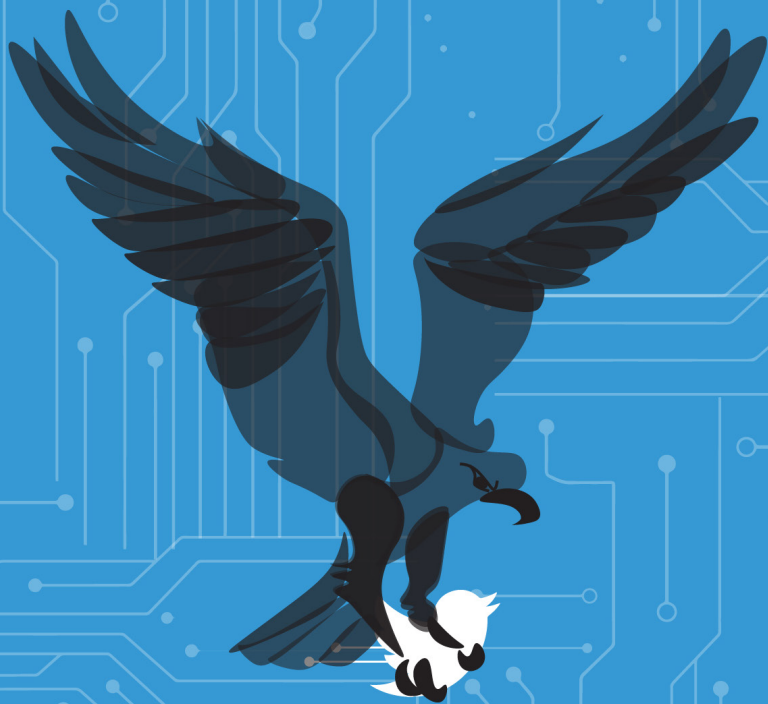


The Continent

with **Mail & Guardian**



The aftershocks of Nigeria's Twitter ban

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

Inside:

■ **'Special leave':** South Africa's health minister implicated in Covid-19 corruption scandal (p8)

■ **Snatched off the street:** Three-quarters of Nigeria's prison population is awaiting trial (p14)

■ **Beating Big Cellphone:** The man from Lesotho who fought for lower data costs (p22)

■ **Out in the cold:** What happens to cancer patients in a pandemic? (p24)

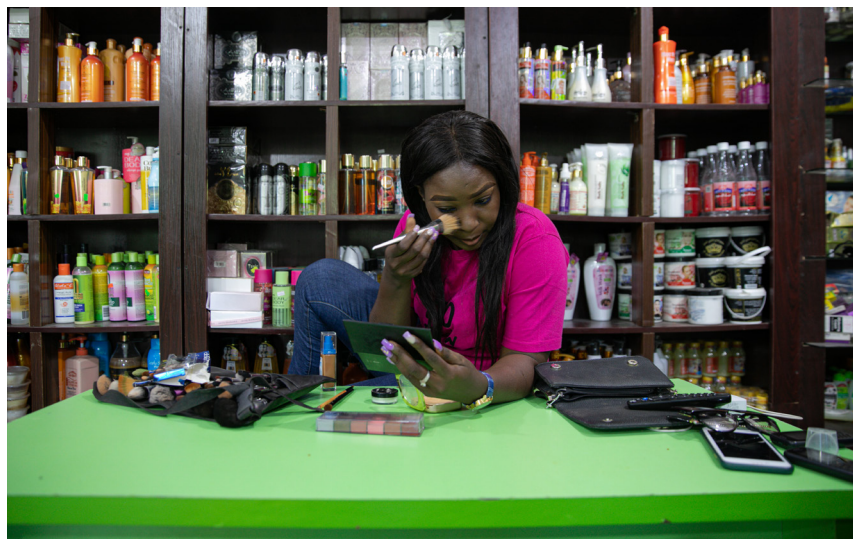
■ **Shrouded in uncertainty:** Question marks surround Zambia's election (p28)



COVER STORY:

Nigerians are still reeling from their government's sudden, dramatic ban on Twitter – a decision

applauded by none other than Donald J Trump. The decision sent shockwaves through the country's rapidly growing tech sector, and confirms investors' worst fears about the capricious nature of President Buhari's administration (p11)



Lipstick, blush and Boko Haram: In this exclusive photo essay, photojournalist Fati Abubakar takes us into the heart of Maiduguri's make-up salons (p17)

The week in numbers

34



... times longer than men:
the time women typically
spend queuing for a toilet



7 hours

... of rolling power
outages each day this
week in South Africa,
the continent's second
largest economy



300%

... inflation in Sudan, the
highest the economy has
seen in decades

10



... the number of women
in Uganda's new
82-member cabinet

1,409%

... increase in VPN
use following
Nigeria's Twitter ban





NIGERIA

Buhari blesses homegrown phone

On Wednesday, President Muhammadu Buhari was presented with a brand new cellphone by his trade minister. The phone – under the not-so-catchy brand name ITF Mobile, where ITF stands for Industrial Training Fund – is the first of 12 mobile phones produced by the federal government, with all components sourced locally. It runs on the Android operating system. *The Continent* is reliably informed that the Twitter app has not been installed on the president's device.

KENYA

If you can't beat them, hire them?

