

The Continent



The Chinese takeover Malawi never saw coming



COVER We assume that superpowers will play their geostrategic game of controlling global mineral wealth by compromising our leaders with a loan here, a grant there and a threat here. Few consider the far subtler, yet more opaque, pathways made possible by modern capitalism and secrecy jurisdictions. When a mining licence is awarded to a company registered in a place that purposefully asks few questions, ownership of that licence can quietly change hands. Through a series of transactions, it can end up fully controlled by a superpower, without ever raising any flags from the original licence issuer. That's exactly what happened with a crucial mining licence granted by the Malawian government in 2017 (p19).

Inside

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Welcome to a new season!

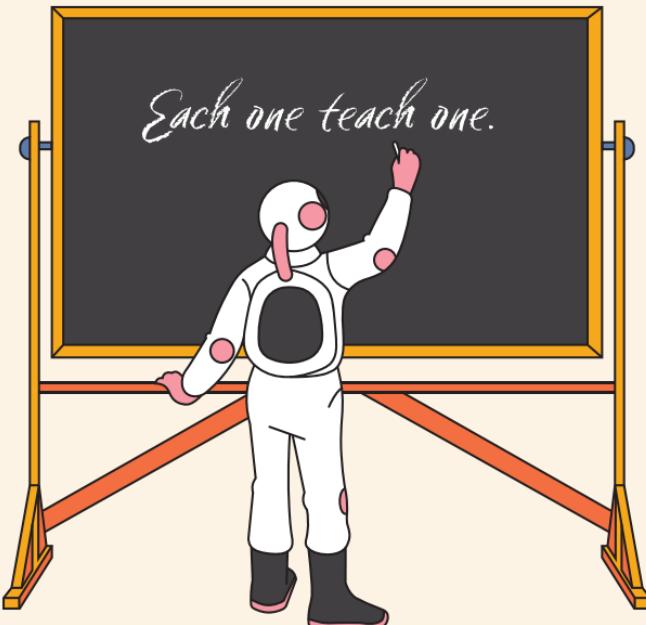
If you are reading this, you survived the highs and lows of last weekend's Afcon finals. Congratulations and welcome back. We look forward to serving you 40 issues of Africa's best loved journalism this year, spiced with humour and splendid visuals. Bring a friend or two to this community (p3). They too deserve nice things. You have so many nice things to say about us! (p4).

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Get the latest edition of *The Continent*, plus every back issue (all 224 of them) by visiting thecontinent.org. To subscribe (for free!), save *The Continent's* number to your phone (+27 73 805 6068) and send us a message on [WhatsApp/Signal/Telegram](https://wa.me/278056068). Or email us: read@thecontinent.org

COMMUNITY

Let's keep growing this revolution



SIPHO KINGS, PUBLISHER

"EACH ONE reach one. Each one teach one." That's why you share *The Continent*, one of you said.

It is a sentiment that is repeated throughout our latest Big Annual Survey™. As best we know, the roots of this quote lie in people fighting back against their enslavement in the United States. Political prisoners on Robben Island in apartheid South Africa used it too.

Sharing quality information has always been a revolutionary act.

And we need a revolution. The internet is failing to democratise information or help us to nurture new communities. The algorithms could be tweaked to do that (on Tuesday my wife and I spent a good half hour crying with laughter, thanks to the humour of humanity on Instagram).

But it is more profitable to share hate and drive division. And AI is just entrenching the existing power dynamics.

These are not entities that exist in the public interest. They don't care about us. And in some cases they are being actively weaponised to drive certain worldviews (*gestures towards X*).

The Continent is one solution to this moment and this power imbalance.

What comes across time and time again in this latest survey, and in the four before it, is your appreciation of this. It comes up in the constant ask for us to "make more noise" about the newspaper so it can get to more people. It comes up when you connect us to funders, or use your own roles in philanthropic organisations to champion us. And it really comes up in

how you share *The Continent*.

This is a newspaper that has 33,000 subscribers in 160 countries, with a skeletal website and no money spent on advertising. We got here because you shared journalism. Nearly two-thirds of the 1,500 people who filled in the Big Annual Survey™ got their first edition from another human.

That's a powerful network.

One reader is the admin of five different Africa WhatsApp groups, and they share *The Continent* to those each week. Another works at a Canadian correctional facility, where they print out the newspaper for African men incarcerated there.



"Friends have asked me to share. When I don't, they ask where their Saturday morning newspaper is. Apparently I'm now their delivery girl???"



"We're a bunch of elderly gents who engage with socioeconomic issues. We love a good intellectual bout."

ILLUSTRATIONS: YEMSRACH YETNEBERK

"Your publication is a way to help them keep in touch with their homes." Another reader added capslock to simply say: **IT IS IMPORTANT TO SHARE CREDIBLE INFORMATION.**

If you're new, welcome: it's great to have you here. Over the past 13 months, 13,000 new subscribers signed up for their weekly, African newspaper. The world is a better place when people are informed. It's a better place when we reach out, with empathy, and help to teach each other.

So we'll keep creating the kind of thoughtful, nuanced, caring, and truthful

journalism that helps us all approach our world with more knowledge.

We'll publish 40 editions of *The Continent* for you this year. They'll be awesome. And we'll keep trying out new things to centre Africa and African journalism in this wild moment.

You are a critical part of this revolution. Our goal is to get to 40,000 subscribers this season at the end of March. That's 7,000 new humans. Think of two friends, colleagues, family members and even people who you disagree with, then send them this edition.

Let's keep growing this revolution. ■

How do you describe *The Continent* to others?

Results from our 2025 Big Annual Survey™*

“Short and pithy; incisive, elegant and cool journalism.”

“Easily digestible news media.”

