

The Continent

with Mail & Guardian

**Taxi overlord.
Governor.
Prisoner.**

The rise and fall of
Nairobi's matatu king














































Cover story: Kenya's capital is being run by an unelected military man, through an entity the courts have declared "extra-constitutional", which *apparently* does not mean "even more constitutional". It's a win for the country's established elite after their control was challenged by a man who built his fortune by blinging up taxis. Mike Sonko rose to Nairobi's governorship with the highest winning margin of any non-presidential candidate in history. The elites fought back. He got rough. They sent in tax officials. President Kenyatta got involved. Now Sonko is in jail.

All protocol observed...

As you can tell by now, we're back! Season 3 comes with more excellent journalism and all the good things you've come to expect from *The Continent*. The world is in a slightly better place than it was when we took a break (Except for Florida. Yeesh, America.) The AU is getting 220-million doses of Covid vaccines, starting this month, and our team still has most of its sanity! This season we're

working with Afrobarometer to tell you more about what people think about issues. This non-partisan survey network interviews between 1,200 and 2,400 people per country. The data we're digging into was collected between 2019 and now, and covers 34 countries, giving us new insights into our neighbours and ourselves. So, with all protocol observed, let's get started...

Africa's Olympics Medals Table

COUNTRY		MEDALS			TOTAL
	Burkina Faso				1
	Côte d'Ivoire				1
	Egypt			   	4
	Ethiopia				3
	Ghana				1
	Kenya	 	 	 	6
	Morocco				1
	Namibia				1
	Nigeria				2
	South Africa		 		3
	Tunisia				2
	Uganda	 			4

**Correct as of August 6 2021,
22:30 Central African Time.**



Photo: Inga Kjer

TANZANIA

Same, Samia and same-same again

Samia Suluhu Hassan's appointment as Tanzania's president five months ago was meant to signal change. Unlike predecessor John Magufuli, she took Covid-19 seriously and has since been vaccinated. People are alive now who otherwise wouldn't be. She talked about easing restrictions on political activity and has visited neighbouring countries in a diplomatic offensive. But many things haven't changed. Last month, police arrested the leader and senior members of Chadema, the main opposition party. The charges range from financing terrorism to conspiracy. They came just before a public forum where the leaders planned to demand reform. Political rallies are still not allowed. Journalism is still dangerous. The trajectory is similar to that of Magufuli, albeit on a shorter timescale.

CULTURE

Stolen recently? Theft. Looted long ago? It's history.

About 17,000 stolen artefacts have been returned to Iraq from the Museum of the Bible in the United States. Founded by a rich American, it exists to collect historical items related to the Christian Bible. Western nations including England, France, Germany are also notorious for looting the cultural wealth of other countries in ages past – but they won't return them because... bygones? Because this theft is more recent, the US government intervened to fine the museum and return the artefacts. Earlier this year it also returned 5,000 artefacts smuggled out of Egypt.

SPORT

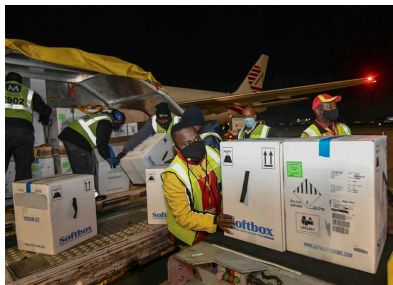
In football and life, Tabitha's indignity is Malawi's shame

The former captain of Malawi's women's football team, Tabitha Chawinga, says when she 13 she was forced to strip to prove to players that she was a woman, and again a year later at a Presidential Cup match – on the pitch. Chawinga has since played professionally in Europe and China, and is calling for reform in Malawi's sporting institutions.

HEALTH

Thanks antivaxxers – you do you, we’ll just take the jobs

Shipments of 220-million doses of Johnson & Johnson’s single-dose Covid-19 vaccine started this week. The deliveries have made arranged through the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, where AU member states pooled their money to get better access to vaccines. Financial backing came through the African Export-Import Bank. The AU said the single shot was chosen because it is easier to administer, with a long shelf life and is also partly made on the continent (in South Africa). It expects over six million doses to be shipped this month. There is an option to buy 180-million more doses, which would allow for a third of Africa’s population to be immunised. In a surprise move, or lack of one, Western countries opted not to sabotage the deal – possibly because they already have too many vaccines, and are struggling to convince their own people to get vaccinated.



