

African journalism. November 14 2020

**ISSUE
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The Continent

with **Mail & Guardian**

Ethiopia's information BLACKOUT

**Why reporting the war
in Tigray is so hard**



Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP

COVER STORY: Ethiopia is no longer on the brink of civil war – because the war has already started. But why is there so little reliable information on what exactly is going on (p19)? From the little that we do know, it is increasingly clear that we may have already missed the window to avert an even greater catastrophe (p30). And, in an interview, the Booker Prize-shortlisted novelist Maaza Mengiste explains how the history of Ethiopia's wars has been manipulated before (p25).

Inside:

- **Pay back the money:** Zambia defaults on its debt (p12)
- **Some good news!** A major breakthrough in HIV prevention (p14)
- **Q&A:** What does the new Covid vaccine mean for us? (p16)
- **Books:** Tsitsi Dangarembga on making movies (p27)
- **PLUS** JJ Rawlings, a very old fig tree and a tour of Abidjan in our all-new travel section!



MISSED AN ISSUE?

The Continent's entire back catalogue can be downloaded at mg.co.za/thecontinent/

The Week in Numbers

#1

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book *Half of a Yellow Sun* was this week voted the best of the 25 winners in the history of the Women's Prize for Fiction.

90%

The efficacy of the new Covid-19 vaccine, announced to much fanfare this week by Pfzier and BioNTech. But it's not quite as simple as that (see page 16 for more).

18.3%

The percentage of Covid-19 deaths in the African region that are also linked to diabetes, according to the World Health Organisation. Diabetes is "one of the conditions that global studies have found to increase the risk of severe illness and death among patients infected with the virus", it said.



57 years

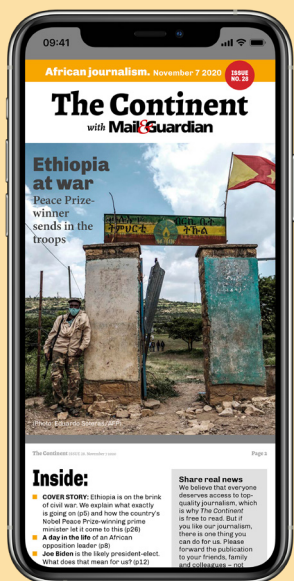
The length of time – ever since independence – that Kenyan parliamentarians have been forbidden from wearing any kind of traditional attire. This rule changed on Tuesday when Narok Senator Ledama Ole Kina wore his Maasai shuka to the Senate; and, in a landmark ruling, speaker Kenneth Lusaka said it was OK.

250

The number of elephants wreaking havoc on crops in Nigeria's Borno state, after crossing the border from Chad and Cameroon. The elephants are taking advantage of the mass displacement of people from the area, but are now causing even more problems for the people who remained in their homes – and may cause further displacement as a result.

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Kenya



(Photo: Robert Bonet/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

The tree was history, now it's geography

For nearly a century, this fig tree has been growing on the corner of Waiyaki Way and Mpaka Road, in what is today the Nairobi suburb of Westlands. It clearly likes it there: it is four storeys high and has become a much-loved city landmark.

Last month, Kenya's roads agency announced that it planned to chop the tree down and, in its place, erect a concrete pillar to support a new expressway. Other trees along the

route have already been removed by construction workers.

Public opposition from disgruntled residents of the capital was swift and vocal – and effective. On Thursday, President Uhuru Kenyatta issued a “Declaration of Conservation of the Tree”, promising to leave it well alone.

Fig trees can live for 200 years, which means that passing pedestrians of the 22nd century might also get to enjoy the shade of the fig tree of Waiyaki Way. ■

Ghana



(Photo: Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images)

John Jerry Rawlings

22 June 1947 – 12 November 2020

JJ Rawlings – known as “Junior Jesus” to his admirers – died in a hospital in Accra on Thursday, reportedly from Covid-19 complications.

The charismatic military officer who was president of Ghana for two decades leaves behind a complicated and contradictory legacy.

He is the man who oversaw not one but two coups d'état against elected governments – in 1979 and 1981 – and ordered the cold-blooded execution of former heads of state and supreme court

judges.

But he is also the man who laid the foundations of Ghana's modern multiparty democracy, and who left office voluntarily in 2001 to cement the transition from military rule.

He will be given a state funeral. “I am extremely disturbed and saddened by his passage. He was not an ordinary Ghanaian ... and therefore his passage has to be a matter for the Ghanaian nation,” said Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo. ■

South Africa

President Ramaphosa's campaign to crack down on corruption nabs a big and dangerous fish

Simon Allison

Shortly after 8am on Friday morning, a convoy of government vehicles – what South Africans call a Blue Light Brigade – drove into the offices of the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation in Mangaung, a city in South Africa's Free State Province.

They were there to deliver Ace Magashule, the secretary-general of Africa's oldest political party, into the hands of the prosecutors who have charged him with corruption. On the streets outside, dozens of people in full party regalia had gathered with placards – “This case is politically motivated”, read one – to show their support for

Magashule. Their presence highlighted the fact that this arrest is as much about politics as it is about the law.

Magashule is a controversial figure. He was premier of the Free State before taking on his current role in the African National Congress, where he is one of the highest-ranking officials. But he has never been far from corruption allegations, and he is tainted in the eyes of some South Africans by his close relationships with former President Jacob Zuma and the notorious Gupta family, whose allegedly corrupt relationship with government is the focus of a commission of inquiry into “state capture”.

It is safe to say that Magashule does not enjoy a similarly close relationship



Divided party: Magashule (right) is the highest-profile target of President Ramaphosa's anti-corruption drive.

(Photo: Waldo Swiegers/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

with current president Cyril Ramaphosa. They belong to different factions within the ruling party.

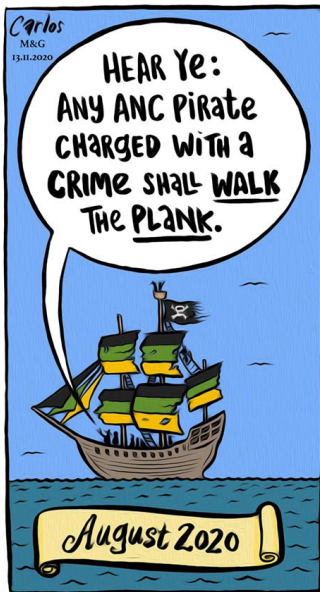
Magashule has been formally charged with corruption in connection with a wildly inflated asbestos-removal contract, which was approved during his tenure as Free State premier. He denies the charges. The trial is already causing divisions within the ANC, whose top leadership will decide at their next meeting whether Magashule must step down from his position, as per a new party policy introduced by Ramaphosa himself earlier this year.