“Independent African journalism that consistently centres political power, state behaviour, and lived governance realities.”

“Authentic.”

“A very cool African paper on WhatsApp.”

“WELL PUT TOGETHER.”

“Africa in a nutshell.”

“Pan-African. Informative.”

“The stories are unique. The photography is stunning.”

“Great content. Great format.”

“It’s important to have a pan-African, anti-imperial analysis of what is happening.”

“A library of knowledge.”

“Amazing covers, great comic artists and equally legit journalists. You speak truth to power. You’re not elitist. You stood with Palestine.”

“My favourite pan-African news source. The newspaper that’s written by Africans for Africans and gives you a real sense of Africans’ perspectives on what’s happening in Africa and beyond.”

“FUBU – For us, By us.”

“The new kid on the block.”

“How can you say you’re African when you don’t know *The Continent*?.”

“21st-century newspaper.”

“The best outlet for news on Africa.”

“The most fun you’ll have on a Saturday morning.”

“*The Continent* is the most nuanced, reliable, and comprehensive media outlet from where to receive news about Africa.”

“Different, not always comfortable.”

“Premium African newspaper.”

Reading is resistance.



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THE WEEK IN BRIEF



PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/ AFP

Arrested: Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, putschist and ex-president of Burkina Faso.

BURKINA FASO

Coup vs coup: Plot ‘mastermind’ extradited

Togo has arrested and extradited Burkina Faso's former leader Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. This came after authorities in Ouagadougou accused Damiba of plotting to assassinate Burkina Faso's current military ruler, Ibrahim Traoré. The former has denied similar accusations in the past. Damiba, who seized power in a 2022 coup, was overthrown eight months later by Traoré. The latest intrigue could distract the military administration – and civilian watchers – from a clearer and more persistent rival: armed groups causing widespread insecurity across the country's north.

NIGERIA

Police flip-flop on latest church abduction

Nigerian police have admitted that worshippers were kidnapped in Kurmin Wali, a community in Kaduna State, after initially denying any abduction. In a statement on Tuesday, police spokesperson Benjamin Hundeyin said the attack “did occur”, after public criticism of the earlier denial. *Premium Times* reported that armed attackers invaded three churches on Sunday 18 January, abducting over 160 people. It is the latest incident in Nigeria's kidnapping crisis, in which armed groups regularly commit mass abduction of civilians for ransom across the country's north.

MALAWI

Petrol pitch passes gas bill down to the people

Petrol prices in Malawi have risen by 40%, the second official hike in four months. Malawians are now paying nearly double what they paid for fuel when President Peter Mutharika was sworn in, in October. The government is trying to broker a deal with the International Monetary Fund in an bid to revive the economy, but critics say it will worsen the cost-of-living crisis.



Déjà vu: Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has been elected to a fourth consecutive term in office by an electorate that barely bothered to vote, and despite growing disdain for his family's general delinquency.

UGANDA

Besigye in a dire state. He's not well, either.

The health of jailed Ugandan opposition figure Kizza Besigye "has reached a critical and deteriorating state", his allies said on Tuesday. The People's Front for Freedom demanded his personal doctors and family be given unrestricted access to him in hospital. Besigye, the most steadfast challenger to President Yoweri Museveni, was imprisoned on treason charges in 2024. Museveni's four-decade rule was extended last week, when he was declared winner of Uganda's latest disputed election.

LIBERIA

Former first lady must show her papers, please

A court has ordered the Clar Hope Foundation, owned by former first lady Clar Marie Weah, to surrender administrative and financial records linked to the construction of its complex outside Monrovia, *FrontPageAfrica* reports. This follows a request by the government's assets recovery body probing claims of illicit financing, which Weah denies, and heightens tensions between the ruling Unity Party and allies of ex-president George Weah, who accuse President Joseph Boakai of selective justice.

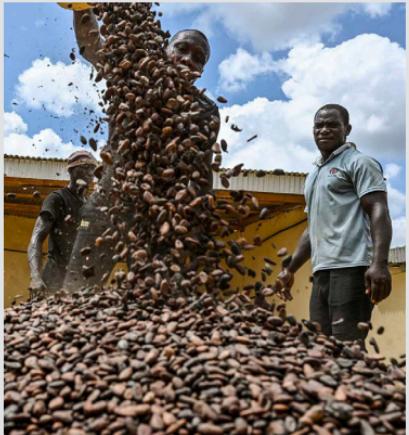


PHOTO: ISSOUF SANOGO/AFP

Bitter fruit: Workers dry and sift cocoa beans at an Ivorian co-operative in Divo.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Ouatarra tries to sugarcoat prices as cocoa bubble pops

The Ivorian government says it will buy the unsold cocoa piling up on farms, even as it is deadlocked with international buyers who won't offer the price promised to farmers. As President Alassane Ouatarra campaigned for re-election last year, his government guaranteed a farm-gate price of about \$5,000 per tonne. But global cocoa prices fell to about \$4,630 a tonne. The country's cocoa-marketing body paused collections, leaving an estimated 700,000 tonnes of unsold cocoa on farms. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's leading cocoa producer.

MAURITIUS

Trump's words fail to hurt UK Chagos plan

Despite previous United States support for the United kingdom's plan to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, President Donald Trump recently tore into it on his Truth Social site. Trump labelled it an "act of great stupidity" and "total weakness". UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the plan would proceed. Britain will pay about \$135-million a year for a 99-year lease on Diego Garcia island, a UK-US military base. Britain displaced Chagossians from the islands in the 1960s and 70s. Some Chagossians oppose the deal, saying they were excluded from the negotiations.