President Uhuru Kenyatta is wooing makers of illegal firearms in the hope of creating a formal arms economy. He has promised them a “steady” job to “grow the economy and help keep your country safe” at a new firearms factory in Kiambu that can produce 12,000 assault rifles a year. Doubtless Kenyatta's economic theory is informed by former colonial powers like France and Britain, which have massive military-industrial complexes and will export to pretty much anyone who will buy.

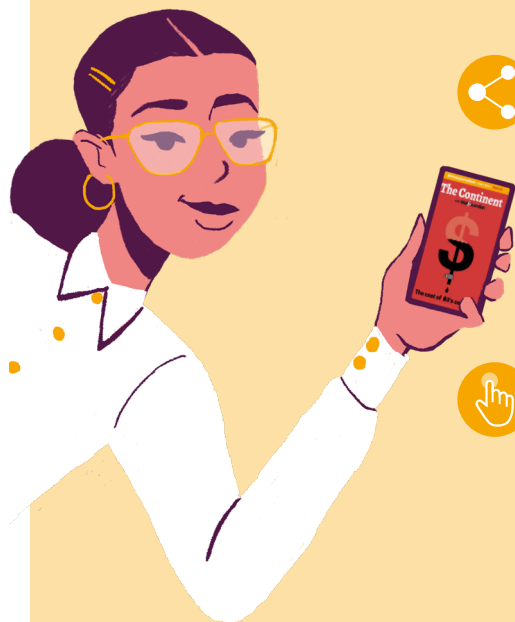
TUNISIA

Dignity for those who drown at sea

A cemetery for people who drown in the Mediterranean while seeking a better life was officially opened in Tunisia this week. The site is called the Garden of Africa, and is already half full. Many of those buried there are unidentified, and their tombstones carry only vague details. “Woman, black dress, Hachani beach,” reads one, according to AFP. The cemetery was built by Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian artist who was moved to act when he discovered migrants' bodies were being buried near a dump. “I wanted to give them a first taste of paradise,” 74-year-old Koraichi said.

UNA GOVERNMENT DON BAN TWITTER, SO MAKE UNA SIGN UP FOR THE CONTINENT.

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ETHIOPIA**Famine returns**

At least 350,000 people in Ethiopia are experiencing famine, according to a new survey backed by the United Nations. The survey was conducted in the northern Tigray province, where the federal government of Ethiopia, backed by troops from neighbouring Eritrea, is waging a brutal war against the provincial authorities. The United States has promised \$181-million in emergency aid, but has urged Ethiopia to remove barriers to entry for humanitarian workers. Eritrea, meanwhile, has accused the United States of “stoking further conflict and destabilisation” through intervening in the region – without acknowledging the role of Eritrea’s own troops, who have been accused of war crimes.

WEST AFRICA**France announces plan to bid Sahel an overdue adieu**

France is going to reduce its military presence in the Sahel region of West Africa, President Emmanuel Macron has said. There are 5,100 French soldiers in the region – specifically in Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso – with a mandate to counter militant groups like Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. “France has been involved for a little over eight years in the Sahel,” Macron said. “Many of our soldiers have fallen. I think of their families.” The French president did not mention the families of the dozens of civilians who have been killed by French forces in the region.

TANZANIA**Facing the music**

When rapper Diamond Platnumz was nominated for the Best International Act at the BET awards, he was probably expecting support from home. Instead, 20,000 Tanzanians signed a petition accusing him of propping up the regime of the late John Magufuli. “[He used his talent] to whitewash and deodorize the brutal repression of the late dictator,” said Change Tanzania, an NGO. Magufuli died this year of Covid-19, after claiming Tanzania was Covid-free and refusing to take precautions.



SOUTH AFRICA

Private power producers get a greenish light

As rolling blackouts gripped a freezing country this week, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that businesses will be able to produce 100-megawatts of capacity themselves, up from the previous maximum of 1MW. This will allow large companies to go off the grid and could potentially hasten the collapse of the state power utility, Eskom, whose power grid is on the verge of collapse thanks to mismanagement and corruption. Some 90% of its capacity is still in the form of polluting coal. Plans to introduce other energy sources have been stymied by politicians with less than honourable intentions.

MOROCCO

Puff, puff, passed: Cannabis legalised

Morocco has become the latest African country to legalise the use of cannabis – known as kif in Morocco – for medicinal purposes. The new law was approved this week by the upper house of parliament. The hope is to create a new cannabis industry that will improve the incomes of local farmers and create sustainable jobs, in turn boosting local development and the national economy.



ZIMBABWE

Prestigious award for Dangarembga

Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga has added another feather to her cap, after being named as the winner of the 2021 Pen Pinter Prize. The annual award is given to a writer from the Commonwealth (or former Commonwealth – Zimbabwe withdrew in 2003) who “casts an unflinching, unswerving gaze upon the world, and shows a fierce intellectual determination ... to define the real truth of our lives and our societies”. Last year Dangarembga was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for her novel *This Mournable Body*; she was also nominated by fellow author Maaza Mengiste as one of *The Continent's* Africans of the Year.

South Africa

Shining star of SA's Covid-19 response falls to graft probe

Covid-19 in Africa's second largest economy has not been going well. Lauded for a strict lockdown that slowed its first wave, South Africa has nevertheless had to deal with nearly 60,000 deaths officially linked to the coronavirus, with the actual death toll suspected to be triple that. Billions of rands have been spent in response to the pandemic. And billions appear to have been stolen.

