violence, but cannot speak about their suffering because they will be imprisoned."

Roi Salomon*, a Togolese software engineer and entrepreneur now living elsewhere in West Africa, said les miliciens work through information networks – gathering details on where

activists live, who they know, when they sleep. "When they want to catch you, they will search for your name," he said. "They will locate you. In the middle of the night, they will come."

And they have resources and connections, built through decades of being close to political power. Being in another country is also no guarantee of safety. Salomon said the government has issued arrest warrants for diaspora members who supported the protests online, and activists have been tracked and detained in neighbouring countries.

Documented violence

The survivors' accounts are supported by documentary evidence.

Medical records reviewed by *The Continent* show that Katanga was hospitalised after being detained again, this time at Lomé civil prison. A certificate issued by CHU Sylvanus Olympio hospital in December 2025 recorded multiple muscular contusions, head trauma following "intentional assault and injury", persistent headaches, back pain, sleep disturbances, and changes to her menstrual cycle.

These accounts are also just some of those collected by *The Continent* through interviews.

Photographs shared by both Katanga and Tchiame show injuries consistent with their descriptions of beatings. Legal documents show that the Association of Victims of Torture in Togo formally mandated lawyers to pursue complaints of torture on behalf of victims. The



Above: Police recruits march during training in Lomé in 2019.

Left: The aftermath after Senegalese Ecowas parliamentarian Guy Marius Sagna was attacked in Togo in 2024.

PHOTO (TOP): YANICK FOLLY/AFP
PHOTO (LEFT): AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

organisation says it handled 13 such cases in 2025 alone. Its director, Kao Atcholi, said Katanga and her family remain under “permanent threats”.

A year later, Katanga is still in Togo. Her children stay with relatives, and she returns home only briefly at night. “I live in hiding. I am not free. I cannot even go out during the day... It is when some people of goodwill remember me that I find something to eat.”