WATER

Killer floods herald global water bankruptcy

More than 200 people have been killed by floodwaters in South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, as torrential rains battered the region for weeks. Many more have been displaced. Tunisia is also experiencing its worst flooding in 70 years, *Reuters* reports. These extreme weather events coincide with a new UN report warning that the world has reached a new era of "global water bankruptcy". The report says human population is depleting freshwater systems to a point they cannot recover from.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Courts affirm another Faustinian bargain

The Constitutional Council has confirmed President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's victory in last month's election. The Central African Republic's top court also rejected an appeal by the opposition alleging fraud and electoral irregularities. The body announced that Touadéra had won with almost 77.9% of the vote, against his main challenger and runner-up Anicet Georges Dologuélé, who received 13.1%. This is Touadéra's third term, after a controversial referendum in 2023 removed term limits. He will be inaugurated on 30 March.

ZIMBABWE

'Sugar us, daddy Trump – our great white hope'

A group of white Zimbabwean farmers are putting their hopes in United States President Donald Trump to help them win compensation for their farms seized by the Zimbabwean government in the early 2000s. *Bloomberg* reports that Mercury Public Affairs, a US lobbying firm with ties to Trump, has agreed to make the farmers' case to American politicians, according to a previously unreported Foreign Agents Registration Act disclosure filed last month. The firm is going to represent the farmers pro bono. Must be nice.

LIBYA

Desert dust puts Northern Africa in a choke-hold

A massive dust storm engulfed eastern Libya this week, prompting school closures, flight cancellations, and a two-day curfew. At least one person died when strong winds brought down the ceiling of a residential home, *CGTN* reports. Wind speeds reached 100km an hour as a low-pressure system originating in the North Atlantic picked up desert dust before reaching Libya. Authorities in the region say they expect conditions to ease as the winds move eastward to Egypt.



PHOTO: ESAM OMAR AL-FETORI/REUTERS

Unfiltered: The dust storm turned Libya more orange than a septuagenarian fascist's facecloth.

NEWS

UNITED STATES

A holy day on ICE

ENDALKACHEW CHALA IN MINNEAPOLIS

ETHIOPIAN AND Eritrean Orthodox Christians around the world celebrated Timket, or Epiphany, on Monday 19 January. Families usually gather for a day of joy, faith, renewal, and community. In the United States, however, immigration law enforcers knocked the wind out of the holiday in Minneapolis and St Paul in Minnesota, where many people who immigrated from the Horn of Africa live.

Community members monitored the activities of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents through WhatsApp groups before deciding whether to leave the house. Some worshippers concluded it was too unpredictable and decided it was safer to stay at home.

Members of the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali communities worried that they might be stopped while driving or walking, regardless of their legal status. One Eritrean Orthodox Church member said the heavy enforcement presence reminded him of life under Eritrea's authoritarian system.

ICE agents are deployed in Minnesota as part of Operation Metro Surge. It is the Trump administration's largest-ever immigration-enforcement operation, involving up to 2,000 federal agents.



PHOTO: OCTAVIO JONES/AFP

Latest fashion: Minnesotans are rallying around their neighbours. But ICE is targeting them too.

The administration has publicly targeted the 80,000 people of Somali origin in the state, but the crackdown is affecting all immigrant communities. It has been compounded by the suspension of immigrant visas to the US, a policy that has disproportionately affected African countries – 39 in total, which face either total or partial visa restrictions.

On that cold Timket morning, one Ethiopian Orthodox Church member dressed up as if she were going to attend the services. She folded her shawl, gathered her prayer book, and stood by the window watching the street. After a while, she put everything back.

"God understands," she said quietly. "But it still hurts." ■

The sources in this story requested anonymity for their safety

SUDAN

Citizens clean up with karos and chutzpah

Khartoum is the capital again, and residents are risking life and limb to make it safe.

**ALHODEEBEE YASSIN AL SEMANY
IN KHARTOUM**

Sudan's military-led government has returned to Khartoum, after nearly three years of operating from the eastern city of Port Sudan. The officials and other residents are returning to a war-scarred city still littered with deadly ordnance.

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group forced the army out of the capital in 2023 when war erupted between the two sides.

Early last year, the tables turned and the army drove the militiamen out, but Khartoum remains dangerous. Shell casings, unexploded munitions, and other remnants of war litter streets, homes, markets, and schools.

In the absence of a state-run clearance effort, much of the work to make the city liveable again has fallen to volunteers.

Abdullah al-Hilu, a social activist, coordinates more than 50 volunteers trying

to clear war debris across Khartoum, Omdurman, Bahri, Jebel Aulia, Um Badda, and East Nile. With almost no equipment, they load debris on tractors and handcarts, known locally as karos. "We've removed about 6,000 pieces of ordnance that could have killed hundreds of civilians," says al-Hilu.

Their work earned the backing of Sudan's national mine-action centre, the body authorised to do such work, which provided training on ordnance collection. Volunteers are also repurposing shell casings into small enterprises, including brick and tile manufacture – creating jobs for residents who lost their incomes in the war.

But the danger persists. "Remnants remain undiscovered," says al-Hilu. His dream is to get electronic devices that can detect explosives more accurately. ■



PHOTO: EL TAYER SIDIG/REUTERS

Streets of fire: Unexploded ordnance litters a street in Khartoum after RSF's withdrawal.

This story was published in collaboration with Egab

KENYA

Need for Speed: Ruto shells out for shiny shills

Kenya is spending a small fortune on an ‘influencer fund’ aimed at defanging youth-led resistance to the president.

ODANGA MADUNG IN NAIROBI

THE KENYAN government has announced plans to spend 100-million shillings (\$775,000) on paying influencers, bloggers, and online creators to promote its narrative.

It formalises what had long been reported: Kenyan authorities recruit content creators, including deploying co-ordinated online campaigns to suppress youth-led protests. The announcement came after American streamer IShowSpeed visited Kenya this month.