The country's Special Investigating Unit is looking at corruption in the awarding of tenders for almost everything – from personal protective equipment for healthcare workers to water for schools and social grants.

Now its health minister has been granted “special leave” while investigations into his potential involvement in corruption are concluded. Zweli Mkhize was the figurehead of the country's response to Covid-19. He caught Covid. He recovered. He travelled the country,

going to hotspots and appearing on television to assure a public worried about South Africa's often faltering vaccination programme. Meanwhile, his friends were making enormous profits off this work.

Digital Vibes, a company answering to Mkhize's former personal assistant, was given a R150-million (\$11-million) contract for handling PR for the health department's response to the pandemic. At one point it invoiced R3.5-million (\$260,000) to set up an interview for Mkhize on the national broadcaster, SABC – despite the fact that the health department has its own communication team, and that the SABC is obliged to carry important announcements in any case. Money from this tender apparently also made its way to Mkhize's son, and to spending on a home owned by his wife.

Billions of rands have been spent in response to Covid. And billions appear to have been stolen.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has so far avoided suspending or firing his health minister, but public pressure meant that something had to give.

The “special leave” allows Mkhize to keep his salary and benefits. For now. ■

Ethiopia

On your left: Ethiopia's Letesenbet Gidey broke the 10km record set two days earlier. Now she plans to do it again. Photo: Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP



Gidey smashes 10k record

On Sunday, Ethiopia-born Sifan Hassan became the fastest woman in the world over 10,000 metres. Hassan, who races for the Netherlands, ran the distance in 29:06.82.

But her celebrations were short lived. Just two days later, the record was broken again – this time by Ethiopia's Letesenbet Gidey (pictured), who was more than five seconds faster at the track in Hengelo in

the Netherlands.

“I expected to run a world record,” said 23-year-old Gidey. “I’d like to try to break the world record again and break 29 minutes.”

At this point, few would bet against her. Gidey is also the world record holder in the 5,000 metres, and will be a gold medal contender at the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo. ■

Once again, Buhari is shooting Nigeria in the foot

In April, Twitter announced that it is setting up its African headquarters in Accra. The location took everyone by surprise. Ghana's tech industry is vibrant, but it is small compared to other major hubs on the continent – most notably Lagos, which is booming with innovative, entrepreneurial start-ups.

But insiders at Twitter told *The Continent* that Nigeria was never really an option. The government is too unpredictable, they said. The rules can change at any time.

Twitter appears to have made the right call – because last week, the rules suddenly changed.

With little explanation, the Nigerian government banned the social media platform. It accused Twitter of “activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence”.

The ban came just days after Twitter deleted a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari that violated the platform's policy on abusive behaviour (the tweet threatened to deal with protesters in the south-east of the country “in the language they understand”, which was widely interpreted as a threat of violence).

The ban sent shockwaves through

Nigeria's tech community (as *The Continent* reports on page 12). There is little doubt that it will make investors think twice before putting their money into Nigeria – and they will demand higher returns on investment to do so. This puts the brakes on a thriving industry that, from an economic perspective, was one of the few areas of growth in Africa's largest economy.

The decision is all the more puzzling given the state of that economy. In our cover story last week, *The Continent* reported that the Nigerian state is set to lose 30% of its annual revenues as the oil price declines over the next decade. It needs new ideas, new industries, and new businesses – and yet it has created an environment that only encourages the smartest and most innovative Nigerians to look for opportunities abroad (we hear it's nice in Accra at this time of year).

Perhaps we should not be so surprised. After all, this is the same state that routinely detains and imprisons its citizens for months on end (see our feature on p14), in brazen violation of due process and individual rights.

Once again, Nigeria has made its priorities clear. ■



Better times: Staff from both companies celebrate in Lagos last year after Paystack was acquired by Stripe

Nigeria's tech community was booming – now it's in shock

The government's sudden ban on Twitter could jeopardise one of the country's most promising industries

Alexander Onukwue in Lagos

Africa's biggest startup story in 2020 was the acquisition, by US company Stripe, of Paystack – an electronic payments processor that started in Lagos in 2015.

Valued at around \$200-million, it was a landmark deal for Nigeria's booming tech

community. A hunt for more Paystacks has ensued among local and international investors. They are worried about missing out. With broadband penetration rising from under 20% five years ago to above 40% since May 2020, Nigeria's ICT sector is the fastest growing in the country, rising 6.31% in the first quarter of 2021.

Such metrics, including the fact that

81% of Nigerian adults own mobile phones, encourage investors to part with even more unprecedented million-dollar checks, like the \$10-million raised by digital bank Kuda at seed stage last November. The appetite and tolerance for tech enterprise in Africa's most populous nation has never been so high.

But this burst of energy and innovation is facing a familiar foe: the Nigerian government.

Last week, the federal government banned Twitter – one of the biggest social media platforms in the world. The ban came after Twitter deleted a tweet that came from President Muhammadu Buhari's account, saying that it amounted to a threat of violence. Businesses and media organisations in Nigeria have now been instructed to delete their Twitter accounts, and ordinary citizens risk arrest for using the app.

The Twitter ban comes just six months after another major shock to the local tech industry, when the Central Bank of Nigeria ordered banks to stop enabling cryptocurrency transactions.

Suddenly, Nigeria is losing its appeal for tech investors.