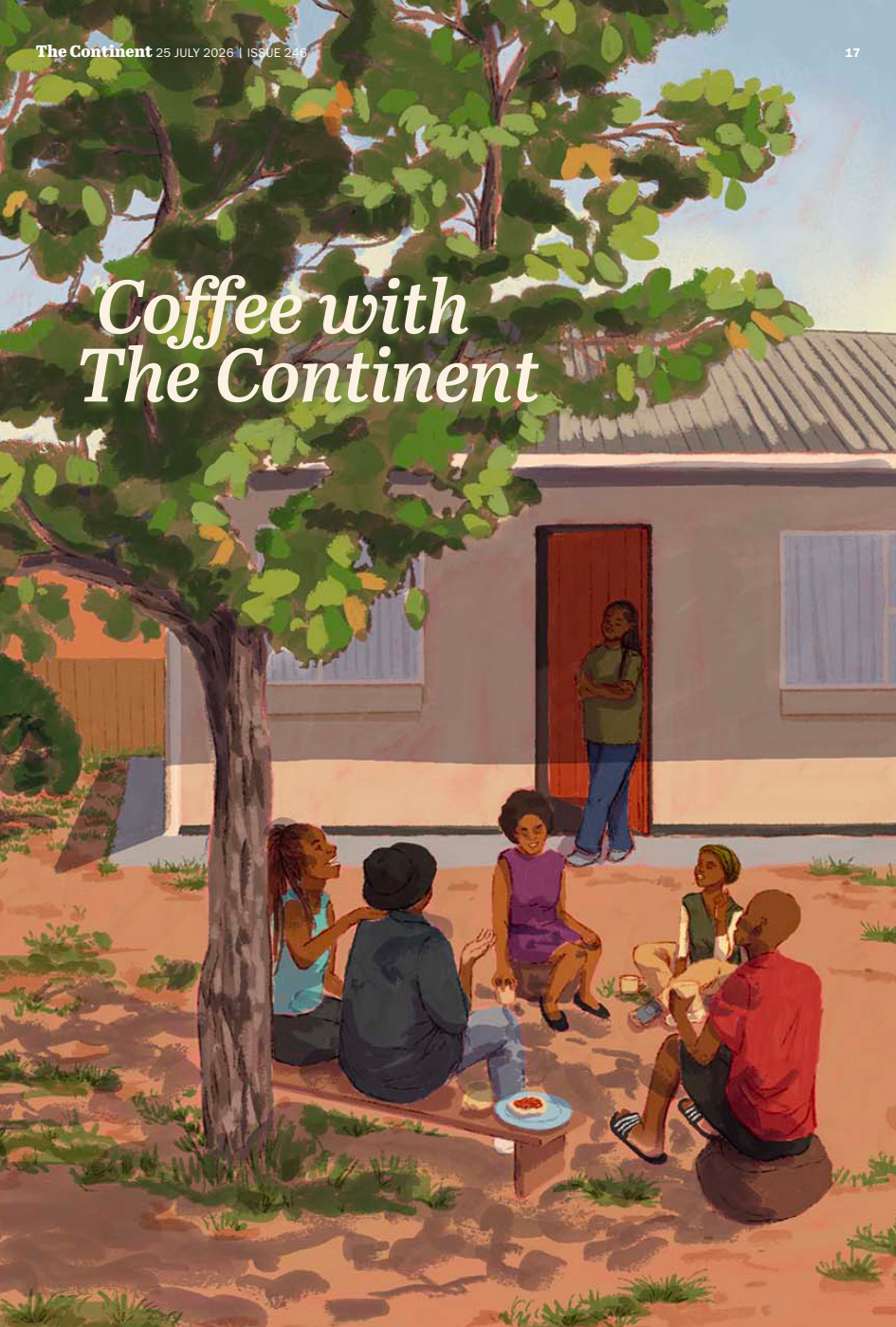
This May, Amnesty International

confirmed it was supporting Tchiame and other alleged torture victims in legal proceedings to pursue justice and redress before a Lomé court.

The Togolese ministry of security and civil protection, the ministry of justice, the Court of Appeal of Lomé, and the Ecowas Court of Justice were sent detailed questions. None replied. ■

*Names changed for fear of reprisals

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 **ZANELE MUHOLI** – the non-binary South African artist and activist whose work centres on and celebrates queer lives. They have won many awards for their work.

VENUE* Their home in P Section, Umlazi, Durban – because “charity begins at home”. In Durban’s heat, sitting in a large group under an avocado or mango tree, on a wooden bench or on the ground, speaking isiZulu, perhaps also eating samp and beans, or peanut butter and jam sandwiches.

DRINK Umbubudlo (sugared water). Coffee is a drink for elders, the elite, or the sophisticated. Umqombothi as an alternative drink.

MUSIC AND FILM They’ve just binged on *The Polygamist* on Netflix, and *Michael*, the 2026 biopic on Michael Jackson. They listen to gospel a lot because they find it grounding, and it connects them to home, the memory of their mother, who was religious. They also love Brenda Fassie, amabhinca, and mbaqanga; artists like Feza, Sjava, and Big Zulu.

MONUMENT** “A human being is a monument too,” and so is the art they make when they have a spiritual experience. They had the experience in Mayotte, where they produced their “best images” 10 years ago.



PHOTO: LARINA FERNANDES/TATE

*We interviewed Muholi online. Their 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.

From the township to the world

MUHOLI has spent decades insisting that Black queer lives be seen as people with histories, beauty, grief, and power. They call themselves a visual activist working in the art world, a position shaped by political purpose and the enduring presence of their late mother.

That commitment has carried a cost. In 2012, thieves stole an archive containing documentation Muholi had collected of funerals of Black lesbians who had been murdered for their sexuality.

Across projects like *Faces and Phases*, *Brave Beauties* and *Transfigures*, Muholi has created an evolving record of lesbian, transgender and non-binary lives in South Africa. Other works confront violence directly: *Isibonelo* documents hate crimes, while *Only Half the Picture* centres survivors of rape and assault.

Muholi's activism extends beyond galleries. They founded the media collective Inkanyiso to expand queer visibility and helped establish the Forum for the Empowerment of Women as a safer space for Black lesbians.

Born and raised in Umlazi, Durban, they finished their masters in fine arts at Toronto Metropolitan University. Their work was exhibited at the Tate Modern in London, collected at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and they recently won the 2026 Hasselblad Award – the world's largest photography prize.