President William Ruto’s most persistent political challenge has come from the young people who helped to elect him in 2022. That discontent erupted into nationwide anti-tax protests in 2023, which peaked in 2024 and lingered into 2025. The police violence, abductions, and



The full throttle: US livestreamer Darren Jason Watkins Jr, known as IShowSpeed, or just Speed.

forced disappearances that marked the government’s response stained its domestic and international image.

Cue Speed and his spectacle-driven Africa tour. His visit helped to refresh the image of the Ruto government without confronting the unresolved grievances of his base. Ruto was the only African president to formally welcome him, signalling how much the president values proximity to youth culture.

Notably absent from Speed’s Nairobi stops were the familiar tools of crowd control. No tear gas, no bullets. Just thousands of delirious fans at an event streamed live over an internet the government has repeatedly sought to surveil and regulate. ■

Odanga Madung is a journalist and fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government

SPORT



The rager in Rabat

The images – and emotions – from the most dramatic final in African football history.



PHOTO: MAHUGNON LEOPOLD SOGLO/GALLO IMAGES

SUNDAY, 8 PM. Players assemble in front of 66,526 fans at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat. The narrative is so perfect it could have been scripted: Senegal, defending champions, take on hosts Morocco in the final of the African Cup of Nations. Tensions are already high. The day before the game, Senegal's football federation accused its Moroccan counterpart of failing to provide adequate accommodation, security, and training facilities for the Senegalese players. Senegal is also unhappy about ticket allocations: despite the size of the stadium, only 2,850 tickets were allocated to their fans.



PHOTOS: SEBASTIEN BOZON/AFP



PHOTO: ABDEL MAJID BIJOUAT/AFP

10.03 PM. After a relatively quiet game, with both teams being unusually cautious, referee Jean Jacques Ndala has two pivotal decisions to make. Senegal scores – but Ndala disallows the goal for a push in the build-up. Then, Morocco's Brahim Diaz tumbles to the ground near Senegal's goal. Did he fall or was he pulled down? The thousands of people in the stadium, and millions more across the world, wait for him to make a call. After reviewing the video evidence, Ndala jogs back onto the pitch and points to the spot – it's a penalty for Morocco!



PHOTO: SIPHIWE SIBEKO/REUTERS

10.04 PM. Pandemonium. Senegal's players are furious. Scuffling breaks out between them and their Moroccan counterparts. The crowd boos at full volume. Riot police deploy to prevent Senegalese fans from running onto the pitch in protest. As the minutes drag on, and the arguing continues, Senegalese coach Pape Thiaw calls his players off the pitch and into the dressing room. Are they coming back? No one knows. This showpiece event, part of the Moroccan state's efforts to charm the rest of Africa, is descending into farce.



PHOTO: ZAMANI MAKAUTSI/GALLO IMAGES



PHOTO: ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY

10.14 PM. Sadio Mané, Liverpool legend and Senegal superstar, stands on the pitch, hands on hip. Almost all of his teammates have disappeared down the tunnel. Should he stay or should he go? Eventually, he gestures to his teammates – come back! Nothing happens. So he runs into the changing room. We don't know what he said, but a few minutes later all his teammates are back. Play will resume.



10.18 PM. Real Madrid star Brahim Diaz steps up to take the penalty. This is the most important kick of his life. Score it and Morocco wins its first major title in 50 years. Miss it, and be remembered for nothing else. Diaz tries a trick shot – gently lifting it over the diving goalkeeper. But Édouard Mendy doesn't dive and makes perhaps the easiest save of his career. Extra time.



10.24 PM. Pape Gueye skips and twirls and unleashes a majestic shot from outside the box. It sails in and the small Senegalese contingent inside the stadium is delirious with joy. The rest of the stadium falls silent.

10.59 PM. Referee Ndala blows the final whistle. Senegal wins 1-0.





PHOTO: MAHUGNON LEOPOLD SOGLO/GALLO IMAGES

11.10 PM. Patrice Motsepe, South Africa's richest man and head of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), goes out of his way to commiserate with the losing Moroccan players. CAF's live blog of the night contains not a single mention of the walk-off controversy. According to *The Africa Report*, Motsepe is considering a bid to succeed Cyril Ramaphosa as president of South Africa.



11.20 PM. Senegal are crowned as winners of the football tournament. Everyone else is trying to figure out what may have been lost along the way.

INVESTIGATION

Pass the parcel: A game of corporate shellacking

How proxies of the Chinese state gained control of a strategic rare-earths mining licence in Malawi, but left the land to rot.

JACK MCBRAMS AND CAROLINE HENSHAW

ON THE FAR edges of Makanjira village, where Lake Malawi's waters meet a blood-red shoreline, a rusted sign stands half-swallowed by tall grass. The letters are fading, the post is tilting, but the

name is still just visible: Mawei Mining Company Ltd.

"There used to be Chinese people here," said farmer Alinafe Mbewe, pointing towards the overgrown path where drilling rigs once stood. "They told us this place would change.



State-pawned: The arrival of Mawei Mining Company was expected to uplift Makanjira by providing jobs and boosting the local economy but the land continues to lie barren and unyielding. PHOTO: ANDREW VIANO

We waited. Nothing changed."

More than eight years ago, Mawei, then a privately controlled company, announced it had found a treasure trove of minerals in this remote corner of central Malawi. Surveys found more than 350-million tonnes of ore in the area, including zircon, titanium, ilmenite, magnetite, and rare earth-bearing monazite.