“The truth is that regulatory risk has been the chief concern for us investors for a while,” Tokunboh Ishmael, a former board chair at the Africa Venture Capital Association, told *The Continent*. Through Alitheia Capital, an investment firm, she has helped fund Nigerian startups like Paga, MAX and Lidya. In each case, “regulatory risk has factored high in our risk matrix”.

For Nigerian startups, this means

that they need to offer investors a higher return on their investment than in more stable markets, Ishmael said.

The Twitter ban comes just six months after another major shock to the local tech industry, when the Central Bank of Nigeria ordered banks to stop enabling cryptocurrency transactions.

Tayo Oviolu, who founded Paga in 2009, says a handful of investors have mentioned regulatory risk as their reason for not investing in the mobile payments company, but such occasions have been rare in the past. “That said, all investors consider the macroeconomic situation of any country they invest in, particularly if investing in a regulated sector.”

Operating costs

The Twitter ban will not just make it hard for Nigerian tech companies to raise money; for some of them, it will also make it difficult to operate. With its estimated two million users in Nigeria, Twitter is an important platform for businesses.

Eloho Oname, founding CEO of Endeavor Nigeria and co-founder of a new firm aiming to fund female-focused startups with \$25,000 seed money, said Twitter has been “essential as a touchpoint” with the founders and

startups they serve.

Her firm, FirstCheck Africa, is essentially a startup in need of a platform to tell its story and gain traction with the women who could found Africa's next big thing. "A not-insignificant part of our investment pipeline relies on outreach on Twitter and a lot of our hiring is done via Twitter. The ban has disrupted all of that. None of the alternatives are as efficient."

Twitter has become a customer service management platform for new startups looking to be lean and nimble. Part of the success of Piggyvest, a popular savings app, is that it went from zero to 450 users in a year with next to nothing spent on marketing, relying on Twitter for customer acquisition.

With the ban, startups have pushed notifications explaining that Twitter support is now deactivated.

An email from Fairmoney, a digital bank, offered a phone number, an email and a Facebook page as alternative customer service channels. Risevest, a stock-trading app, included Instagram among its alternatives. Henry Mascot, founder of Curacel – which provides fraud detection technology for insurance companies – says they have had to hire a new team outside Nigeria to manage their Twitter feed. That means more spending.

Staying hopeful

Mascot says it's too early to know how bad the impact of the ban will be. His investors, who helped Curacel raise \$450,000 in March, are in for the long run, but he is concerned about the message to the broader ecosystem of investors.

Oviosu, the Paga CEO, is optimistic and says investors will observe the Twitter ban as an isolated issue and won't be deterred from the market.

Victor Basta, managing partner of Magister Advisors which has advised on multimillion-dollar deals in Africa, sees the negatives of a social media ban but doesn't expect spillovers to fundraising work.

"We have multiple deals ongoing with Nigerian companies and we see no backlash from this step," he says.

"A government that is consistently hostile to technology sends a message that its economy is less credible as a destination for important future-focused investments of time and money."

But in the present, founders and investors agree that a continued pattern of arbitrary regulatory changes is a wrong signal to people considering Nigerian startups as a destination for their capital.

"A government that's consistently hostile to technology sends a message that its economy is less credible as a destination for important future-focused investments of time and money," Omame says. "We're competing for talent and capital with ecosystems all over the world and we're even further on the back foot."



Stuck in jail: The cost of Nigeria's arbitrary arrests

Nearly three-quarters of prisoners in Nigeria are still awaiting trial – but the police continue to randomly pull people off the street.

Aisha Salaudeen in Lagos

In October 2018, Samson Udeh was in a crowded market in Lagos, Nigeria buying garri, a staple food, when he was arrested by two officers and shoved into the back of a police van.

Udeh, a meat griller in his early 20s, said the officers identified themselves as members of the anti-cultism unit and accused him of being a cultist.

“They weren’t in uniform and they kept insisting that I am a suspected cultist because I had dreadlocks at the time. I told them what I do for a living and said I had not done anything wrong but they put me at the back of their van,” he told *The Continent*.

He said he was kept in a cell and denied access to a phone call until the third day of his arrest. He was only charged on the 10th day of his arrest. His bail condition, which he could not afford, was set at 5,000 naira (about \$13).

Without bail or legal representation, he spent the next three months in jail.

The Continent put Udeh’s allegations to the Lagos state police command. Muyiwa Adejobi, the spokesperson, said the police cannot take responsibility for what happened to him. The judge who ruled

that Udeh be remanded in prison was responsible, he said, and not the police force.