NIGERIA

Inglorious incompetence reins in Nigerian athletes' parade

If things had gone differently, Nigeria might have tallied more medals at the Olympics. At the very least, the country would have had more participating athletes. Unfortunately, the African giants’ Olympic narratives have mostly been about under-performance spurred on by maladministration and mishandling of the athletes’ preparation for the games. There have been reports of team kit delays at Nigerian customs and of athletes not meeting drug test requirements – thanks to administrative failures – which in turn has led to disqualifications. Apparel brand Puma even pulled out of providing Nigeria uniforms “as a direct consequence of recent developments”. Fidelis Gadzama, vice president of Nigeria’s athletics body, took responsibility, telling Quartz Africa that “our recklessness led to the exclusion of these athletes. We are responsible.”

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SOUTH AFRICA

Out with the bad, in with the just-as-bad

Former president Jacob Zuma, in prison for ignoring an order to testify in a corruption commission, has been granted permission to face *different* corruption charges in person, instead of remotely. After permission was granted, he was promptly admitted to hospital to undergo medical observation. South Africans immediately recalled the fate of his former associate Schabir Shaik, whose

own corruption sentence was commuted in 2009 after he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. (In 2019 a surprisingly not-dead Shaik was spotted out golfing. Truly, miracles abound.) Meanwhile, President Cyril Ramaphosa has reshuffled his cabinet, demoting rivals and replacing his health minister, who resigned amid allegations of corruption, and his finance minister, who practically begged to be let go. As the latter's replacement, he picked a man allegedly involved in defrauding pensioners. He also axed the intelligence ministry, as it had none to provide. Never a dull moment, down south.

CAMEROON

Hamstrung MSF packs its bags

Months after its work was forcibly suspended, Médecins Sans Frontières has officially withdrawn from the northwestern part of Cameroon. More than 3,000 people have died in the country's "Anglophone crisis" a bloody conflict between state security forces and armed secessionist groups. The government suspended MSF in December, even though it has a French name, accusing the organisation of being "too close to armed groups". The people are "paying a very heavy price for this situation," MSF said. "We cannot stay any longer in a region where we are not allowed to provide care to people," said Emmanuel Lampaert, operations coordinator in Central Africa.



Africans protest in Bangalore.
Photo: AFP

CONGO / INDIA

Protesters beaten after suspect dies

The death of a Congolese man in police detention has sparked unrest in Bangalore in India. The police said the man was arrested after being found "in possession of drugs" and "experienced chest pain and later died in a private hospital". When crowds gathered to protest the death "without permission", police used force to disperse them.

Ethiopia

Rivers run red as Tigrayan war intensifies

Local authorities in Kassala in eastern Sudan have found at least 50 bodies floating in the river between Sudan and the neighbouring Tigray region of Ethiopia. The victims were apparently refugees fleeing the war between the federal Ethiopian government and its northernmost state; a conflict that in the nine months since it began has killed an unknown number of people but left almost two-million displaced.

A Sudanese official told *The Associated Press* a forensic investigation was needed to determine the causes of death, but confirmed some of the dead were found with bullet wounds or with hands bound.

The bodies were discovered in the Setit River, known in Ethiopia as the Tekezé. The bodies are believed to belong to Tigrayans as some of them had facial marks indicating their ethnicity, and one had a common name in Tigrinya, the local language, tattooed on his arm.

A Twitter account believed to belong to

the Ethiopian government called reports of the bodies a false campaign spread by “propagandists”.

The war between Ethiopia and its restive Tigray region began last November when prime minister Abiy Ahmed declared war on the region for allegedly attacking an army base. The Tigray Defence Forces, the armed wing of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front, reclaimed key towns and the capital, Mekelle, in June, marking a stunning reversal of fortunes.

The bodies are believed to be Tigrayan, as some had facial marks indicating their ethnicity and one had a name common in the local language tattooed on his arm.

But Tigray is home to the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, with up to 900,000 in serious danger of famine. Getting aid to the region is difficult, with access roads and bridges destroyed in the war. And aid organisations like the Norwegian Refugee Council and Doctors Without Borders said this week Ethiopia had suspended their operations for three months. ■

Tunisia

No spring in Saied's steps

The Arab Spring was sparked a decade ago when, in 2010, large swathes of the Tunisian population took to the streets to oust a dictator who was approaching his third decade in power. The fall of Ben Ali showed that things could change. And change they did.