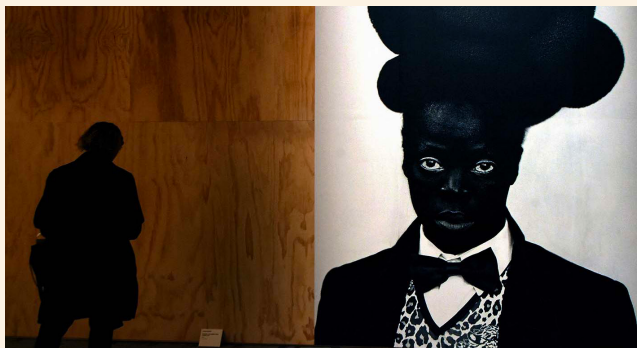
Despite international acclaim Muholi

remains grounded. "I'm still a township person," they say. Even the money from the accolades is channelled into sending young people to study photography, making films, and supporting the structures that need it most.

"I'm always reminded about where I come from and how I was raised, how impossible it was for me to be in any space like this, anywhere ... I've had to work extra hard, but also senza ngenkani (we do it by force), to penetrate these impossible spaces. And also when you're there, you still remember that you're just a simple person, like, you're nothing to these people."

Why do this work – photography, video, installation, sculpture, beadwork, crochet? "It's about healing ... tapping in spaces that are not, or were not, meant to be for Black people. I'm producing to ensure the existence of people like me, because not many survived to reach this far. Most of what I do isn't funded by anyone, so I have to work a hundred times more to become better, and make sure that whoever gets to that space where my work is feels my presence."

Muholi also works in honour of their mother, who was denied access to many spaces under apartheid. "It's about what I'm capable of doing and the impact I have on those who are looking at that particular something that I produced. For me to heal. For my mother, wherever



Awake: A visitor views Phaphama at Cassilhaus, North Carolina, 2016, a silver gelatin print photograph – and self-portrait – by South African artist Zanele Muholi, at the Venice Biennale in 2019.

PHOTO: TIZIANA FABI/AFP

she's at, to see and feel that I have done something, and I'm not wasting time and spaces that I have access to."

"We've been bruised as Black people. We've been bruised as female bodies. We've been bruised and displaced and discounted as Black, queer, and trans human beings. We live, or have lived, in spaces where you need permission for someone to say that you are worthy, you know? I don't need to sing anybody's song to say I'm worthy, and I'm here now, and I need to be heard, I need to be recognised, I deserve to be respected."

Muholi's work also speaks to communities and governments about gender-based and sexual violence. Through the visual medium, Muholi says, "the evidence is in your face. It cannot be ignored."

On their activism: "Activism is social work. Activism hurts, and breaks, and kills," they say. "Most of us, we're born activists because of the backgrounds from which we come," from the displacement to racism, to the phobias attached to queer beings and trans lives.

Muholi also sees sport as a platform for social change, particularly given the exclusion of queer and trans people from South African football. They support their sister's football programme for grandmothers in Cape Town. "I'm ageing, and I see myself there," Muholi says. Watching them play offers "hope" and the possibility of a future that is "healthy" and "sane".

The surge in xenophobia in South Africa has them deeply concerned. Their father was a Malawian migrant. "My father would have been forced to leave, and my mom would have been forced to raise eight children on her own with the money she earned as a domestic worker."

Muholi also fears particularly for queer migrants caught up in the violence. "You were already displaced from where you came, then you found a home – or not even a home, just a space to breathe and to be relieved – in South Africa, where you have this thing called the Constitution. Now you are forced to leave... and then you go back to the country of your birth, where you will face persecution." ■

FEATURE

Throwing shade

Freetown is one of Africa's most climate-exposed capitals. The city's chief heat officer – Africa's first – is betting on trees, shade and smarter urban design.



Tree's company: A Mayemie woman with seedlings ready for the #FreetowntheTreetown initiative.

PHOTO: YOUTHS ACTION FOR RELENTLESS DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

TINA S. MEHNPAINE IN FREETOWN

BUILT on a narrow, mountainous peninsula, Sierra Leone's capital makes it uniquely vulnerable to climate change. The city has little room to expand, and as its population has grown, its highland forests have given way to homes built on steep hillsides and low-lying coastal land. The city has lost around half a million trees, leaving it increasingly exposed to floods, landslides, coastal erosion, and rising temperatures.

The consequences have already proved deadly. In 2017, heavy rains

triggered mudslides that killed more than 1,000 people and displaced thousands more. Today, climate change is compounding those risks.