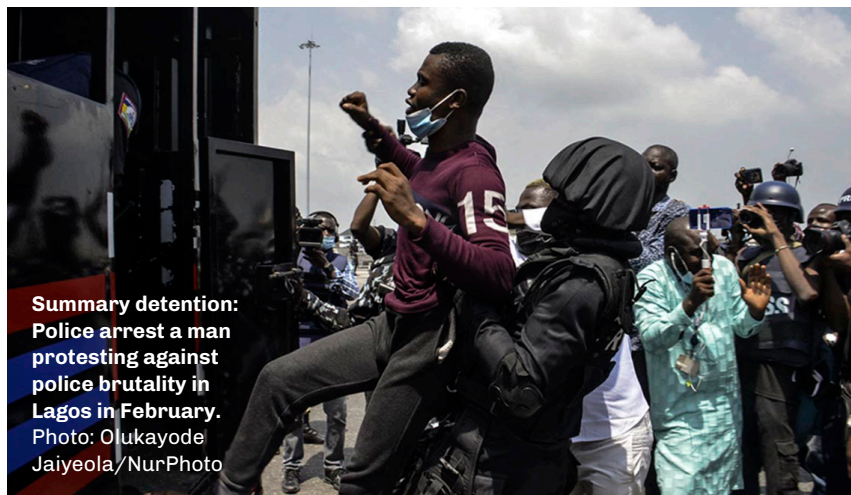
Adejobi also insisted that the police officers who had arrested Udeh must have had credible evidence before making the arrest. He did not elaborate on that evidence. “Since the case has gone to court, police can not be blamed for wrongful arrest again. If we (the police) didn’t have credible evidence we wouldn’t prosecute him.”

Udeh’s case is far from unique.

In Nigeria, remand inmates like Udeh make up 72.8% of the country’s prison population, according to a report by the World Prison Brief. Additionally, out of 65,465 inmates in correctional facilities across the country, 48,034 are still awaiting trial, according to the Nigerian Correctional Service.

Section 35 of the Nigerian constitution says anyone arrested by the police must be formally charged within 48 hours, and those who have been charged with minor offences must be tried within two months.

But Oluyemi Adetiba-Orija, a criminal lawyer based in Lagos, said the law is not often enforced, leaving people stuck in prison, sometimes for crimes they did not commit, for longer than stipulated.



**Summary detention:
Police arrest a man
protesting against
police brutality in
Lagos in February.**
Photo: Olukayode
Jaiyeola/NurPhoto

Adetiba-Orija runs Headfort Foundation, a non-profit providing pro-bono legal services to minor offenders without legal representation in the country.

The 32-year-old said that people are kept in prison for long because of their inability to meet their bail conditions. To help, her foundation goes to prisons and tries to pick up 30 cases with each visit. Their focus is minor offences, because capital crimes take too much time.

It was during one of her team's visits that Udeh's case was picked up. He was found not guilty of cultism as the police could not provide evidence against him, and was released in December 2018.

Udeh is lucky.

Many are not. In the past, organisations like Amnesty International have accused the Nigerian police of detaining and torturing people without evidence. According to a 2016 report by the

organization, Nigeria's now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit often picked people from the streets, extracting bribes and false confessions from them.

The rights group also said that it had documented 82 cases of police brutality in the country between 2017 and 2020.

One of the far-reaching effects of unlawful arrests or keeping people longer than required in prison is that it contributes to overcrowding, according to a 2019 report by the Asylum Research Center.

The report found that as a result of keeping too many people in federal prisons across the country, resources such as toilets are inadequate, and food is readily unavailable to match the number of people kept in these facilities.

Udeh, who spent three months in Ikoyi prison, Lagos, said it was "a horrible experience". ■

THE QUIZ

0-4

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

5-7

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

8-10

"In the great Twitter war of '21, I stood my ground: retweet was not an option."

- 1_ Which city was the capital of the former Songhai Empire?
- 2_ The famous Benin statues originate from which country?
- 3_ The former Kingdom of Dahomey (artwork pictured) is which modern-day country?
- 4_ True or false: Lomé is the capital of Malawi.
- 5_ Harissa is a chilli pepper paste from which country?
- 6_ What is the textile called that is used to make popular African fabric? (Hint: it's also the name of the capital of Turkey.)
- 7_ What is the demonym for people from Somalia?
- 8_ Which former president of Côte d'Ivoire was recently acquitted of war crimes by the International Criminal Court?
- 9_ What is the highest mountain in Kenya?
- 10_ Which bank, established in 1921, is the continent's oldest?

How did I do?

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Would you like to send us some quiz questions or even curate your own quiz? Let us know at TheContinent@mg.co.za



Photo:
Gerard
Julien/AFP

Thank you to Reinhold Guetter in Hamburg, Germany, for our first reader contribution!

Allure By Nina



PHOTO ESSAY

Lipstick, blush and Boko Haram

Sometimes, there's more to looking good than meets the eye. Meet the make-up artists of Maiduguri.

Words & Pictures by Fati Abubakar in Maiduguri



Nigeria's north-eastern Borno State is the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, which has been raging for more than a decade. The conflict has been devastating for the people who live here: thousands have been killed, and millions displaced. It is only the heavy Nigerian army presence that allows for some semblance of normalcy in Maiduguri, Borno's regional capital and largest city with a population of two million people.

Boko Haram's ideology is premised on "purifying" Muslims and dismantling western ideals, with the end goal of establishing an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. The group's name literally means "Western Education is Forbidden".

Fatima Abubakar* is the CEO of Glow by Fatima. She is also a student, juggling lectures during the week with clients at the make-up studio she runs in a colourful room in her family's home. "I developed an interest in makeup four years ago. I found it helped women with their self esteem. It makes women glow, hence the name ... When I started, I was called many names, I still am, but we have to work. And I love what I do."

* Not the same person as the photographer and writer of this photo essay

The group has banned schools in the areas it controls, and schoolchildren – and particularly school girls – have

been regularly targeted for kidnapping. As far as women are concerned, Boko Haram's message is clear: they belong in a patriarchal world of servitude and submission to men.