Dictators like Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, kept in place because they made life simple for global powers, were removed and, in some cases, killed. Driven by abuse and failing economies, (and, let us not forget, assisted by opportunistic forces in the West, a naval blockade and a Nato bombing campaign on Libya not least among their interventions), the people had triumphed. But democracy is messy. Creating new institutions out of centralised and corrupt bureaucracies is challenging.

Tunisia has had 10 governments in the decade since then. It has 20 different parties with at least one seat in parliament, alongside dozens of independents. Peace has been tenuous and hard-won through bargaining, a strong trade union movement and a healthy civil society.

Until late last month, that is, when President Kais Saied suspended

parliament, sacked the cabinet and assumed emergency powers. Unlike in Egypt, where the army intervened to remove the elected government in 2013, the army has stayed out of politics.

Saied had won the 2019 election with some 70% of the vote, so it was not surprising to see supporters celebrating his actions in the streets. But others warned that he had undertaken a coup.

Unusually, Saied does not belong to Ennahda, which by virtue of being the biggest party in parliament stands to lose the most from parliament being suspended. A lot rides on its actions, and Saied's, once the 30-day deadline on the emergency powers lapse.

Democracy is messy. Creating new institutions out of centralised and corrupt bureaucracies is challenging. Tunisia has had ten governments in the decade since.

Whatever happens, it will affect the wider region. If Tunisia can't work out its model of inclusive governance, it will embolden those with dictatorial tendencies in the region. If a way forward is found, it will show that making a country work is messy, yes, but also that it is possible. ■

Zambia weathers a winter of discontent

As Zambians prepare to elect a president and legislature next Thursday, the general mood in the country would appear to be far from rosy.

Although public expressions of dissent are actively and in some cases violently discouraged under the administration of President Edgar Lungu, Afrobarometer's survey in November-December 2020 clearly documents citizens' discontent.

Approval of the president's performance has dropped by 27 percentage points since 2013, to 46%, in parallel with a sharp decline in satisfaction with the way democracy is working (from 68% to 37%). Ominously, only about one in five Zambians (22%) think the country

is going "in the right direction" – about one-third as many as thought so eight years ago. One indicator that's on the rise is the measure of lived poverty: The share of Zambians who frequently go without basic life necessities has shot up from 47% in 2014 to 74%.

In this atmosphere, who's likely to win the election? As of late last year, only 23% said they would vote for the ruling Patriotic Front, about the same as for the main opposition United Party for National Development (25%).

However, a significant proportion of respondents refused to say how they would vote (39%) or said they didn't know (6%) or would not vote (5%).

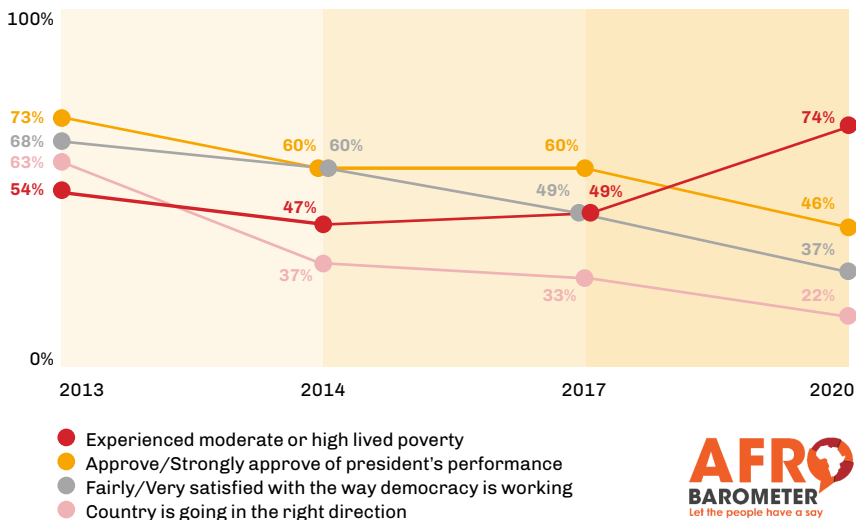




Photo: AFP via
Getty Images

The rise and fall of the Matatu King

Kenya's capital is now run by an unelected army leader. He succeeds the taxi overlord Mike Sonko, who used the power and profits from his blinged-out transports to buy and batter his way to the governorship.