Mawei pledged to spend some \$40-million on the first phase of construction, projecting the start of operations by early 2020. Malawi's government stood to make millions in taxes and fees from the 20-year project to extract that mineral wealth. It was to be a boon for Makanjira, where most people rely on smallholder farming and subsistence fishing. Locals hoped it would trigger investment in schools, roads, and healthcare.

Mawei boss Armstrong Cao blames high transport costs and the lack of power for delays. Malawi's ministry of mining said it was "upgrading energy and road infrastructure to the project site", but did not provide specifics.

Today, the patch of earth that once held so much promise looks abandoned. Villagers said they have not seen any Mawei workers in Makanjira since the beginning of last year. "They said there would be jobs," said fisher Mussa Juma. "We are still waiting."

However, while nothing has changed on site, everything has changed on paper.

An investigation by the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Finance

Uncovered found ownership of Mawei has shifted twice since 2023 – and without the legally required approval from the Malawian government. Through a game of corporate pass-the-parcel, the Mawei licence ultimately came to be controlled by regional state authorities in China.

**"They said there would be jobs," said fisher Mussa Juma.
"We are still waiting."**

Companies that own mining licences in Malawi are legally required to seek approval from the mining ministry for any change of ownership, a law common across Africa so that governments can protect national assets. This approval was not sought in the share transactions relating to Mawei. As a result of this investigation, the Malawian ministry of mining has promised a "fact-finding exercise" that could lead to fines or administrative penalties.

From private ownership to state control
Mawei is fully owned by Xinjin International Company Ltd, registered in the British Virgin Islands, a tax haven well known for its secrecy.

In 2017, when Mawei obtained the Makanjira licence, a private Chinese mining-investment company called Shenzhen Mawei Titanium owned 51% of Xinjin International. Hainan International Resources, a state-owned enterprise controlled by the Hainan regional government in southern China, owned (and still owns) the other 49%.

According to public stock-exchange filings in China, Shenzhen Mawei Titanium transferred its controlling stake in Xinjin International to another private entity, Chinese mining conglomerate Zhongrun Resources Investment Company, in August 2023.

Two years later, with work still stalled in Makanjira, control of Mawei changed hands again, this time to a Chinese state company. In mid-2025, Zhongrun Resources transferred its controlling stake in Xinjin International to its top shareholder, Shandong Zhaojin Ruining Mining. Shandong is ultimately controlled by the Zhaoyuan municipal government.

With these exchanges, two entities ultimately controlled by the Chinese state took full ownership of one of

Malawi's strategic mineral prospects – Shandong with 51% and Hainan with 49%.

The deal was approved by Chinese authorities, but Malawian mining officials remained unaware. Malawi's ministry of mining confirmed it had not been informed of the changes in Mawei's ownership. "This is mineral extraction without oversight. It is modern dispossession through the language of investment," said Joy Chabwera, programme manager at the Natural Resources Justice Network.

Cao, Mawei's managing director, said it didn't need to inform the ministry of the share transfers because the immediate owner remained Xinjin International, adding he would contact authorities for clarification.



Regulator unready for resource rush

The oversight lapse raises questions about Malawi's readiness to manage its emerging geopolitical position. The country is home to millions of tonnes of critical minerals – including rare-earth metals essential to manufacturing everything from electric vehicles to smartphones – placing it at the centre of a geostrategic battle.

Over the past three years, Chinese delegations have toured Malawi's rare-earth deposits, met ministry officials, and explored entry into the sector. China is expected to invest some \$12-billion in the Malawian mining sector over the coming years – more than the country's entire economic output in 2024.

China is not the only interested party. Last year, an Australian company, Lindian Resources, raised \$59-million to begin mining rare-earth metals in Kangankunde – about 90km north of Malawi's commercial capital of Blantyre, where the rare-earth minerals deposit is said to be one of the world's largest and best. The company expects its first output towards the end of this year.

"The world's superpowers need what Malawi has and they need it now," said a Malawian industry analyst, who requested anonymity because of his work on sensitive mineral projects.

But the country faces many challenges in managing this geopolitically complex influx of global-investment interest.

A World Bank study of Malawi's extractives sector, published in May, offers an unflinching assessment. The country's official licence register is

neither up to date nor fully digitised. Regulatory authorities lack the staff, resources, and equipment to effectively monitor mining sites. The country also has no accredited minerals lab, so every sample must be sent abroad to be tested.

Malawi faces many challenges in managing this geopolitically complex influx of global-investment trading.

In a system in which the regulator can neither inspect nor consistently publish contracts, foreign firms face little pressure to operate transparently. Even when properly licensed, there is little accountability. The World Bank says no work has been done on most of Malawi's hundreds of mining concessions.