But an irony occurred. The fighting has claimed the lives of so many men that women in Maiduguri, and in the camps for internally displaced people spread across north-east Nigeria, have had to fend for themselves and their families. Despite their emotional exhaustion, women have fought for their survival and seized control of their own destiny – and, in the process, the role of women is undergoing an extraordinary evolution.

Some women have joined vigilante groups to fight the terrorists. Others have returned to schools, in defiance of the risks. Still others have become entrepreneurs, starting small businesses with the help of government and NGOs.

Of course, women in Maiduguri have always occupied many different roles, and there have always been a few examples of remarkable women whose lives or work were not considered “traditional”. But now there are many examples – this feels like a societal shift. Women previously on the sidelines are now on the front lines.

I wanted to capture this moment; this movement. I sought to find women who were running some of the most lucrative businesses in the town: make-up studios.

After a decade of silence, Maiduguri is beginning to return to something of its old self. The weekends are now once again full of the extravagant, flamboyant, colourful weddings for which Borno State used to be famous. Every Saturday,



Saadatu Mohammed is a student at the University of Maiduguri. She combines her studies with running a make-up business from her home studio at her parents' home. “As creative director and owner of Ummi's Exquisite, I believe in enhancing the beauty of women. I love makeup and wanted to have a business. But I didn't have the support of the community because it was frowned upon for women to have a business. But I believe times have changed and the generation I am in, we are different. And my family bought me cosmetics. Three years later, Alhamdulillah.”

well-dressed residents flock to events across the city, and the dancefloors are full of young couples – even in the midst



of conflict, love and romance prevails. Some weddings, particularly those of the Shuwa or Kanuri ethnic groups, last four or five days, encompassing a multitude of traditional events.

But before making their way to these celebrations, women make an appointment at the beauty salons – or the creatively-decorated home studios – of Maiduguri's make-up artists. As a photographer, it was strange to witness this joy, which contrasted so sharply with

Comfort Ibrahim has been in the business for nine years. She created Mimiz Beauty Spot, a beauty supply store with its own dedicated make-up studio." As a child I was fascinated with my mother's cosmetics. After joining the university, there was a long strike and I wanted to keep busy. I enrolled in a make-up school, finished and became the first make-up studio in the whole state. My dad encouraged me and my husband paid for the shop. It wasn't easy but right now I am happy with the outcome."



At first, **Nina Wudiri** just enjoyed using her friends' faces as a canvas. She didn't realise until later that she could turn her joy into a career. Now she has her own studio, Allure by Nina, with many clients a day – all while also studying physiotherapy at the University of Maiduguri. "I love how it gives me the freedom to do whatever I want. And when I see the expression on their faces after we are done – that smile when they see themselves – it is so pleasing."

the everyday pain of living through the insurgency.

One day, it was people fleeing from men with guns; the next, it was a woman with a cosmetic brush, contouring a client's face.

As I spoke to these women, and took their pictures, I noticed a recurring theme: a love of their art. Their passion and interest in what they are doing brought

them not only self-expression, but also financial independence.

And this, as we try to build a post-conflict society, is what will lead us to women's liberation. With this crop of unapologetic, educated and entrepreneurial women, I was seeing the promise of a new world: a bruised but not broken society hell-bent on healing and rebuilding. ■

PROFILE

Kananelo Boloetsi



Taking on the cellphone giants and the government of Lesotho – and winning.

Pascalinah Kabi in Maseru

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

It is the first Monday of June 2021. And it's near-freezing in Lesotho. In the capital, Maseru, people are layered up and walk with their hands tucked into their pockets.

One of these pedestrians is Kananelo Boloetsi, a 32-year-old Lesotho-based journalist and human rights activist.

In October 2018, Boloetsi announced on social media that he had written to the Lesotho Communications Authority (LCA) with a common complaint: cellphone companies were charging customers unacceptably expensive out-of-bundle rates for data when their data ran out. This was lucrative for the companies. Boloetsi wanted the authority to impose regulations to stop this.

He also wanted the LCA to force the companies – Vodacom Lesotho and Econet Telecom Lesotho – to start sending people depletion notifications ahead of time so that they could buy data before it ran out. Across the border, the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa had just put a similar regulation in place.

While excess data costs were a problem for most people, Boloetsi's own journey started in 2017 when his grandmother bought a smartphone. The cost of running it led to her accusing her grandson of stealing her airtime and deleting messages to conceal evidence.

When he tried to follow up with the service provider, a call-centre attendant told him there was nothing the provider could do to help him get any airtime back. "I immediately realised that this was a serious matter," Boloetsi says. However,

the telecoms companies were operating within the rules – if he wanted them to stop then the rules would have to change. But he decided if that's what it would take, then that's what he would do.

His first step was laying a formal complaint with the communications authority. In response, Boloetsi says, the cellphone companies tried to intimidate him and threatened to withdraw advertising from his employer, news website *Public Eye*. When asked for comment by *The Continent*, both companies denied any wrongdoing.

Boloetsi says: "Vodacom people came to me with an attitude of, 'You are just a journalist who studied marketing and knows nothing about the telecommunications industry.' They wanted to intimidate me."

His editor backed him and, in March 2020 – three years after his grandmother scolded him for using up her data – the communications authority changed the rules. It was a very lonely journey, says, as in Lesotho there is a tendency of people only coming "at the end of the journey to congratulate you ... They are afraid to come forward when you need them most."