His dramatic rise to power challenged the vested interests of the country's ruling elite. So they fought back. And won. Journalist and *Debunk Media's* Editor-in-Chief **Isaac Otiidi Amuke** pieced together Sonko's rise and fall from original reporting, public records and the utterances of those involved. The story is extraordinary. And true.

Part 1: A king is born

In the mid-2010s, before his 40th birthday, Mike Mbuvi Gidion Kioko Sonko straddled Nairobi's Eastlands like a colossus; a king and his bulging fiefdom.

Eastlands is many things, one among them being a constellation of colonial housing estates and their post-independence imitations. Once upon a time, Eastlands was the hallmark of arrival for the Black African elite. But upon seizing state power, that gentry migrated en masse to hitherto Europeans-only neighbourhoods.

Left to its own devices, Eastlands saw swathes of urban ghettos burgeon across its flanks. Later attempts at urbanisation yielded poorly designed high-rise residential structures made up of mostly cramped and poorly-lit flats.

But Eastlands wasn't dwindling.

Eastlands was transforming.

Out of the dusty roads, unlit streets and dried-up taps came Sheng, a popular slang made from an intricate mix of English, Kiswahili and bits and pieces of other vernacular. The language paved the way for Kenya's 90s rap culture, a punchy co-option of American gangster rap.

Art forms such as graffiti piggybacked on the music, with both the music and graffiti finding their way into matatus, the unruly public transport minibuses that are ubiquitous in Nairobi.

This evolution saw matatus morph from plain-looking jalopies into manyangas – cozy rides with ostentatious bodyworks and exteriors embellished with avante garde artwork, blasting deafening music.

Matatu crews – drivers, conductors



Riding high:
Lavish minibuses known as matatus are the rock stars of Nairobi's transport and commuting culture. Control of the matatus brings with it wealth – and power. Photo: Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images

and hangers-on – lived up to their billing as some of the most fashionable men in town.

Dressed to the nines –and so blinged up you'd be forgiven for assuming they'd just teleported in from the set of a Snoop Dogg music video – they had tattoos, they dyed their hair and they wore gold and silver teeth, chains, bangles and rings. The deres and kanges – the drivers and the conductors or touts – were a hip hop version of the DR Congo's immaculately-dressed sapeurs.

Earning a modest daily wage– spent as quickly as it was gained – these exuberant personas were demigods in Eastlands' jobless corners. They regularly sponsored bottles of cheap liquor and bundles of khat, the narcotic shrub, to the delight of their less-blessed peers and admirers. The matatu subculture became an integral part of Eastlands' fabric.

And from this new weave of Kenyan material culture emerged Mike Sonko, the Matatu King.

In 2010, when the rest of Nairobi and Kenya got to know him, the 35-year-old Sonko – or Mbuvi, as he was known then – was already the undisputed supremo of Nairobi's matatu subculture. He owned a dozen of the swankiest nganyas, the Sheng word for souped-up matatus had evolved from “manyanga” in the 90s to “nganya” in the 2000s and, more recently, “choda”.

These all plied route number 58, operating between downtown Nairobi and Buruburu shopping centre, a busily congested hub populated with pubs, supermarkets and discotheques.

The rule for matatus is the more

ostentatious the better, so Sonko went all out, pioneering the installation of big screen TVs at the front of the passenger cabins of his 32-seater matatus, and giving them names like Brown Sugar, Convict, Ferrari, Lakers and Ruff Cuts. Commuters could now watch the music video as the song played. Mbuvi even added a double-decker bus to his fleet, affording Buruburu residents a lofty view as they traversed their city.

For Mbuvi, who just 12 years earlier was serving time in a maximum security prison, this was already a remarkable turnaround in fortunes. Few realised then that he was only just getting started.

Escape from prison

Born in Mombasa and raised in Kwale, Mbuvi had been a resident of the two coastal towns for most of his life. His father ran a property brokerage company, and the young Mbuvi dabbled in the family business. But Mbuvi's wheeling and dealing occasionally crossed the line.