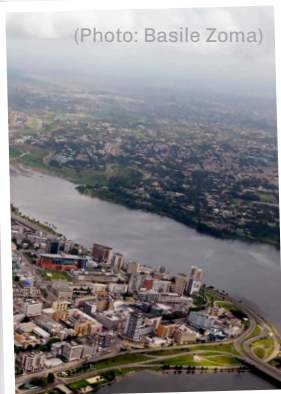
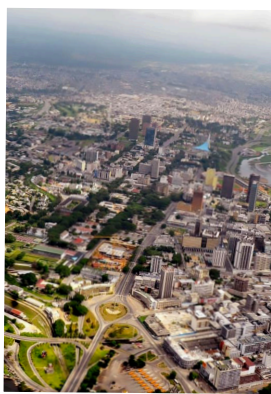
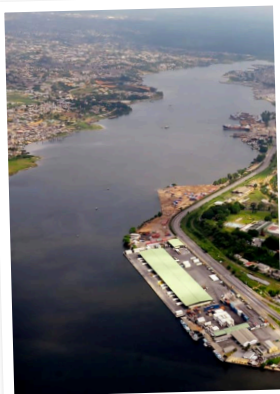
Appearing before parliament on Thursday, the president was coy on the subject, saying that Magashule's future within the ANC is an internal party



Charged: Magashule on the campaign trail in Krugersdorp ahead of local elections this month. (Photo: Gallo Images/Daily Sun/Christopher Moagi)

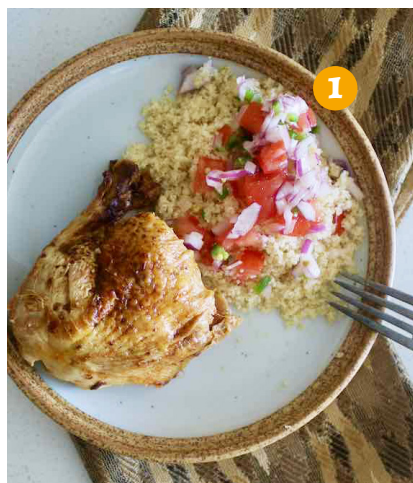
matter. "In time these matters will be addressed and everybody will get to know how the African National Congress itself is addressing those matters," he said. ■





Welcome to Abidjan!

In a new series, *The Continent* asks journalists and readers to give us a tour of their favourite cities. This week **Leanne de Bassompierre** shows us around Côte d'Ivoire's economic hub.



Favourite restaurant

Abidjan is a cosmopolitan city where you can find restaurants that suit every palate and pocket. *Maquis*, local eateries you find in every neighbourhood, give the best value for money with their scant décor, and offer delicious barbecued chicken or fish, accompanied by the local staple *attiéké* (1), made from cassava root, or *alocco*, fried banana plantain. The entire meal will set you back around \$5, depending on the neighbourhood, but it's even on the menu at fancier restaurants, like my favourite, *Kajazoma* in Deux Plateaux, a serene

green setting with unique African-inspired furniture pieces available for purchase if you're moved by any of them.

Favourite things to do

It may seem hard to believe, but there's 30km² of primary forest virtually in the middle of the city. I love spending weekends walking through Banco Forest with my kids, where you can still spot chimpanzees and the odd pangolin living in the wild. Entry for locals is the equivalent of just under \$2, but for foreigners it's nearly \$9. It's possible to also hire a guide for around 20 US dollars for the day as well, which is recommended for first timers. The former capital, Grand Bassam **(2)**, is about 40 minutes away and good for a half a day of strolling around followed by lunch along the ocean. There are a number of places to choose from, some with swimming pools, but it's advised to not go in the ocean as the current is way too strong. For surf lovers, venture past Grand Bassam to Assinie about an hour and half from Abidjan for some of the best waves in the world.

Best bar / coffee shop / bakery

There's a reason Abidjan is often referred to as the Paris of West Africa. The selection of pastries and breads on offer rivals those one finds in the French capital. I get my daily French baguette at a local franchise, Des gateau et du Pain, for less than



a dollar, but rarely sit down for a coffee. I'm a cappuccino gal and it's hard to find a good one in this city. Locals prefer espresso. If I need to meet people for work, I like to do so in the lobby of the Ivoire hotel **(3)** overlooking the Ebrie lagoon in the upmarket Cocody neighborhood. With its modern take on 1970s glamour, it attracts West Africa's finest and on any given day you're likely to bump into newsmakers from across the region.

City vibe check

Abidjan is a city that grows on you. It was definitely not love at first sight, but the warmth of the people, the delicious food and soap opera politics have captured my heart. I love how much pride people take in their appearance. Men, women and children of all social classes



are always impeccably dressed, especially on days of worship. Traffic can be nightmarish on the city's main arteries, but also on back streets where mini-bus taxis and cabs cut through to avoid congestion.

How do you get around town?

Abidjan is not an easy city to walk around, but public transport is cheap and easily accessible. Ride-hailing services are becoming more and more common, but it's easy and safe enough to just grab an orange taxi (read cab) on the fly. Prices are negotiable, but locals know how much to pay for specific distances. It's always a little bit more if you happen upon a cab with actual air-conditioning instead of the all-the-windows-open variety. I generally drive myself around. I feel safe as woman driving around at all hours of

the day and night. I sometimes take a cab downtown for the weekly cabinet meetings at the presidency, where parking is limited.

One song that represents the feel of the city?

It's an oldie, but a song that will always remind me of Abidjan is Ernesto Djedje's *Ziboté* (4), recorded in 1977, but still resonates with audiences today. You can't help but shake your hips to Afro-Latino beat when you hear it. I discovered him shortly after arriving in Abidjan in 2017 when I drove past a statue of him dancing at the national arts and culture school, INSAAC. Born of Wolof and Bété parents in the western Ivory Coast town of Daloa, he died of an untreated ulcer in 1983 at the age of 35. But his music still lives on. Another famous song, *Konan Bedie*, could be heard at rallies of a politician of the same name during recent elections.

Favourite time of the year

It's always hot and humid, but avoiding the heavy rains of June and July is recommended. August is cool and less congested and expats are still on summer holidays, but for beachgoers and surfing enthusiasts the months November through February are best. ■



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Zambia has fallen off a debt cliff

This will have major implications for an already struggling economy – and for the other African countries in a similar position

Cobus van Staden

Last month, Zambia missed a deadline for a \$42.5-million repayment on \$3 billion of Eurobond debt. Friday is the last day of a grace period, and barring a last-minute deal with its creditors, it will start the weekend as the first African country to default on its debt since the beginning of the pandemic.

It probably won't be the last.

In 2012, things looked a lot brighter. On the back of high copper prices, Zambia issued its first \$750-million Eurobond. At that stage, it was offering lower interest rates than some developed countries. The Eurobond was so popular that it was oversubscribed to the tune of \$12-billion.

But soon the problems became apparent. One was that Zambia never diversified away from copper, which means that when the copper price

plunged, so did its economy. Another was that President Edgar Lungu's government borrowed indiscriminately. After his Patriotic Front took power in 2011, public debt jumped from 21% of GDP to an eye-watering 120% around the end of the decade. Many of the loans were also padded to line the pockets of corrupt officials.