In response, Freetown took an unusual step. In 2021, it appointed Eugenia Kargbo as its first chief heat officer, the first in Africa, with the responsibility of preparing the city for a hotter future.

Beyond monitoring temperatures, "the role encompasses developing, co-ordinating, building partnerships, and mobilising finance, but also implementing practical on-the-ground solutions to ensure that those

who are vulnerable can adapt to rising temperatures,” Kargbo told *The Continent*.

Extreme heat is emerging as one of Africa’s fastest-growing climate risks. The World Health Organisation warns that rising temperatures are already affecting health, food security, and livelihoods across the continent, while rapid urbanisation and limited early-warning systems leave many cities poorly prepared.

In Freetown, the poorest residents face the greatest danger. More than a third of the city’s population lives in informal settlements, many living in houses made with corrugated iron roofs that trap heat during the day. Women selling produce in open-air markets, outdoor workers, children, and the elderly are among those most exposed.

“[The] people who are contributing the least to emissions are suffering the most,” Kargbo said. “When it floods, people in the slum area and people along the coast are badly affected, and extreme heat also poses a lot of environmental and health issues. Women selling in the streets outdoors in the market are extremely disadvantaged.”

In the five years since her appointment, her response has focused on making the city cooler rather than simply responding to disasters after they occur.

The most ambitious initiative is “Freetown the Treetown”, a campaign to restore the city’s shrinking tree cover. So far, about 1.2-million trees have been planted across 18 reforestation



PHOTO: HERA/OLIVIA AGLAND

Cool under pressure: Eugenia Kargbo, heat officer.

sites, including mangrove forests along the coast, degraded hillsides, and neighbourhoods. Each tree carries a unique digital ID that allows community groups to monitor its growth and health. The initiative aims to plant four million trees by 2030.

The programme has also created jobs, nearly 80% of which are held by young people. Kerifala M. Jalloh, who survived the 2017 landslides, now works as a tree tracker. His job is to photograph newly planted trees and upload their location and condition. He is one of about 3,000 local planters, growers, and trackers involved in the project.

The work, however, is far from perfect.

Jalloh says field teams often lack basic equipment such as raincoats, boots, and gloves, while delays in providing mobile data sometimes interrupt monitoring. Kargbo acknowledged the shortages, saying they largely reflect the impact of funding cycles.

The city has installed solar lighting in its markets, built shaded structures,



PHOTO: ONEBILLIONRESILIENT.ORG

Increased overheads: Shading has been erected to cover the stalls of Freetown market.

and introduced cooling infrastructure designed to allow shoppers to browse in cooler conditions and enable traders to continue working after dark.

In 2025, Freetown also launched a national action plan on extreme heat, joining a small but growing group of African cities beginning to treat heat as a public health emergency rather than simply a weather event.

Yet the scale of the challenge remains daunting.

Nearly all of the city's adaptation projects depend on international partners, including C40 Cities, the non-profit HERA (formerly known as Climate Resilience for All), the Mayor's Migration Council and the World Bank.

As aid budgets shrink globally, Kargbo worries that financing for long-term

adaptation could become increasingly uncertain. "We cannot continue to depend on donors for funding... We need government and other financial institutions to know that investing in adaptation is not a charity," she said.

The bigger question is whether the city can adapt quickly enough. Trees planted today will take years to mature. Population growth continues to push development into forests and fragile hillsides.

In the meantime, a few public gardens provide tiny oases of freshness to Freetowners sipping tea under the shade of new trees. Kargbo is looking to advocate the construction of buildings with white roofs that will reflect heat, installing public fountains, and planting many, many more trees. ■

PHOTO ESSAY

A sacrifice for the season

PHOTOS: PATRICK MEINHARDT/AFP



Target acquired: Each year, during a divination ceremony, a high priest known as a Saltigue tells hunters which animal must be hunted for the rains to come. They then set off on the Diobaye Hunt.

ACCORDING to Serer tradition in Senegal, the hunting of an ordained animal brought on the end of a period of severe drought. The 700-year-old tradition, Miss de Diobaye (the Diobaye Hunt), continues in present times. It begins when the Saltigue – the high priest – performs a divination ceremony then tells hunters which animal must be hunted for the rains to come.