In 1995, aged 20 and already making petty cash, Mbuvi was arrested and charged with assault.

The following year, Mbuvi was charged with impersonation in the course of cutting his land deals. He was released on bail on both occasions.

But he kept failing to appear in court, which violated the terms of his bail and eventually, in 1997, saw him rounded up and sentenced to six months in prison.

Mbuvi was dispatched to the Shimo La Tewa Maximum Security Prison on 12 March 1998 as prisoner number P/No. SHO/477/1998. After a month behind

bars, he feigned illness and was admitted to Coast General Hospital in Mombasa, from where he vanished on 16 April 1998, only to reappear in the vast Buruburu housing estate in east Nairobi.

Mbuvi's justification for skipping jail was that he needed to pay his last respects to his late mother, Saumu Mukami, whose funeral he had missed while he was behind bars. But in reality he just needed a fresh start.

Speaking Kiswahili with a coastal accent, Mbuvi landed in Buru with a bang. Together with his wife Primrose, he scrounged for capital and set up a hair salon, a barber shop, a video library, a cybercafé, an outlet for selling automobile parts, and a clothes boutique.

As a fugitive, Mbuvi operated in the shadows. Primrose ran the show, and the businesses flourished. The couple opened a popular nightclub, and then ventured into the matatus business.

Initially, Mbuvi couldn't afford nganyas, so he settled for a couple of worn out matatus, which he deployed into the deep of Eastlands in Dandora, a sprawling settlement which hosts Nairobi's largest dump site. It was while operating on these Eastlands back routes that Mbuvi got a deeper understanding of the business – and of the place. It was also around this time, aged 25 in 2000, that Mbuvi got himself into trouble with the law again, over yet another property deal gone south.

It was while Mbuvi was detained at Nairobi's Industrial Area Remand Prison awaiting trial that wardens connected the dots backwards to his escape from Shimo La Tewa prison in 1998, and promptly

moved him first to the more secure Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, and then on to Shimo La Tewa. Mbuvi found himself back where he'd started, with the remainder of his original 12-month sentence ahead of him.

While operating on these Eastlands back routes, Mbuvi got a deeper understanding of the business and the place.

After nine months, he applied for a review of his sentence. In his dramatic affidavit, Mbuvi claimed he was epileptic and HIV-positive, and suffered from chronic tuberculosis and peptic ulcers. He was released on the strength of his supposedly dire medical condition and reported good behaviour.

Back in Buru, Primrose had grown their businesses. With satisfactory liquidity, it was now time to get into the top league of the matatu business. Making it their main hustle, Mbuvi and Primrose accumulated a fleet of Nairobi's loudest and most dashing nganyas, thereby dominating the Buru route. And the money streamed in.

The logic was simple

There is a hierarchy of nganyas, which works in the same fashion as music charts.

The longer a song stays at number one, the more the artist earns. For nganyas, those at the top of the pecking order make more money per day: by charging higher fares or making the highest number of



On the move: In Nairobi, matatus demand and receive right of way. Photo: Andrew Henneisen/Getty Images

round trips, or both. The audacity to charge higher rates emanates from the fact that nganyas always have a steady stream of passengers – call them fans or groupies – who will wait at the terminus until their favourite nganya shows up.

This group of commuters has no qualms about paying something extra for the comfort, choice of music, or simply the prestige of riding their favourite nganya.

More importantly, reigning nganyas manage to make as many round trips as possible since they are ordinarily exempted from certain protocols within the matatu ecosystem, including the first-come-first-boarded rule at the pick-up and drop-off points.

This meant that whenever Mbuvi's nganyas got to downtown Nairobi, they skipped the queue, filled up instantly and turned around.

The same applied when they got to Buru shopping centre, never allowing the ignition to turn off.

As long as the nganyas were on the move, Mbuvi's bankers were elated.

However, the biggest advantage nganyas had was that they were a law unto themselves. In their pursuit of making as many round trips as possible, nganyas overlapped, took short cuts, bullied motorists off lanes and occasionally drove on the wrong side of the road.

All of this, christened “matatu madness” by Nairobians, was made possible through collusion with traffic police, who were on the payrolls of the matatu barons.