Nevertheless, the success of his activism has bolstered Boloetsi's determination to hold power to account, and he has become active in monitoring the state's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. When eventually reopened in October, lockdown and the Covid-19 virus itself had already put many livelihoods in jeopardy and families were struggling to pay school fees.

Boloetsi partnered with parents

from his home district of Mafeteng and petitioned the (now former) minister of education and training to do something. A petition was also started and sent to the prime minister. As a result, the minister of social development got involved and committed to the government paying school and examination fees for secondary and high school learners in public schools around the country.

"I choose to be involved in projects that have an impact on many people, solutions that benefit people who don't even know what is happening in Maseru."

He and other activists are currently focused on what they say was an unlawful declaration of a state of emergency by the government.

This, he alleges, has attracted unwarranted attention from the National Security Services, who are demanding to know if there is a politician behind his activism.

But though he may speak up on behalf of others, Boloetsi is his own man: "I choose to be involved in projects that have an impact on many people, solutions that benefit people who don't even know what is happening in Maseru." ■

This story is part of a series of profiles on human rights defenders in the SADC region, funded by Internews.

Pandemic and fire conspire against cancer patients

After a fire at South Africa's biggest public cancer treatment centre left more than a thousand patients waiting for treatment, an uncomfortable truth rose from the ashes.

Laura López González

South African cancer activists say they are exploring legal options to compel the government to deal with treatment backlogs in Gauteng, the country's most populous province. The move comes as the country faces its third high-profile cancer care crisis in four years.

Johannesburg's Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital is one of South Africa's largest public cancer treatment units. The facility treats about 2,500 chemotherapy patients each month. Another 2,500 patients pass through the facility's radiation oncology unit, but only 300 of these patients are actually given radiation each month, the provincial health department said in May.

In April, a hospital fire forced the facility to close its oncology unit, leaving hundreds of people without treatment for at least three weeks before some were shifted to the province's two other cancer treatment centres. Although activists say chemotherapy services are getting back on track, almost 1,200 cancer patients are still awaiting radiation therapy two

months after the fire, putting them at risk of relapses. Most of those awaiting treatment are prostate cancer patients, who are receiving hormone therapy to help control cancer while they wait.

Patients who have had chemotherapy or who have had surgery to remove cancers are at risk of cancers coming back if they wait more than eight weeks for scheduled radiation, warns Dr Prinitha Pillay, a radiation oncologist in the private sector. "Once you start treatment, timing is really important. It's important when you start treatment but also that you continue it without interruption."

The Gauteng health department said in May that new cancer patients were being seen within two to three weeks of diagnosis. But patient advocacy group Cancer Alliance said the waiting time for radiation therapy is closer to months or years. "You are sending those patients home to die," says the alliance's Salomé Meyer.

The fire left in its wake what Meyer calls "unco-ordinated chaos" in cancer care and revealed for the third time in almost as many years the dangers of



Alarm: A fire at Johannesburg's Charlotte Maxeke has exposed SA's precarious cancer treatment capacity.

Photo: Elizabeth Sejake/Media 24/ Gallo Images

an overly centralised system that relies almost solely on the state. The country last saw major provincial cancer treatment crises in 2017 in KwaZulu-Natal and in Gauteng in 2018.

Chairperson of the Cancer Alliance Linda Greeff says there are now backlogs in three provinces. And only about 10 state hospitals in South Africa provide radiation oncology services. However, she estimates that there are more than 100 private oncology centres.

Data from Statistics South Africa shows that, as of 2017, fewer than one in five South Africans had private medical aid. About 42,000 cancer cases are diagnosed in the country each year, based on the latest publicly available figures, also from 2017. But cases – and deaths – remain underreported.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation even worse. A recent study published in the *South African Medical Journal* found that major cancer diagnoses in the public sector fell by a third in the country's Western Cape province in the first three months of the outbreak alone.

Greeff says underdiagnosis and the

lack of data help to keep the country's cancer crisis out of the headlines and allows it to continue.

The Cancer Alliance is adamant that the state must begin working with the private sector to increase access to cancer treatment. Nationally, at least four radiation oncology public-private partnerships (PPP) have sprung up in the past decade but the alliance says the country needs more – including in Gauteng, even after the understaffed Charlotte Maxeke hospital re-opens.

In May, that province's health department released a statement saying it was in discussions with a major hospital group about providing radiation services.

The hospital also told *The Continent* it will hire four additional radiation oncologists by the end of July, and that the province has plans to build cancer care facilities at other less-specialised hospitals.

The Cancer Alliance says it is aware of three private oncology groups that have offered to provide services to the state, but cautioned that the state of these discussions remains unclear. ■

Lessons in patriotism, perseverance and pride



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Are we too harsh on our leaders in this column? No. Or yes, depending on your point of view. Harshness is a subjective quality, after all. So let's go with a solid "maybe".

But no more. For we have seen the error of our ways, and we have filled our own hearts with the tolerance and forgiveness that they, in their wisdom and mercy, have shown us.

To borrow from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice: If you prick them, do they not bleed? If you teargas them, do their eyes not burn? They are only human: why should we not be patient with them when they make mistakes?

As an olive branch, and to make amends, we have decided to say only nice things about them this week, and celebrate the wonderful things they have taught us.