Last month, Lusaka asked Eurobond creditors for a six-month repayment freeze on its Eurobond debt. One creditor group has already refused, and another seems set to do so this week. In response, Zambia has been downgraded by international ratings agencies, which will make accessing any additional funding very difficult. The reason for the refusal isn't only due to greed (although that's certainly a factor.) There's also China. Zambia is on the hook for about \$9.7-billion of bilateral debt to China. Despite having joined the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), China has insisted on renegotiating loans on an extremely opaque, case-by-case basis.

Zambia's Eurobond creditors have made debt relief dependent on the full disclosure of Zambia's loans from China. They fear that any debt relief will simply go into servicing Chinese debts, or to prop up corrupt presidential projects in the run-up to next year's election. On 28 October, Lusaka announced that it had reached a deal with China Development Bank to postpone debt service payments



Cash crunch: 2.3-million Zambians are considered severely food insecure, and rely on food aid.
(Photo: Guillem Sartorio/AFP)

on one loan for six months and to reschedule the principal, increasing pressure on private creditors to do the same. However, the Zambian government still hasn't made clear the size of the loan, nor which proportion it makes up of its complete Chinese debt.

A lack of trust in the Zambian government is compounding the problem. In August, Lungu fired the Reserve Bank governor Denny Kalyalya, and replaced him with a political ally. Kalyalya was pushed out in part because he refused to allow the Central Bank to print money. Inflation is already rising in Zambia, and political pressure to print money could add an inflation crisis to a pandemic, a global recession impacting copper prices, and a regional locust infestation currently threatening next year's crops.

This isn't only a Zambian crisis. Many more prudent African lenders are facing

similar challenges due to the overlapping impact of the pandemic, the global economic crisis and the need to fund infrastructure to fuel development. The G20 is meeting this week to work out a 'common framework' for debt relief. But it's still uncertain whether China (which holds 20% of African debt), the World Bank (16%) and other multilateral lenders (15%) will cooperate. Meanwhile, private lenders are ignoring calls to join G20 debt relief efforts, and the Trump administration has so far blocked emergency relief from the IMF, fearing that some of it will go to China.

This leaves Africa with few other options than to watch Zambia teeter – and wonder who's next. ■

Cobus van Staden is a senior researcher at the South African Institute of International Affairs, and co-host of the China in Africa podcast

Six injections a year could stop new HIV infections

A major new breakthrough will make it much easier to protect women from the virus

(Photo: Luca Solaro)

Laura López González

Six shots a year of an antiretroviral (ARV) drug can protect women from contracting HIV, shows new research.

A study conducted among 3,200 women found that an injection of a long-lasting ARV called cabotegravir every two months was 89% more effective in preventing HIV in women than the daily HIV prevention pill known as Truvada. The research was carried out in seven African countries, including South Africa, Botswana and Kenya.

Scientists believe the new injectable ARV was able to outperform Truvada because the bi-monthly shot was simply easier for women to take than daily pills, says lead researcher Sinead Delany-Moretiwe. Delany-Moretiwe is also the director of research at the Wits

Reproductive Health and HIV Institute.

“The challenge with Truvada is that it relies on consistent daily pill-taking,” she says. “[We found that] cabotegravir is far superior to Truvada in preventing infection and we think that’s because of adherence.”

Truvada is a two-in-one pill combining the ARVs emtricitabine and tenofovir. The tablet is extremely effective in preventing HIV infection, and can bring a person’s risk of contracting HIV down to as low as one percent when taken correctly, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention explains.

A 2012 study in the *New England Medical Journal* found that less than 40% of women were able to take the Truvada daily to prevent HIV. And when women skipped a dose, their bodies weren’t able to retain the level of Truvada needed to

ward off HIV infection, showed research published just four years later in *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*. In contrast, Truvada was more forgiving in men.

This week's news has been called a game-changer particularly for women in sub-Saharan Africa who continue to make up almost 60% of all new HIV infections on the continent, according to 2019 UNAids data.

And, following similar study results released in July, scientists now know that injectable cabotegravir doesn't only protect women, but can also prevent HIV infection in another high-risk group – men who have sex with men and transgender women.

A study found that an injection of cabotegravir every two months was 89% more effective in preventing HIV in women than the daily HIV prevention pill Truvada

Still, the bimonthly injection will likely not be publicly available for at least several more years, says Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute director of research Sinead Delany-Moretwe who led the most recent cabotegravir study.

In the meantime, many activists are calling for countries to begin thinking now about how they might one day use – and pay for – the new injection and expand access to the HIV prevention pill.

Today, about 24 countries in Africa have started people on Truvada. Still, the number of patients who have received the pill varies from just a few hundred in some countries to tens of thousands in others, shows data compiled by Avac.

A lack of awareness about Truvada among patients and healthcare workers as well as a high initial cost of almost \$100 in some places were some of the challenges Africa governments faced in trying to roll out the medication, a 2016 research review in the journal *Current Opinion in HIV and Aids* found.

High costs were to blame for South Africa's slow rollout, which only managed to start about 6,000 people on the pill in its first two years. But by February 2020, the country had managed to increase that figure up to more than 50,000 people.

Viiv Healthcare has not set a price for cabotegravir, Delany-Moretwe says, but the company has publicly committed to making it accessible to low and middle-income countries.

But injectable cabotegravir – when it comes – will never replace the HIV prevention pill for everyone, explains Yvette Raphael, executive director of the South African organisation Advocacy for Prevention of HIV and Aids. Instead, it has to be offered alongside Truvada to make sure people can choose what works for them.

“Here's the thing, [injectable cabotegravir] is another option in the prevention basket,” Raphael says. “We're excited, and we're happy, but it doesn't mean that ... everyone's going to like it.”





(Photo: Dogukan Keskinilic/
Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

What does the new Covid-19 vaccine mean for us?

This week's announcement of a promising new Covid-19 vaccine is good news. But don't get too excited: more affluent countries have already bought up most of the doses, and we do not own the expensive technology necessary to store and transport it

How excited should we be about the new vaccine? Is the pandemic over?

According to the pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and BioNTech, their new vaccine has exceeded all expectations so far in clinical trials. They said it is more than 90% effective at preventing Covid-19 symptoms. But there are important caveats: the trials are still in an early stage, and the results have not been peer-reviewed.

About 44,000 people have enrolled in the clinical trials for this vaccine, which are taking place in several countries around the world, including South Africa.

Even in the best-case scenario,

the vaccine will take years to roll out across the world – and that's assuming that everyone can afford it. So no, the pandemic is not over yet, even if there is room for cautious optimism.

Vigilance is still required, and the World Health Organisation's advice remains unchanged: wear a mask, social distance, and wash your hands.

How does the vaccine work?

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine exploits new technology that has never before been used in vaccines – another reason to treat it with caution. It uses mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid) to tell the body to produce viral proteins which stimulate an

immune response in the body. Although effective, there are considerable logistical challenges associated with this approach. The mRNA is not especially stable and must be stored and transported at a temperature of -80°C . The vaccine is administered with two injections, spaced three weeks apart, so another challenge will be to make sure that people return on time for the second injection.