According to deres of some of Nairobi's top nganyas (the routes they ply can't be named for fear of victimisation) there has always existed a cascading bribery food chain, where the top cops are paid

monthly, and the amount trickles down the ranks: the lowest earners are the roadside cops, who take as little as half a dollar per nganya per day.

This rule-breaking by nganyas was deemed necessary, considering it cost an arm and a leg to transform a regular minibus into a nganya.

Matatus made Mbuvi incredible amounts of money — he has previously estimated that at the end of the morning shift on an average day, he'd have a clean \$200 per nganya, excluding whatever he'd make during the evening rush hour.

But more than the money, Matatus also made Mbuvi “el jefe”. A boss.

To run his ever growing matatu empire, Mbuvi recruited some of the shrewdest youngsters across Eastlands to be his deres, kanges and hangers-on, making him the leader of an influential network across Eastlands.

It was in this era of Mbuvi's life that he earned the nickname “Sonko”, which is Sheng for boss or the monied one. Mbuvi's other moniker, whispered only – and never among strangers – was Kabumba: a Sheng term insinuating black magic. The rise of Mbuvi – now Sonko – had been so meteoric that some onlookers suspected sorcery.

These hushed rumours were partly fueled by the fact that he was from the coast, and tapped into the popular myth that there is a powerful form of wizardry that draws its powers from the Indian Ocean.

Sonko did little to discourage this impression; he even donned gold rings, one for each finger, emblazoned with

eldritch animal figures. There is power in bling. Sonko was happy for it to be occult.

Stepping into politics

By the time a parliamentary by-election arose in Nairobi's Makadara constituency in April 2010, Sonko was already a powerhouse across Eastlands.

More than simply the flamboyant owner of the flashiest nganyas, he had risen to become defender-in-chief of all Eastlands matatus, which had elected him as chairman.

As early as 2007, when the government attempted to relocate the pickup and drop-off points for Eastlands matatus from central Nairobi to the edge of the city in 2007, he had gone to court and successfully stopped the move.

In the land of the matatu, Sonko was king. Outside of Eastlands, however, he was still an enigma; the mysterious owner of the infamously rowdy Buru matatus. But Nairobi would soon come to learn plenty more about him.

Sonko's interest in the Makadara by-election was stirred by the fact that, in his estimation, no one had the kind of network, manpower and infrastructure he had across the cosmopolitan constituency which had Buru shopping centre as its nerve centre.

If he activated his extensive web of drivers, conductors and hangers-on on his nganyas and decided to use his matatus as a campaign tool, he would be miles ahead of the other candidates.

Moreover, Sonko had stacks of ready-to-spend cash courtesy of his nganyas, which he splashed around with abandon.

Part 2: The dishonourable member

Sonko immediately caused a splash in Nairobi's usually staid political scene. Who was the skinny lad on the billboard, with the outrageous fashion sense? And who was he to call himself "Sonko"?

Word quickly got out that he owned the infamous Buru nganyas, and then it all made sense. The nganyas made him tons of money – hence Sonko – and being their proprietor accorded him immunity.

From that point onwards, and throughout his theatrical decade in politics, his multiple faux pas stood forgiven on account that he was the embodiment of umatatu: an anarchist phenomenon characterised by brashness, vulgarity and braggadocio, and personified by carefree matatu crews.

However, much as umatatu brought Sonko fame and fortune, it also attracted judgemental frowns. Kenya's established political parties wouldn't touch him, despite his repeated overtures. He did not play by the rules of the political elite, and was not welcomed there.

Kenya's established political parties wouldn't touch him. He did not play by the rules of the political elite, and was not welcomed there.

Nevertheless, despite going up against locals and the established order, Sonko

won – and Makadara had a new MP.

He began his parliamentary term with a bang, keen on leaving a quick mark considering he had just over two years before the 2013 general election.

Living up to his name, Sonko dished out bundles of crisp currency notes indiscriminately to destitute Nairobian whenever they caught his eye or ear, conveniently broadcasting his generosity on social media. To keep the streets talking, he rode around town in gold-plated SUVs, wore kilos of gold jewellery and dyed his hair gold.

This attracted plenty of attention – not all of it welcome.