The identity of the animal is known

only to initiated men, who keep it secret.

Over time, Diobaye forest has been replaced by a vast arid area with few trees. Years of unchecked deforestation and, more recently, climate change have rendered the landscape barren. Large antelope and even rhinos that were once hunted have been replaced by foxes, birds, monkeys, and monitor lizards. Hunters once explored the forest on foot but today's proceedings feature

motorcycles and a wide assortment of pistols and rifles. The timing of the hunt has also shifted; these days, the rainy season arrives much later. The region farms mainly peanuts and millet, which are drought-resistant, giving a higher

yield in a shorter farming season.

Last week, hundreds of hunters gathered to partake in the event, which is always held on a Monday. The day after, western Senegal received the season's first major rainfall. ■



Sky prize: A man tries to shoot down a bird in the Diobaye Hunt in Fatick.



Foliage fatigues: Hunters cover themselves in leaves to ward off evil spirits.



Prey, tell: Crowds gather at Ngor Siid Ndour Arena, where the hunters will display their catches.



Toto recall: Dance is part of the ceremony that will summon the rains.



Rite of way: Onlookers gather to welcome participants back from the hunt.



Trophies: A hunter on his way show his catch to community leaders after the hunt has concluded.

SPORT

What awaits at Wafcon

LEE NXUMALO

DON'T WORRY, folks. In March, when the Confederation of African Football rescheduled the upcoming Women's Africa Cup of Nations (kick-off Sunday) at the last minute, it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that the Moroccan federation was salty about the men's final. It's just a cosmic coincidence that it happened in the same breath as the overturning of Senegal's title. We'll take the confederation's "unforeseen circumstances" reason to heart.

Speaking of Morocco, the hosts are one of the favourites to win. Like their towel-stealing brothers, they have not lifted *the* African trophy in Mohamed Ouahbi's lifetime*. But unlike them, they are big girls who can take losses on the chin and not to a courtroom. Captain Ghizlane Chebbak arrives with back-to-back Golden Boot awards, while Ibtissam Jraïdi is the kind of striker who leaves fullbacks on read. Or on a grass diet.

If anyone could get in their way, it's Nigeria, who are chasing their 11th title. But their greatest rival is not any team – it is the Nigerian Football Federation. And the only thing it hates more than progress is a clean audit. However, the squad has depth and history on their side: they've never lost a final.

But the road there is tricky. They open against Malawi and the Chawinga sisters



PHOTO: ABDEL MAJID BZOUAT/AFP

Reboot: Morocco's Ghizlane Chebbak vs Ghana's Doris Boaduwa at their Wafcon 2025 semifinal.

– the closest thing African football has to a sibling cheat code. That's before facing Zambia's Barbra Banda and Racheal Kundananji, the kind of duo that gives centre-backs nightmares. They could also get jumped by Banyana Banyana's technical prowess or Senegal's physicality in the knockout rounds.

Of course, the real winner of the Fifa World Cup was Cabo Verde's tourism office, so their women can complete the marketing campaign with their showing.

Is this yet another tournament after seven weeks of non-stop football? Yes. Are we going to watch? Also yes.

*We do not acknowledge trophies won in boardrooms. We are, after all, a civilised publication. ■

Lee Nxumalo is an award-winning journalist whose work explores the intersection between sports, politics, and culture

DATA

Access to justice? Judge for yourself

HAVE you ever had reason to sue or lay a charge against someone, but worried that the court case would be too expensive, take too long, or produce an unfair outcome? Access to justice requires that these barriers be removed. How do Africans view these issues?