When can I expect to receive the new vaccine?

Not any time soon.

Pfizer says it can only make about 1.3-billion doses of the vaccine next year. Between them, the United States, the United Kingdom, European Union, Canada and Japan have already bought about 1.1-billion doses. That leaves just 200-million doses to be shared between nearly 7-billion people.

Even assuming that the vaccine is available, it is going to be very difficult – and expensive – for developing world countries to build and maintain the extreme cold supply chain necessary to keep the vaccines at -80°C . Currently, no countries on the African continent have this capacity.

The WHO has argued that the vaccines should be given first to people who need them most, to “slow and change the trajectory of the pandemic”. This would be health workers, the elderly and people with underlying conditions.

Why can't we make the vaccine for ourselves?

Egypt, Senegal and South Africa have the

most developed pharmaceutical sectors on the African continent. However, Pfizer has already said that it does not intend to manufacture the drug in South Africa and will use its existing manufacturing facilities instead.

South Africa and India have led global diplomatic efforts to waive patents and other intellectual property protection for any potential Covid-19 vaccines. Civil society groups, including Doctors Without Borders, have strongly supported these efforts, arguing that this is not the time to be “profiteering” on drugs.

If countries which have capacity can make and sell the vaccines for themselves, this will increase availability and drive down prices.

Pfizer has so far refused to commit to waiving its intellectual property. On the day of the announcement of its new vaccine, as the company's shares soared to its highest-ever price, Pfizer chief executive Albert Bourla sold \$5.6-million in stock.

Are there any other vaccines on the way?

There are dozens of other vaccines in development around the world, including 10 in late-stage development. The positive results in the Pfizer/BioNTech trials are encouraging for all of these, as they indicate that the Covid-19 virus is susceptible to the kind of interventions used in most vaccines. Other vaccines may not require extreme cold storage or double-dosing, which are significant barriers to widespread distribution. ■

SO, YOU THINK YOU'RE A REAL PAN-AFRICAN?

Take this quiz to find out
how well you really know
our continent



- Which cat breed is considered one of the ancestors of the modern domestic cat?
- What is the name of the magnetic anomaly that causes compasses to go haywire in the Central African Republic?
- The Strait of Gibraltar separates Europe from Africa by 14km, 40km or 140km?
- Which country has more than 200 pyramids, double the number found in Egypt?
- From 1977 to 2011, this country was the only one in the world with only one colour for its flag, with no insignias, design or other details.
- What is the name of the mixture of butterfat and ochre pigment used by the Himba people of Namibia to protect themselves from the harsh desert climate?
- When Congolese musician Franco Luambo died in 1989, president Mobutu Sese Seko declared four days of mourning. True or false?
- Is Khartoum the capital of South Sudan or Sudan?
- Abiy Ahmed is the president of Ethiopia. True or false?
- Which country celebrated its 45th anniversary of independence from Portugal on November 11?
- True or false: The governor of Kisumu County in Kenya is the father of actress Lupita Nyong'o.
- Complete Yvonne Chaka Chaka's famous lyrics: "I wake up every day to make my beer – umqombothi. Wake up early every morning to please my people with African _____."

How did I do?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS'
to +27 73 805 6068 and
we will send you the
answers immediately.

0-4

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

5-8

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

9-12

"The sauce of the
Nile is actually
piri-piri."

Why it's hard to report on Ethiopia's civil war

Between a communications blackout and tight restrictions on movement, we know almost nothing about what is going on in Tigray. But the little that is emerging is enough to make us very afraid.

Simon Allison

It was nearly midnight on a Tuesday in Addis Ababa and Samuel Getachew, a freelance journalist, was at a friend's birthday party. Suddenly his phone started buzzing. Nothing had been officially announced yet, but his sources alerted him to some kind of conflict in Tigray, a province in the north of the country.

"Almost all of my friends at the party are from Tigray. And what was supposed to have been a birthday became something else. We couldn't go through with it. So we just cancelled it and headed home. We didn't know yet if this was a civil war or if this was a minor incident," he said.

A continent away, in Germany, Tsedale Lemma was fast asleep. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of the *Addis Standard*, one of Ethiopia's most influential independent publications. It was around 2am Addis time on Wednesday, November 4 when she was woken up by a call from Medihane Ekubamichael, a senior editor in Addis Ababa.

"Medihane was panicking," Tsedale told *The Continent*. "He said. 'Did you see what the prime minister said?' I said no, I'm sleeping."

In the middle of the night, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had posted an extraordinary announcement on Facebook. In it, he said that militants aligned with Tigray's regional government had attacked Ethiopian army positions in the region; and that he was sending in the troops for a "military confrontation".

He was, in effect, declaring war.

Medihane knew that tensions between the national government,



Calls for aid: Members of an Amhara militia, who fight alongside the national government, in Gondar. (Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP)

based in Addis Ababa, and the regional government led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had been rising for months. But this was a dramatic escalation, and he wasn't even sure if it was real. Maybe Abiy's Facebook was hacked, he asked Tsedale. Is it too late to text the prime minister's press officer?

Modern censorship

Abiy's Facebook had not been hacked. Ethiopia really was going to war – which meant that journalists needed to get to work. Except they could not get any information out of Tigray due to a province-wide communications blackout imposed by the national government: no internet, no mobile phones, no landlines. Overnight, the entire region went dark, and has remained so (it is not just journalists that are impacted, of course; none of Samuel Getachew's Tigrayan friends have yet been able to contact their relatives).

Nor are journalists allowed to travel to the conflict areas. The government said that special permits are required to go anywhere near the front lines, and they have not been issuing any of these permits (in fact, foreign correspondents have been told that the machine that prints press accreditation at the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority has run out of ink).

“Nobody independently is having access to Tigray,” said one Addis Ababa-based foreign correspondent, who asked not to be named. “Then there is the total communications blackout in Tigray. What we do know about bombings in Mekelle or in Tigray in general, we know from what the Ethiopian government says. We do not know from journalists. The only people who have access to communication are the Ethiopian troops and the militias.”

A small press trip organised by the Ethiopian government to Dansha – the military base allegedly attacked by Tigrayan forces on November 3 – ended in farce when journalists were denied access. They were told

that the situation had deteriorated rapidly, and instructed to return to Addis immediately.

Denying journalists access to Dansha military base meant the government's own version of events could not be confirmed

This meant, said the foreign correspondent, that they were unable to even confirm the government's own version of events – never mind probe any further. “I'm very, very frustrated,” said the foreign correspondent. “I would

like to work and to report on what people are living through right now. And so far, it's been very difficult. Some journalists are in trouble for just quoting the TPLF. What you have seen in the news is only scratching the surface.”

This is a throwback to the dark days of Ethiopian journalism, said Getachew. “Abiy allowed us to report on whatever we wanted for the first two years [of his administration]. And now we are going back. We were allowed to criticise him, and say whatever we wanted, and all of a sudden our social media is being supervised, and there is fear that whatever we say will come to haunt us in the future.”