Allegations of corruption

Three months after his election, police raided Sonko's office and Buru residence on suspicion that he was involved in drug trafficking, following a tip-off from the US embassy (the minister for internal security owned up to parliament about this leak from the Americans). Playing hide and seek with the cops, he complained bitterly to parliament about police harassment.

In a subsequent police report, detectives said Sonko had been afraid to meet investigators. When he did, they said, he denied being a drug dealer, but did confess to taking part in a multimillion-dollar land fraud syndicate, an admission which the police didn't pursue further by charging Sonko with fraud. The scams involved working with government



Mike drop: Sonko fans cheer during a 2018 Labour Day parade in Nairobi.

Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP via Getty Images

officials to grab parcels of land whose leases were about to expire and secretly transferring the title deeds from original owners to fraudsters who use them to con buyers.

The report listed three companies – Casuarina Club, Primix Enterprises and Tungwa Brand Design – as businesses registered under Sonko’s name, none of which was paying taxes. Possibly trying to protect her and their businesses, Sonko told investigators that his wife Primrose was actually his sister.

The report barely mentioned Sonko’s matatu empire, except to observe that “he operates several matatus christened ARTUR within Nairobi”.

Sonko did indeed operate two nganyas named Artur, but the police were hinting at something else.

It was one of those if-you-know-you-know scenarios.

On 10 November 2005, two brash gold-chain-wearing Armenians named Artur Margaryan and Artur Sargasyan landed in Nairobi. Presenting first as businessmen, then as playboys and then as security experts, over time the pair cultivated connections at the highest levels of Kenyan society. Ultimately they proved so useful to their collaborators in whatever shadowy shenanigans they were involved in that they were both appointed deputy commissioners of police.

Kenyan journalists repeatedly linked the Arturs to drug dealing. And so, though the police could not prove that Sonko was himself involved in drug dealing, by pointedly mentioning his nganyas named Artur – even writing ARTUR in capital letters – they seemed to be implying that even if he wasn’t guilty, Sonko’s fondness for suspected dealers was a telltale sign.

Deserved or not, the drug dealer label

stuck to Sonko (perhaps that's why he decided to formally change his name in 2012, from Mbuvi Gidion Kioko to Mbuvi Gidion Kioko Mike Sonko). Not that it seemed to do him any harm: his popularity was skyrocketing.

Sonko saw the drug trafficking allegation as a shot across the bows, and knew he needed to find political protection – fast. Similarly, his by-election win didn't guarantee future political success, especially as he had now set his sights on becoming the first-ever senator for Nairobi (a position created in Kenya's new 2010 Constitution).

He needed to align himself with one of the two political parties. And this time, his timing was exactly right.

Respect Uhuru, you pieces of shit!

Uhuru Kenyatta, then one of two deputy prime ministers, was about to run for president on The National Alliance (TNA) party ticket. As the son of Kenya's founding father Jomo Kenyatta, Uhuru Kenyatta was political royalty, but he had a major problem and needed all the friends he could find.

Kenyatta was one of four Kenyans facing crimes against humanity charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. These stemmed from the 2007/2008 post-election violence in which more than a thousand people were thought to have been killed.

Sonko cast himself as Kenyatta's defender-in-chief. Mourning more than the bereaved, Sonko went as far as asking his barber to carve Kenyatta's name on his head. He flew to The Hague to lead

demonstrations in support of Kenyatta whenever he appeared in court, always wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words, "Respect our Prezzo, Takataka nyinyi ghasia". Respect our president, you pieces of shit!

Sonko's support paid off.

During the 2013 general election, Kenyatta and running mate William Ruto – who was also facing crimes against humanity charges at The Hague – won the presidency by a slim margin, and the cases against both leaders were subsequently dropped.

Riding Kenyatta's wave of tacit support, Sonko became Nairobi's inaugural senator with a staggering 808,705 votes: the highest number of votes ever cast in Kenya for a single politician who wasn't running for president. He was unstoppable.

Sonko cast himself as Kenyatta's defender-in-chief, a move which paid off. He became Nairobi's inaugural senator with a staggering 808,705 votes.

Like most of the new senators-elect, Sonko realised he might have made a miscalculation. Much as the title is grandiose, the job itself is limited to oversight. The real power lay with governors, who controlled huge budgets and could therefore affect lives and livelihoods.