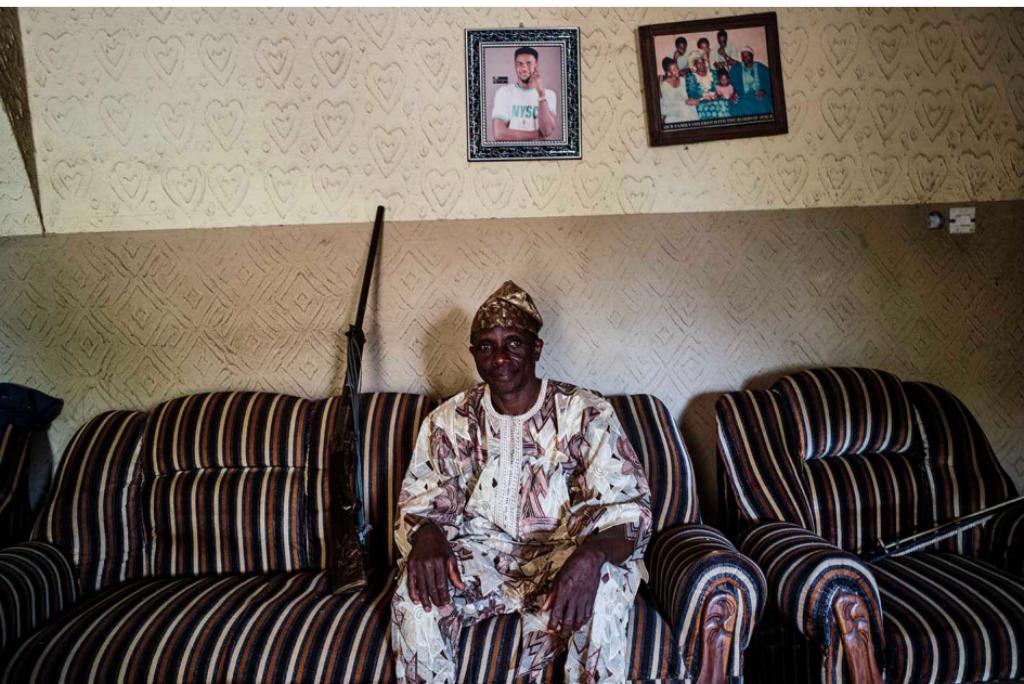
Exports from mining are worth just over \$110-million a year, making up 1% of GDP. But they could grow to \$3-billion a year by 2034, according to Robert Schlotterer, a World Bank Economist who focuses on global energy and extractives, and was speaking last January.

Not that exports mean money going into the economy and local communities.

Enforcing corporate transparency may be a start on managing that potential.

"When ownership is hidden in offshore structures, you cannot even tell who to hold responsible," said Chabwera, of the Natural Resources Justice Network. "Decisions that affect our land and people begin to be shaped by external interests. We lose bargaining power. And secrecy becomes the norm." ■

FEATURE



ALL PHOTOS: SOGO OLADELE

Silent night in Eruku

Hovering bandits, lingering trauma, and a military presence stole the Christmas spirit.

SOGO OLADELE IN KWARA STATE

THE NIGHT before Christmas was indeed a silent one in Eruku. As other parts of Nigeria enjoyed Christmas Eve service and Detty December concerts, the town lay under a heavy quiet, broken only by hushed conversation and the occasional moving vehicle. Military checkpoints stood only a few metres apart. Eruku was also literally dark:

PHCN, the company behind Nigeria's erratic power supply, had failed again. Solar-powered bulbs and rechargeable lamps lit up the night in small pockets. With festivities cancelled and fireworks banned, residents huddled indoors, reminiscing about simpler times.

Eruku made international news when a group of armed bandits stormed a livestreamed service on 18 November, killing two people and abducting 38.

The footage became an online poster for the “Christian genocide” narrative floated by United States President Donald Trump earlier that month.

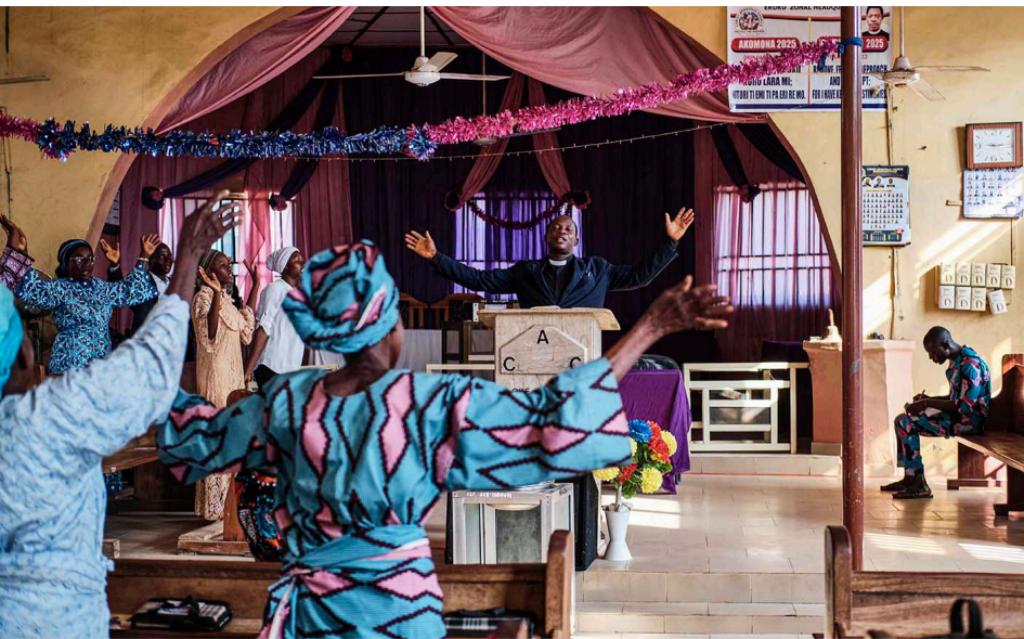
The abducted worshipers were released a few days later after government intervention. The Kwara State government housed them for a week and provided immediate medical assistance, but no psychological or other medical support followed, even though many of them were still traumatised or in pain.

Funlayo Joshua, a trader, said the captors beat her. A month after her government-funded hospital stay, she was still suffering from headaches and dizziness. She fainted shortly after the rescue and remained

unconscious for three days.

The attack took place during a seven-day programme by the Christ Apostolic Church to thank God that some of its members had survived another abduction a month earlier. In October, bandits had attacked a bus of people returning to Eruku from a wedding ceremony, 18 of whom were church members. Local hunters responded but the bandits managed to whisk two children away. Both were rescued – one by the army and the second after a clandestine ransom payment of 4-million naira (\$2,800).