'Fifty propaganda materials every day'

Last week, the *Addis Standard* issued a strongly worded statement urging the government to open channels of communication. “It was not a statement the government wanted to hear and we knew it. By doing so we are putting ourselves into the spotlight,” said Tsedale.

In Addis Ababa last Saturday, Medihane Ekubamichael called an emergency meeting of the *Addis Standard's* editorial team. He and Tsedale Lemma outlined basic safety protocols, and got everyone to update their emergency contact numbers. Just in case anyone was arrested, assaulted or disappeared, the team drafted letters to embassies,



Wary: A fighter in the town of Musebamb. (Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP)

human rights groups and trade bodies like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists. If anything happened, the letters would be ready to send immediately.

The letters were needed much sooner than expected. That afternoon, two police trucks pulled up outside Medihane's home. They arrested the editor and initially took him to an undisclosed location. Later, he was transferred to a prison and then charged with "attempts to dismantle the Constitution through violence" and "outrage against the Constitution".

After being released on Monday evening, Medihane was re-arrested on Tuesday, and he remains in custody. His absence is being felt in the newsroom. Medihane was in charge of day-to-day copy flow, and without him the publication has been forced to sharply reduce the amount of journalism they can do.

Tsedale is adamant that *Addis Standard* will not be used as a government mouthpiece. "They are releasing 50 propaganda materials every day, and we are not using more than 1% – only the major announcements. We are not using announcements from the army generals. We will not publish a one-sided story," she said.

But given the communications blackout and the restrictions on travel, first-hand reporting remains impossible. Besides, the journalist she would have sent to do that reporting is in jail. "Medihane would

have been the perfect person to despatch to that area. He is Tigrayan. He speaks the language, he knows the area, he grew up there.” But this identity may also have been what got him into trouble. “I can’t separate whether he is being targeted for his identity as a Tigrayan, or for his coverage of the situation,” said Tsedale. “These are absolutely abnormal times. And scary.”

Scraps of information

Even if it is not the full picture, what has made it into the news provides a terrifying glimpse into the severity of the conflict.

The African Union, headquartered in Addis Ababa, dismissed its own security chief after the Ethiopian government accused him of being “disloyal”. The United Nations has warned that food aid and medical supplies are being blocked from reaching Tigray. Thousands of displaced Tigrayans have fled into neighbouring Sudan. And at least four more

journalists have been arrested: Haftu Gebregzhiaber, Tsegaye Hadush, Abreha Hagos and Udi Mussa.

According to a leaked document seen by Reuters, Ethiopian police demanded a list of ethnic Tigrayan staff from the United Nations World Food Programme in the neighbouring state of Amhara, raising fears of ethnic violence.

The Ethiopian government said it

launched air strikes on major cities in Tigray; the Tigrayan authorities said these airstrikes have killed civilians.

Most damning of all is an Amnesty International report released on Thursday, which detailed how dozens and likely hundreds of people were stabbed or hacked to death in the Tigrayan town of Mai-Kadra. The victims appear to be mostly Amhara civilians; eyewitnesses told Amnesty that the perpetrators belonged to a militia group linked to the TPLF.

“We were lucky,” Fisseha Tekle, Amnesty’s Horn of Africa researcher, told *The Continent*. Mai-Kadra is on the south-western edge of Tigray, which meant that people could find a mobile phone signal not too far from the town. They sent photos and videos – showing streets lined with dead bodies – which were passed to the Amnesty team.

“We used forensic technology to authenticate some of the videos and photos coming from these areas. We verified that these photos have

A report by Amnesty International detailed how dozens and likely hundreds of people were stabbed or hacked to death in the Tigrayan town of Mai-Kadra



Sentinel: Zeleke Alabachew, a farmer and militia fighter, poses in his land near the village of Tekeldengy, northwest of Gondar. (Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP)

never been used previously. And based on the geographical and spatial view of the videos, we have confirmed they are really coming from the town,” said Tekle. Amnesty employed a consultant pathologist in Addis Ababa who was able to determine that many of the deaths were caused by sharp objects.

For now, these scraps of information are all we have about the tragedy that is undoubtedly unfolding in Tigray.

When contacted, the prime minister’s office referred *The Continent* to a press briefing about the media blackout, in which spokesperson Redwan Hussein blames the TPLF for the communications blackout. “The lack of information that everybody has is also true for the government. We cannot call, we cannot travel there. The only access we have is through our airport.”

The government does, however, have a track record of cutting communications during emergencies, such as during the 27 days of unrest which followed the killing of Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in June.

The Continent was unable to make contact with the TPLF. ■

Maaza Mengiste on writing, war and manipulating history

There are echoes of today's Ethiopian conflict in Mengiste's book, *The Shadow King*, which is set during a different Ethiopian war

Theresa Mallinson

"My father always said, Kidane begins, smiling, that a gun will not keep you alive. It is only designed to kill."

Kidane, an Ethiopian commander, said these words as he hands out guns to his soldiers in preparation for battle in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1941), the setting of Maaza Mengiste's second novel, *The Shadow King*.

This warning reverberates from the pages of historical fiction to contemporary reality; fast-forward more than 80 years and Ethiopia is erupting in a civil war

between the federal government and the northern Tigray region.

When *The Continent* speaks to Mengiste earlier this week, she is distressed about the situation. "I can't help thinking about the civilians who will inevitably be involved in this," she says. "War is not a neatly packaged enterprise. You know, the point of it is to destroy: it's about destruction."

After spending close to a decade researching and writing *The Shadow King* (and before that her debut novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, set during the Ethiopian Revolution, to which she has a more direct temporal and personal connection), Mengiste is well versed in the horrors of war.



Memento vitae: Archival images such as these of a young girl and woman soldier inform narrative and structural elements of the novel. (Photo: Project 3541)

This Thursday she tweeted: “There’s no war that stays confined to its objectives. There’s no war without disastrous consequences. No one can control war, no matter what authorities say. They can control silence concerning the events. But even that, they cannot keep quiet forever.”

Through her writing, Mengiste pierces this silence and breaks the shackles of such attempted control. Even when the immediate threat of war-time censorship has passed – when the killings on the battlefield and the massacres in villages are long over, and have been set down neatly in official accounts – there is still much to excavate: those untold and neglected stories of the people erased from history.

Fiction provides the medium to resurrect these forgotten experiences. Years ago, when Mengiste was grappling with how to depict war in her first book, her creative writing professor, South African Breyten Breytenbach, told her: “You must write this as fiction. Because fiction tells a truth that history cannot.”

“It was a powerful reminder of the power of literature...to tell you how something felt as it was happening, not just what happened,” Mengiste says. “And I wanted to do that part: I wanted to tell what it felt like for people who had often been ignored by history.”