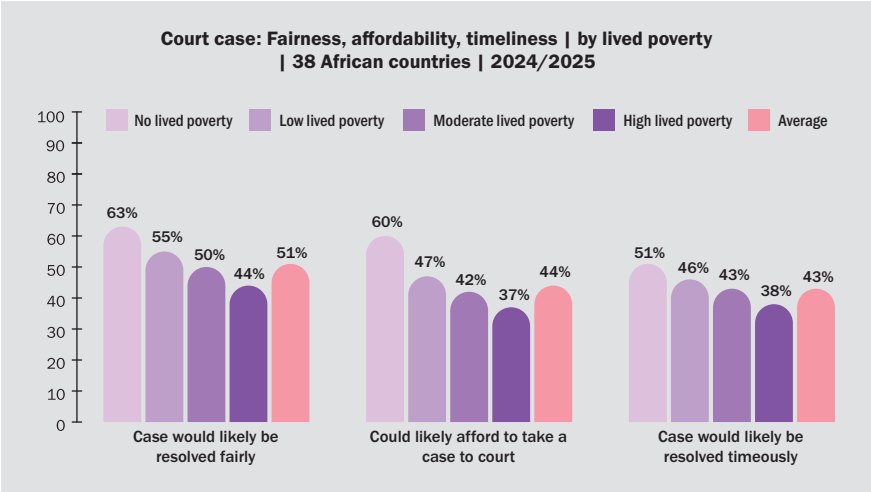
A minority (44%) consider it “fairly likely” or “very likely” that they could afford to take a case to court. About half (51%) expect it would probably be resolved fairly, but fewer (43%) are hopeful about getting a speedy ruling.

Optimism drops with material deprivation. Well-off respondents

are 23 percentage points more likely than the very poor to say they could afford a court case (60% vs. 37%). Similar gaps exist in beliefs about the fairness (+19) and timeliness (+13) of resolutions.

Expectations of justice are also unevenly spread across the continent: Only a quarter of Emaswati (25%) and Sierra Leoneans (25%) believe court cases are within their means, compared to 70% of Malagasy.

Just one in three Angolans say judgements would likely be unbiased (34%) and timely (34%). ■





FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



FILM STILL: THE POLYGAMIST

The Polygamist is must-see television

Beneath the twists and turns is emotional terrain that has struck a chord with global audiences.

WITH MORE than 23-million views in its first month of release and spending five consecutive weeks sitting in the Netflix global top 10 for non-English shows, *The Polygamist* is having a moment. What is it about the series that makes it so resonant?

Jonasi Gomora (S'dumo Mtshali), the titular protagonist (or maybe antagonist), is a charismatic and wealthy Zulu businessman married to famous influencer Joyce (Gugu Gumede).

Their seemingly picture-perfect union, however, is just a front for Jonasi's

chaotic secret life, overflowing with several torrid affairs, not to mention a second family kept away from Joyce. How does he get any work done?

The story starts off with Jonasi's funeral and is unspooled in flashbacks. Each 30-minute episode gets seriously messier than the last, tracing the successive bad decisions that led to his demise.

Adapted for the screen by Akin Omotoso from Zimbabwean author Sue Nyathi's 2012 novel of the same title, *The Polygamist* is an old-fashioned telenovela that sits firmly within South Africa's established tradition of must-see domestic television. Part of the show's appeal is in how recognisable the characters are: the self-centred manipulator, the long-suffering wife, the ambitious younger woman – archetypes that travel far beyond South Africa.

A 22-episode show is a streaming anomaly but *The Polygamist* takes full advantage of the heightened scale to approach its narrative from the multiple perspectives of Jonasi and the many women with whom he is entangled.

The show finds space to weigh in on the impossible restrictions of patriarchy and how it conditions women to become willing participants in their own subjugation. By the end, the story suggests that patriarchy no longer needs a single villain to sustain it; the cycle has become self-perpetuating. ■

The Quiz

- 1 Jean-Lucien Savi de Tové is which country's (ceremonial) president?
- 2 Which country is WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus from?
- 3 Gnassingbé Eyadéma was once president of which country?
- 4 What is the name of Liberia's national currency?
- 5 In which country is the festival Fespaco held?
- 6 Macky Sall is a former president of which country?
- 7 Bunce Island (pictured) belongs to which country?
- 8 Who are the current Wafcon champions?
- 9 Which country has won the most Wafcon championships?
- 10 Which anti-apartheid hero is celebrated with his own day on 18 July?



HOW DID I DO?

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

0-3

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

4-7

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

8-10

"I believe the collective noun for people who turn islands into slavery hubs is 'cunch'. As in 'that cunch of Bunce'."

Big Pic

Splash dash: Comoran boys jump into the Indian Ocean from Kalaweni harbour, the former dhow port in Moroni. Behind them stands the Grand Mosque du Vendredi, also known as the Badjanani or Old Friday Mosque, in the city's historic Medina quarter.

PHOTO: SHAINESS DAUD/AFR



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