Let us begin, then, with the government of President Muhammadu Buhari, which last week gave Twitter its last rites in Nigeria, by way of a total ban

of the social media platform. This was followed a day or two later by the National Broadcasting Commission "advising" all radio and television stations to "suspend the patronage of Twitter immediately", before kindly suggesting that to use the platform would be considered "unpatriotic".

Nobody wants to be unpatriotic. Especially seeing as the attorney-general has helpfully told authorities to throw the book at anyone who dares to use Twitter. What this means of course is that any authorities who were being peremptorily patriotic by not being on Twitter better download it and sign up quick, so that they can find all the dastardly ne'erdo wells who are being unpatriotic by still being on Twitter.

And there you have it: a nice little riddle from the government of Nigeria to test the flexibility of our brains, with a neat lesson in patriotism thrown in to boot. We wish Buhari's tweet-hunters the best of luck. We just hope they don't all end up arresting each other due to being the only Nigerians left on Twitter, because how embarrassing would that be?

Judge not, lest ye not be a judge

Next we bring you a lesson in diligence and determination, courtesy of President

Uhuru Kenyatta, who has demonstrated a stoic resolve in the face of frankly rather unsporting criticism from elements of society representing outmoded and bourgeois concepts such as “the law” and “constitutional democracy”.

Recently, when it came time to appoint new judges, all Kenyatta was constitutionally required to do was formally approve the candidates recommended by the country’s Judicial Service Commission. But did he simply sign off? No! He actually bothered to give the list a thorough going over, and realised that of the 41 recommendations, only 34 seemed worth elevating to the ranks of the wigged and gavelled. So he signed off on those, swore them in and that should have been that, right?

Wrong. It just kicked off a new wave of ungrateful moaning, led by none other than Kenya’s former chief justice, Willy Mutunga. Emphasis on “former”. Makes you think, right? Anyway, Mutunga wrote an open letter to the president – for all to read – urging Kenyatta to go against his own personal conscience and swear in the remaining six judges on the Judicial Service Commission’s list.

“You bear a burden of history to do the right thing for Kenya’s Constitution, her institutions, and the general public,” he wrote. “Discharge this burden. Simply do the right thing.”

And then he had the temerity to advise his own president to “resist the temptation to be garlanded in the pettiness of performing power”.

Strong words, in this day and age. Nobody this side of a Hawaiian luau is

being garlanded in anything, thank you very much. And if they were, what of it? Garlands are lovely.

But what did Kenyatta do in response to this missive? Why, he did nothing at all. Radio silence. A lesson to all of us on the virtues of restraint and self-discipline.

And possibly also a lesson in biding your time – because as Shakespeare also had the Merchant of Venice say: “If you wrong us, do we not seek revenge?”

Do our leaders subject us to a harshness we are not due? No. Or yes, depending on your point of view. But they are able to see the error of our ways, and fill their prisons to their hearts' content.

Do our leaders subject us to a harshness we are not due? No. Or yes, depending on their point of view.

But they are able to see the error of our ways, and fill their prisons to their heart’s content. Their mercy and forgiveness - and their tolerance of our wisdom - may have their limits, but if they have a chance to teach us a lesson, we know we can count on them to take it. ■

Samira Sawlani is a journalist and analyst with a focus on East Africa. She holds an MA in international studies and diplomacy from the School of Oriental and African Studies, and previously worked in the humanitarian aid sector.

Zambia ties itself up in an electoral knot

O'Brien Kaaba

Zambia is scheduled to hold general elections in August. But there is a great deal of uncertainty about whether the polls will go ahead. Concerns have been accumulating over the credibility of the new voters register; the constitutional eligibility of the incumbent President Edgar Lungu, who will be running for a third term; and even the date of the election itself.

Each is a serious matter. Together they present a significant challenge to the country's democratic institutions, and an opportunity for the state to delay elections until more favourable conditions prevail.

In 2020 the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) abolished the existing voter register and embarked on a fresh registration process. The new list was criticised as it saw a rise in numbers in perceived ruling party strongholds and a fall in areas seen to back the opposition. The constitutionality of this process has been challenged, but the case is still pending – meaning one of the key pillars of the electoral system remains in doubt.

Because the Zambian constitution imposes a two-term limit, there has also been uncertainty about Lungu's

candidature. He has twice won election, but Lungu believes his first term should not count, as he was completing the term of the late Michael Sata and so did not serve more than three years, which is how the new constitution – but not the old one – defines a presidential term. Although the Constitutional Court ruled in Lungu's favour on Friday, questions about the legitimacy of his candidacy remain and continue to divide the country.

Finally, the government appears to be losing confidence in its ability to win the elections and may be lining up a postponement to save its blushes, using Covid-19 as an excuse. Amid widespread political violence, police brutality, and censorship and an economic crisis, support for the government is low. While Lungu is officially bullish about his chances, state media, health officials and even the ECZ have started to play up the threat posed by rising coronavirus cases.

The pandemic has already been manipulated to ban campaign rallies while government events have continued, and the regime is testing the waters to see how donors and the public would respond to a postponement. If polls are delayed, this most uncertain of elections will become even less predictable. ■



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THE BIG PICTURE

Ashen play: Youngsters play football below the Nyiragongo volcano in the city of Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nyiragongo is Africa's most active volcano, located in the Virunga National Park. It erupted on May 22, killing 32 people and forcing almost 400,000 residents to flee the city below. Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP



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