In *The Shadow King*, a formidable quartet of women characters – Hirut, an orphan girl; Aster, her mistress; the unnamed cook; and Feren, aka Fifi, a courtesan and spy – shape the events of the novel and reclaim their place in history, not merely as “helpmeets” in



Enlisted: War is the backdrop of *The Shadow King*, by Maaza Mengiste, which has been shortlisted for the Booker prize.

(Photo: Nina Subin)

war, but as warriors in their own right. In centring women, Mengiste does not fall into the simplistic trap of celebrating only their strengths; each character is rendered in all her complexity, as a full human being.

Mengiste uses photographs extensively, both in her research, and as an element in the narrative and the structure of the novel. But, like written text, photographs contain many layers of meaning.

The act of “bearing witness” is complicated, as depicted in the character of Ettore Navaro, the Italian soldier and photographer. “[Ettore] was taking photographs and realising that they were about to be used to continue to create a false narrative about people like Hirut; people like Aster,” Mengiste says.

“I wanted to create these photo sections in the book, because I want us to consider the way that photographs are manipulated: they are manipulative.”

As reports emerge of photographs being digitally manipulated in the current Ethiopian conflict, Mengiste’s nuanced critique of the rhetoric and propaganda of war in *The Shadow King* is the necessary counterpoint. ■

The Shadow King has been shortlisted for the 2020 Booker prize. The winner will be announced on 19 November.

Tsitsi Dangarembga wants to make a feature film. Why can't she?

*Tsitsi Dangarembga is Zimbabwe's most prominent novelist. Her latest work, This Mournable Body, is shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize. Yet despite her long track record of success, she initially struggled to find a publisher for it. Dangarembga also wrote Neria, the highest-grossing film in Zimbabwe. But, as she explained in an interview with the art historian **Zamansela Nsele**, she has never been in a position to do her own feature film.*

I was commissioned by an American company to do [*Neria*]; an American man and his wife. I do not know how many feature films they made together. I went on to make another one with them, *Everyone's Child*, and then went on to do consultations on a couple more.

I have not been in a position to do a single feature film of my own. Those films were made within the development paradigm, and so they depict African people and women as being in situations of lack and needing to grow in consciousness in order to go to the next stage of their development, which is all right, except that in my opinion there is an exclusion of the aspirational.

I find that this cuts across gender in narrating black people on the continent and especially in my part of the continent, where we are trapped in this development paradigm. So we constantly have an image of ourselves as lacking and that is fed back to ourselves...

If it were accidental or random, it wouldn't take somebody like me, with all

the energy that I have and the narrative, more than two decades and I still haven't made my first feature film – no matter how I have tried to do it, so the structural issues are huge. They come from the way that society is structured with respect to blackness and with respect to black womanhood. ■



(Photo: Jekesai Njikizana / AFP)

This is an excerpt from a longer interview published in the Mail & Guardian.

Ask not for whom my heart breaks - it breaks for you

Samira Sawlani

Heartbreak is everywhere. An air of ambient lamentation has settled over us like a cloud. An inconsolable cumulonimbus.

Would it surprise you to learn that our dearest leaders are also broken-hearted? The cruel spear of sorrow does not spare the heart just because it beats in the breast of a head of state.

Sometimes it's about reciprocation. Or its lack: the deep ache of unrequited love that has us weeping in front of the poster of Justin Bieber or Frantz Fanon above our bed. (Don't judge – conscientisation is a process.)

Sometimes it's about betrayal. We spend weeks building the courage to ask out our crush, only to see them with their arms around our nemesis! Or the greatest betrayal of all: we dream all day about the last piece of cake, *which we saved to help deal with our heartache*, only to find our flatmate has scoffed the lot.

Presidents are not immune. Put yourself in their shoes: let's say you've been betrayed by your favourite army chief, who tries to do a coup on you even though you got him a villa in France and stood up to the UN when they were saying mean things about his so-called human

rights “abuses”. You had his back! And then he stuck a knife in yours. How would that make you feel?

Presidents are only human. If you prick them, do they not bleed? If they run out of tear gas, do not their own tears flow freely? Should they not lament when people – the people they've poured their hearts and souls into pretending they care about – call for them to step down?

There isn't enough cake in the world.

Cross my heart, hope not to die

It wouldn't surprise us to learn that Alpha Condé of Guinea and Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire have taken to bed with a tub of ice cream and a rom-com binge lined up on Netflix. We can all relate to their melancholy over not receiving ALL of the votes in their respective elections.

But focus on the positives: Guinea's Constitutional Court upheld Condé's victory, rejecting the pesky opposition's claims that polls were fraudulent.

And in Côte d'Ivoire, the Constitutional Council validated results that saw Ouattara win another term. Alassane, sweetheart, you got 94.3%. That's nothing to be ashamed of – it's actually pretty good for someone only on

his third term. Just hang in there, you'll get to 100% in no time, and your broken heart will mend.

(It will certainly mend more quickly than the 8,000 broken lives of those who fled to other countries to escape the violence visited upon them for daring to ask you to leave your Ivory tower, but we digress.)

Much Tundu about nothing?

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, then perhaps love for Tundu Lissu will grow in the heart of President John Magufuli of Tanzania, now that the opposition leader has left for Belgium. Lissu said he would fight for democracy from abroad as it was not safe for him to stay.

Dear John, others may say "he wasn't good enough for you anyway", but may we suggest you consider making amends? Maybe - and we're just spitballing here - maybe by not arresting every politician who isn't on your side?

We're all friends here, and friends don't let friends carry out unlawful detentions. Not while the world is still watching, anyway. That way sanctions lie. So if you're feeling that your assets might be a bit frozen, can we suggest you make like Elsa and let it go?

Do you want to build a straw man?

If only Zimbabwe would. Journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, charged with obstructing the course of justice there, has been denied bail because of his "propensity to commit offences". So in Chikurubi Prison he remains - heartbroken, as we all



An emotional farewell: A screen-grab from a video of Tundu Lissu departing Tanzania this week

are about Zimbabwe's latter-day struggles.

Heartbreak is everywhere. It is in you and in me. In Guinea, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. And it is in Ethiopia, where the Tigray crisis is escalating. Aid agencies are low on supplies, and many of those who can leave have left - 10,000 refugees have fled to Sudan already. Many of those who can't are simply just ... dying.

Our hearts break. Again and again. Will they ever heal?

The words of Warsan Shire weigh heavily on us today. From her poem, "what they did yesterday afternoon".

*...i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere* ■



Combat stations: Amhara militia men, who fight alongside federal troops against Tigray, receive training north of Bahir Dar on November 10.

(Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP)

Ethiopia is about to cross the point of no return

NEWS ANALYSIS

Rashid Abdi and Tobias Hagmann

With the world's attention fixated on the United States elections, Ethiopia embarked on a civil war last week. In five days Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who won the 2019 Nobel peace prize after making peace with Eritrea, ended the democratic transition that he had initiated two years before.

In the early hours of Wednesday

last week, Abiy ordered federal troops to launch an offensive against the northern region of Tigray, which borders Eritrea and is home to about 6% of the population. Government airstrikes on military positions in Tigray and a telecommunication shutdown began the same day.