Grace Ige, a caterer, was a victim of both attacks. The October wedding was her son’s and the two children abducted then were hers too. She borrowed to



Praying alive: Congregants worship at Christ Apostolic Church Oke Isegun in Eruku, northern Nigeria.



Sanctuary: Grace Ige, one of the 38 people that were abducted during the attack, attends a service at CAC Oke Isegun. Grace had been part of the first group that were abducted on their way back from a wedding ceremony. They were on their way back from her son's wedding.

raise the ransom and remains in debt.

Since the attack, church gatherings have been limited to brief services held under strict military presence. When the Christmas service started at 8am, fewer than 10 people were present in a church that often had more than 160 worshippers. Church leaders now send canvassers to people's homes, to let them know the service has begun. Even

so, they are happy to get a crowd of 50. In the end, about 60 people turned up for the Christmas service. Only four of them had been among the 38 abducted the previous month.

A town of migrants

Geographically, Eruku is in the north of Nigeria - but its people speak Yoruba, a language typically spoken in the south.

Attacks by Boko Haram and other groups have driven some Hausa and Fulani people into the town over the past decade, many from Nigeria's northeast and some from as far away as Togo.

Well before the livestreamed attack – in which the bandits are seen gathering up worshippers' handbags – banditry had been hollowing out life in and around Eruku.

Farmers on the outskirts were attacked and forced to abandon their land. Then, the bandits turned toward the town itself. This left many of Eruku's recent migrants feeling that death and crisis follow them like a bad odour.

Some of them even started heading

back home, given what they ran from had followed them.

Nigerians online – particularly in the south – tend to hold a thinly veiled hostility towards Hausa and Fulani people. Most violent attacks occur in the northern states they traditionally called home and some people in the south blame northerners – as groups – for Nigeria's perennial insecurity.

In Eruku, however, this hostility seems almost non-existent. Elder Agbabiaka, the church secretary, explained that people understand the bandits are a minority, who do not represent a religion or an ethnic group. He said that before the attack on the church, the bandits had



Welcome, ye faithful: Elder Michael Agbabiaka leads a worship session as Pastor Lawrence Bamidele and members of the church dance at the Christmas service at CAC Oke Isegun on 25 December.

been wreaking havoc on farmers in the bush and a lot of the victims were Hausa, Fulani, or Muslim.

Life in Eruku goes on with bated breath. The Nigerian government says normality has been restored, but

the residents would not call the heavy presence of soldiers normal. Even with the militarisation of their town, they still cannot venture into their farms. The soldiers patrol the town; the bandits remain in the surrounding forests. ■



Back from the brink:
Felicia Ige was also among the congregants who were abducted. She says the bandits made them walk such a long distance that her walking is now impaired, and she has been in the grip of constant anxiety ever since their release.



DATA

From ABCs to the birds and the bees

TODAY (24 January) is International Day of Education. Everyone supports society educating their children, right? But what about when it comes to that most intimate of subjects: sex?

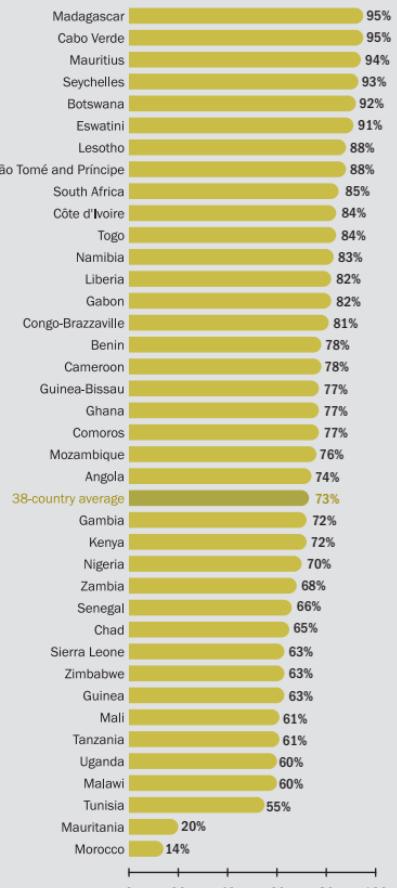
Across 38 countries we surveyed in 2024/2025, nearly three-quarters (73%) of Africans “agree” or “strongly agree” that “schools should teach sex education to young people to help them make informed decisions”.

Majorities in 36 countries support public sex education, but two countries buck the trend – and how! Only one in five Mauritians (20%) want sex education in school, and even fewer Moroccans (14%) agree. The countries that display the strongest backing are all island nations: Madagascar (95%), Cabo Verde (95%), Mauritius (94%), and Seychelles (93%). (Perhaps it’s something in the water?) Several southern African countries also feature near the top.

Christians are significantly more accepting than Muslims (81% vs 58%), suggesting that religion plays a role.

Unsurprisingly, education is a factor. Among adults with no formal education, 60% express support, compared to 78% of those with secondary schooling and 80% of degree-holders. ■

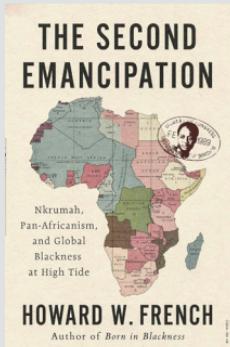
Support teaching sex education in school
| 38 African countries | 2024/2025





TC BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



Nkrumah, who fought the wind

This book troubles the record of the larger-than-life liberator of the Gold Coast from the clutches of Britain, also reminding us how important he was on the world stage.

COULD THIS be the definitive biography of Nkrumah and analysis of his impact on the world? Howard W. French's brilliant and thoroughgoing treatment of the life of Francis Nwia Kofi Nkrumah

very well might. From the vantage of southern Africa, I knew nothing about how complex Nkrumah's legacy is in his home country of Ghana.