Since then, Abiy's government has purged Tigrayan officials from government positions, mobilised ethnic militias to join the war and rejected international calls for dialogue with leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

On Saturday, Ethiopia's parliament replaced Tigray's elected leadership with a caretaker administration.

On Sunday, the prime minister appointed some of his close allies as the new heads of national defence,

intelligence and the federal police.

Until recently, Abiy preached national unity and forgiveness. So why did he start a civil war?

Abiy's *casus belli* is an alleged raid on the headquarters of the Northern Command in Mekelle during which, it is claimed, arms were looted and scores killed. The truth is more complicated. First, the war preparations had been under way for weeks. Federal forces and allied troops from other federal states were massed on the Tigray and Amhara border as early as late October.

Second, the officer corps of the Northern Command is predominantly Tigrayan and Oromo. The command has been in Mekelle for more than a decade. It had put down deep social roots and developed close ties with the TPLF. When Abiy issued the order for an offensive, the command rejected it and reaffirmed its loyalty to the elected leadership in Tigray. A brief firefight between loyalist and dissident troops ensued, which was quickly suppressed.

Abiy's government has purged Tigrayan officials from government positions, mobilised ethnic militias to join the war and rejected international calls for dialogue

The Oromo members of the command are believed to be predominantly supportive of the TPLF. Most are

disenchanted with the prime minister's arrest of Oromo leaders and the heavy-handed crackdown in Oromia.

Third, Tigray is estimated to hold the bulk of Ethiopia's military hardware. The region has enough helicopter gunships, heavy field guns, tanks and armoured personnel carriers to mount a conventional war. The idea they would need to raid the command armoury and depots for weapons and ammunition is spurious, fantastical, even.

The role of distrust

Abiy distrusts the professional national army. His relations with the rank and file are brittle. His stint in the army as a radioman in the signals corps and cybersecurity department was brief and had not given him the depth and network needed to effectively influence it.

This partly explains why he is increasingly reliant on ethnic forces drawn from other regional states to prosecute the campaign in Tigray. So far, the bulk of the federal fighting force is drawn from a plethora of ethnic armies from the regional states. They include Amhara State special forces and Liyu paramilitary police from Oromia.

By outsourcing the war to ethnic units – some with axes to grind against Tigrayans – Abiy is playing a dangerous game almost certain to aggravate the conflict and transforming, potentially, what is a centre-periphery contest into a wider ethnic conflagration.

Both the Tigray leadership and the federal government deserve blame for the current crisis, but it is important to

understand the wider context.

The speed at which Abiy evolved from political reformer to war prime minister has astonished his friends and foes alike. When he came to power amid popular unrest in March 2018, Abiy gained overwhelming acclaim as a reformer. He released prisoners, welcomed back the opposition and promised to open up the economy. Yet political liberalisation backfired as pent-up ethnic tensions spiralled out of control, destabilising a nation that has long been considered an anchor of stability in the Horn of Africa region.

Opposition arrests

“Abiymania” dissipated rapidly when it became clear that the new federal leadership was unable to manage these conflicts. Abiy faced serious political opposition from the outgoing TPLF guard, which had dominated the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front for decades. After he broke with his former colleagues of the Oromo Democratic Party, Abiy faced increasing criticism from Oromo nationalists. They accused him of selling out the Oromo cause; he had many of them arrested in return. Repositioning himself as an Ethiopian nationalist who transcends ethnic divisions, Abiy created the multi-ethnic, but unitary Prosperity Party that controls all levers of power.

Ethiopia has taken a fatal step towards a full-blown civil war. Armed clashes are now raging on multiple battle fronts. Unconfirmed reports suggest that hundreds of soldiers have died on both

sides in less than a week.

Expectations of a swift and clean victory are misplaced. The most likely outcome is a messy and grinding stalemate; and, worse, a protracted insurgency for which TPLF is well-suited. A prolonged conflict is bound to have dire implications. It elevates the prospect of a regionalised and multi-ethnic conflict, risks reversing the economic and development gains made in the past 20 years, and is almost certain to trigger large-scale displacement. Most crucially, it diminishes prospects for furthering democratisation and reduces the chances for credible elections in 2021.

The speed at which Abiy evolved from political reformer to war prime minister has astonished friends and foes alike

The window for international intervention and mediation is closing very fast. Without a quick, robust and concerted international response to stop the fighting, Ethiopia runs the real risk of crossing the point of no return. ■

Rashid Abdi is a Horn of Africa analyst based in Nairobi. Tobias Hagmann is an associate professor in international development at Roskilde University in Denmark

The Edo State election tells us a lot about politics in Nigeria today

Princess Hamman-Obels

Elections for State governor are important in Nigeria, because state governments control vast budgets and these positions can mobilise support for presidential candidates. Edo State held its governorship election in September, with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, Godwin Obaseki, defeating the All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate, Osagie Ize-Iyamu. This was the first major election in Nigeria to be held during the coronavirus pandemic, and provides several important insights into Nigerian politics today.

The Rejection of 'godfatherism'

Nigerian politics is often said to be controlled by political godfathers, who do not necessarily stand for office, but fund candidates to stand on their behalf. Much of the Edo election was centred on Adams Oshiomhole and his role as a godfather in Edo politics. Oshiomhole had allegedly used his influence to get Ize-Iyamu the APC governorship ticket, and many

believed that he would have been heavily involved in governance if Ize-Iyamu had won. Thus, the defeat of the ruling party candidate can be read as a rejection of godfatherism.

There is greater consensus than you might think

Although the election pitted the ruling party against the main opposition, it was not the pitched battle one might have expected. This was demonstrated by the stark absence of APC stalwarts, including President Muhammadu Buhari, in Ize-Iyamu's campaign – and their willingness to congratulate Obaseki on his victory. Some have suggested that this situation came about because, through Oshiomhole, Ize-Iyamu was seen to be close to another prominent Nigerian “godfather”: APC leader and former Governor of Lagos, Bola Tinubu. By blocking Ize-Iyamu, Tinubu's rivals within the APC hoped to weaken Tinubu's aspiration to replace President Buhari at the end of his current and final term in office.

Taken together, these two lessons demonstrate the complexity of Nigerian politics – especially as the race to succeed Buhari heats up. Party networks matter, but intra-party divisions mean that they don't determine how party leaders behave during sub-national elections. ■

Princess Hamman-Obels is with the Electoral Hub, an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation, and Advocacy in Development.



Citizens win landmark case for safe childbirths

Amy Fallon and Tinka Teddy Nalule

Before her daughter-in-law bled to death after refusing to bribe a government hospital nurse for a safe childbirth, Ugandan Rhoda Kukiriza had never set foot in a court. She had never spoken to a lawyer. She had never been involved in a legal case.

Today, the 70-year-old farmer and grandmother is fêted in her small village as a “victor and a celebrity” after her role in a historic legal triumph for her country and Africa in which she and other brave citizens stood up to the government in a bid to make the death of Sylvia Nalubowa and all the other deaths of women during childbirth in Uganda count.