Nkrumah was once extolled by his party's newspaper as the "Man of Destiny, Star of Africa, Hope of Millions of downtrodden Blacks, Deliverer of Ghana, Iron Boy, Great Leader of Street Boys, personable and handsome Boy from Nzima".

French says he is remembered in his home country as someone who became dictatorial in the later years of his rule, suppressing dissent and using lawfare against his opponents. Ghana's economy also suffered greatly from his ill-conceived attempts to use its major commodity at the time, cocoa, to fund his government's plans.

For many people on the continent, for whom this will no doubt be a revelation, Nkrumah remains a hero and towering legend (making me reconsider even Robert Mugabe's continuing lionisation in some African quarters). So it is: one man's liberator is another's dictator.

Human memory is lamentably short. That's why this book is important: it's an excellent corrective for Nkrumah's tarnished legacy and a primer on mid-century Africa and colonial crimes you can point your Western friends to.

French lays out an excellent case for why Nkrumah was the most consequential leader of the century. He

made Africa matter to the world, French says. But it was his “precipitous drive for African unity” that consumed him – leading, as French argues, to his downfall when he was famously removed from power in a coup in 1966.

Nkrumah spent a decade studying in the United States (a fascinating choice over Britain), which was pivotal to his trajectory. There, he obtained two masters degrees, worked odd jobs, and even became a preacher-for-hire in Black churches.

He met CLR James, who introduced Nkrumah to George Padmore, and it was Padmore who had the biggest impact on Nkrumah's life, mentoring him in Britain and later moving to Ghana to act as his advisor. Also in Britain, Nkrumah met and first worked with WEB Du Bois to organise the Fifth

Pan-African Conference in Manchester.

Nkrumah's story is only one of self-invention insofar as his life was full of serendipity – and he a man who took full advantage of this. He was a self-mythologiser: he published his autobiography on the very day of Ghana's independence, giving out copies at the celebrations and so ensuring he had control of the story of his rise to power.

French refers at various points in *The Second Emancipation* to Nkrumah's accounts of his life and compares them to the recollections of interlocutors or archival records. Nkrumah did not lie, precisely, but his belief that he was a man of destiny apparently made him always see those events through that lens.

Nkrumah was a true believer in independence for all Africans. But his pan-Africanist ideas built on the work



PHOTO: BETTMANN

Up and away: Allies lift Kwame Nkrumah aloft after Ghana wins independence from the UK in 1957.

of forerunners such as Du Bois, James Kwegyir Aggrey, Africanus Horton, Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, and JE Casely Hayford, with Nkrumah more of an "evangeliser", according to French.

In pursuit of his perhaps somewhat misguided vision and attempt to create a "United States of Africa", Nkrumah recruited Guinea under Ahmed Sékou Touré; Mali was onside for a while, then not; his plan for the Democratic Republic of the Congo was doomed from the start.

Incidentally, *The Second Emancipation* is incredibly illuminating on Patrice Lumumba's rise and how he sealed his fate with his ambition – or alternatively, how his fate was sealed by the greed of the Belgians colluding with a US made antsy and paranoid by the Cold War.

French's text shows lineages and links between Africa and its diaspora, particularly across the Atlantic. He illustrates how Nkrumah's diaspora influences (Padmore and James high on the list) – as well as his later political successes and Ghana's independence – had an impact on the self-image of Black Americans in the lead-up to the intense years of the US civil-rights movement.

Although Nkrumah's downfall was due to multiple factors, per French, his fixation with his pan-Africanist vision led him to take his eye off the ball domestically. Perhaps the dreams of his foreign policy were more appealing than the failure of Ghana's economy.

Here is French's central argument: Nkrumah's dream was valid and he deserves much more recognition for



PHOTO: REUTERS/FRANCIS KOKOROKO

Pointing the way: The statue of Kwame Nkrumah at the Nkrumah Mausoleum in Accra, Ghana.

what he represented, not least to have his place in the pantheon of great African heroes restored.

He knew Africa's newly independent nations would struggle unless they united economically against their former colonisers. He told them, too, saying: "Independence must never be considered as an end in itself but as a stage, the very first stage of the people's revolutionary struggle."

Instead, they formed the Organisation of African Unity (now the mostly ineffectual African Union) – a body very far from Nkrumah's confederate dream, that struggles with what Nkrumah, the prophet, foresaw: the scourge of neocolonialism.

Nkrumah fervently believed a new world was possible for Africa and its diaspora. Perhaps he had feet of clay. Perhaps he was a man out of time, someone against whom the winds of the Cold War blew so strongly that he never had a chance. French presents intriguing evidence for both in *The Second Emancipation*. ■

The Quiz

- 1 Which African president recently won a seventh term in office?
- 2 The Secondo-Lido Lighthouse (pictured) is found in which country?
- 3 How many official languages does Eritrea have?
- 4 True or false: Mamady Doumbouya is the president of Burkina Faso.
- 5 Which country's men's football team is called "Lions of Teranga"?
- 6 And "Atlas Lions"?
- 7 Which country was called "Gold Coast" in colonial times?
- 8 Mozambique's coast lies on which ocean?
- 9 Romania is which African country's flag doppelganger?
- 10 On which African island was Freddie Mercury born?



HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to [+27 73 805 6068](https://wa.me/2738056068) 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

"Being a lighthouse keeper in the age of GPS is a tough gig, you know – everyone thinks you're just coasting."

PHOTO: GUY PETERSON/AFP

Big Pic

Magi mixer: High priests celebrate Timket, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's celebration of Jesus's baptism and the revelation of his divinity during Epiphany, on the shore of lake Dembel, in Batu on 18 January.

PHOTO: AMANUEL SILESHI/AP



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