In August, judges finally ruled after nearly a decade-long court case over the loss of Nalubowa and Jennifer Anguko, who also died while giving birth, that the government must prioritise maternal health, in a move which activists say symbolises a “seismic shift”.

“My daughter is irreplaceable,” said Kukiriza when asked by *The Continent* about her reaction to the rare and decisive



Mum's the word: Activists protest for maternal health in Kampala (above) and a nurse attends to a mother in Tororo (Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik for The Hewlett Foundation/Getty Images)



victory in Uganda, where legal cases can drag on for years unresolved through a system where corruption often creeps in.

“I miss her. But when I got the call from Kampala and the lady said ‘you won’, I jumped. I danced, I sang. I shouted out of joy. It was so long, but we want to see no more deaths that can be avoided.”

Sixteen women die daily in Uganda from childbirth-related complications, according to the State of Uganda Children report of 2012/13.

Nalubowa, the wife of Kukiriza's son

Stephen, died in Mityana Hospital, about 70km outside the capital Kampala, in 2009 due to lack of medical staff. Less than a year later, district councillor Anguko died needlessly in Arua Regional Referral Hospital, in the country's north, from complications of obstructed labour while also delivering via caesarean, due to nurses' negligence.

In 2011, Kukiriza and Inziku Valente, Anguko's widower, joined forces with Ugandan nonprofit Center for Health Human Rights and Development (CEHURD), and Professor Ben Twinomugisha of Makerere University School of Law, suing the government in a landmark petition.

On August 19, five judges unanimously ruled that women's rights had been abused. Their families were to be awarded compensation of \$40,000 each for the "psychological torture, violation of the rights to life, health and cruel and degrading treatment of their loved ones".

Ibrahim Nsereko, a strategic litigation program manager at CEHURD, said that this marked the first time that a court in Africa had directed the government to fund maternal health or the health sector.

And after almost 10 years of challenging the government, it may be hard to believe that activists say they're now in an even tougher fight to enforce the ruling.

Uganda's health funding as a share of the national budget has shrunk, while defence spending has skyrocketed from \$260-million to \$717-million – unbelievably the same size as the proportion for health.



Victorious: Nakibuuka Noor Musisi, the director of programmes at CEHURD, (left), Rhoda Kukiriza (right) and Valente Inziku (below) won the case after almost a decade. (Photo: CEHURD)



National budgeting preparatory work is being conducted for the 2021 budget, a crucial year when Uganda will head to the polls.

Last week, activists were expected to travel to Arua to meet with district officials, followed by Mityana, before meeting with Parliament and health and finance ministry officials to explain what the landmark judgment means.

In Mityana, Kukiriza is already telling her fellow villagers that they too can challenge the government over their rights. "Everywhere I go I speak to women," she said. "Through my activism, I will look to see that the judgment is enforced." ■

Angola's president has squandered his early goodwill

The initial optimism that surrounded João Lourenço has disappeared thanks to the country's poor economic performance and persistent corruption

Cláudio Silva

When João Lourenço took over as president of Angola in September 2017 – following 38 years of his predecessor, President José Eduardo dos Santos – he basked in a wave of support and even adoration.

The mood in Angola, and even among international observers, was one of widespread optimism. Here was a president who finally seemed willing and able to stand up to entrenched corruption by dismantling the very system that put it in place, and prosecuting the people who institutionalised it.

Fuelling this optimism were his

promises to promote freedom of the press, economic diversity, and boost employment, especially among Angola's youth. JLo, as he is commonly known, appeared willing to go after members of his own party, the ever-present People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Politicians who had never seen the inside of an interrogation cell, including Dos Santos's son, for example, were publicly accused of corruption and stood trial. Some even went to prison.

Three years later, that initial excitement has worn off, and instead the mood is one of anger and betrayal: street protests have been violently suppressed by police; there is a feeling of hypocrisy surrounding corruption allegations within JLo's own cabinet, which he has not addressed; and the MPLA has gleefully returned to inflammatory rhetoric and total control of state media. Recent asset seizures from previously "untouchable" generals, part of Dos Santos's inner circle, now mean that the MPLA government has a monopoly on television channels, which they use to spew pro-government rhetoric with no oversight.

So what happened?

Despite the early optimism, Lourenço has failed to understand one of the most important factors afflicting Angola: its failing economy, which continues to be completely dependent on rapidly dwindling oil revenue, and is characterised by rampant unemployment

and a severely weakened local currency. Decades of government mismanagement, coupled with institutional corruption, mean that during the previous regime, at least \$24-billion was illegally stolen from the public purse (this figure comes from JLo himself). Angola's public debt is currently valued at around \$72-billion, of which about a quarter is owed to China alone.

In other words: the amount of money siphoned off to feed the lifestyle of Angola's billionaires and millionaires is more than the country's debt to the Asian superpower.

Angolans have also started to lose faith in JLo's much-vaunted fight against corruption. The president has kept many of the same people in power, including ministers and governors, often in the same positions. Some people who were removed from one job, ostensibly due to incompetence or corruption, were nominated for another one months later.

One example: JLo's current chief of staff, Edeltrudes Costa, who held the same position under Dos Santos, was recently exposed in the Portugal press as having significant assets abroad due to government contracts he won while being employed by the state. Despite intense public pressure, there have been no repercussions.

Amid the global pandemic which has wreaked even more havoc on the economy, it is simply wishful thinking to imagine that Angolans, about 65% of whom are under 25 years old, would be happy with the status quo. Instead, they are protesting against it, demanding jobs, local elections



Same old: Three years in, Angola's new president is looking an awful lot like his predecessor. (Photo: Pavel Golovkin/Pool via Reuters)

(which have been postponed indefinitely), greater transparency in government, and more accountability.

But rather than engage with these concerns, JLo's government has resorted to the same old tactics used by the previous administration: brute force and cheap and outdated propaganda. These are the trappings of autocratic regimes, and will only serve to exacerbate an already tense situation.

On Wednesday, Angola celebrated 45 years of independence. Yes, it's a milestone. But what does the country have to show for it besides crippling public debt, persistent corruption, a government unwilling and unable to take responsibility for its citizens' most basic needs, and a president who had everything in his power to turn a corner, but instead chose the route of repression, incompetence and unaccountability? ■

Cláudio Silva is an entrepreneur from Angola who writes about food, travel and politics



The Big Picture

Dunkirk spirit: This week, much of the western world observed Remembrance Day, commemorating the soldiers who lost their lives in World War II. Some of that war's most famous battles were fought on the coastline of France, which is today the centre of another crisis. This photograph, taken on the beach of Gravelines, not far from Dunkirk, shows migrants carrying a small inflatable boat in a dangerous attempt to cross the English Channel. Some 6,200 migrants attempted the crossing in the first eight months of 2020, compared with 2,294 in the whole of 2019. (Photo: Sameer Al-Doumy/AFP)

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