So he hatched a plan. He established a privately-funded pro bono service

delivery entity known as the Sonko Rescue Team (SRT), which comprised ambulances, fire engines and water bowzers. He enlisted the services of hundreds of youth to operate the entity, and asked them to pick up litter at the same time. He got the new organisation to pay the medical bills of those needing specialised treatment in Kenya and abroad; and, in the unfortunate event of a beneficiary passing on, Sonko used his famous *Buru nganyas* as free hearses.

No one, including the incumbent Nairobi governor Dr. Evans Kidero, could compete with Sonko's apparent generosity.

Critics questioned how Sonko could afford all this, given that he earned less than \$10,000 per month as a senator.

Sonko brushed off the haters: he told

the city that he would be Nairobi's next governor, and at a public rally declared himself to be Kenya's third most powerful man, behind only the president and his deputy. He was not afraid to use this power: whenever a government official got in his way, Sonko would get President Kenyatta on the phone, putting the call on loudspeaker as the ever-present media cameras rolled.

Taking their cue from their incorrigible boss, Sonko's bodyguards started showing up in public spaces wielding AK-47s, as if operating in a war zone. At a senate meeting, Sonko attempted to get into a fistfight with Governor Kidero, the man he wanted to unseat.

None of this hurt him. Sonko was untouchable. For now.

Part 3: Operation Stop Sonko

As much as the famously nonchalant Kenyatta didn't seem bothered by Sonko's *umatatu*, allowing his anarchist tendencies to slide on repeated occasions, a coterie of senior civil servants felt differently. They were worried what would happen if he became Nairobi's next governor.

Working with Kenya's wealthiest business people, they hatched what would become known as Operation Stop Sonko, an intervention Sonko himself publicly lamented time and again, whenever he experienced state harassment.

Stopping Sonko involved a series

of legal and technical roadblocks that would make him ineligible to run for office. First prize here was ensuring that Sonko would be denied a certificate of good conduct from the police. Given his criminal record, this ought to have been an easy win.

The conspirators backed up the roadblock strategy by supporting their own candidate, Peter Kenneth, who Sonko referred to as "the system's candidate".

Kenneth was as different from Sonko as day is from night. He was well connected in all the right circles of business, politics and high society.



Purple Reign: While he was governor, Mike Sonko sowed political chaos in Nairobi. Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/ AFP

Two funerals that took place after the 2017 general election showed the public Kenneth's possibilities: a funeral, it is said, reveals more about a society than any other occasion.

The first was the non-state state funeral of Bob Collymore, the Kenyanised Guyanese CEO of Safaricom, the Vodacom-founded telecommunications behemoth which is Kenya's most profitable company. As much as he was a private corporate citizen, Collymore's passing commanded national mourning, considering that being Safaricom CEO – at least if one understands the role, its trappings and leverage and acts accordingly – is akin to being a deity.

Kenneth stood up as a replacement for Collymore as captain of The Boys Club, a not-so-loose formation of powerful business figures, covering business, banking, journalism and telecommunications. The invite-only club had the power to decide some Kenyan

fates, and deployed properly could have blocked Sonko's ascent.

The other funeral was that of Ezra Bunyenyenzi, the debonair Ugandan businessman who had provided seed money for the founding of what became Radio Africa Group.

In his past life, Bunyenyenzi had supplied Janet Museveni with a car to take her kids to school in Nairobi as her husband was waging the liberation war back in Uganda; he was one of two businessmen who financed the building of a bridge to assist Paul Kagame's ragtag Rwandan Patriotic Front to make their way to Kigali; and he bought an air ticket for Raila Odinga, Kenya's future prime minister, who was on the run in the late 80s, on his way to Oslo.

In short, Bunyenyenzi was entwined in Africa's liberation story.

By being at Bunyenyenzi's funeral in a leading role – as if a captain of a different Boys Club, Kenneth was showing the

public that his 2017 bid for the Nairobi governorship against Sonko came with serious support.

Make it all go away

Sonko and Kenneth both ran under the colours of Kenyatta's Jubilee Party, a product of a merger between the president's 2013 party and that of his deputy. As their competition intensified, Sonko's criminal past surfaced in the press. A disqualification looked likely. But then Sonko sought a late night audience with Kenyatta. He reportedly broke down, asking the president why he was betraying him when Sonko had stood with him during his trial at The Hague.

By 8am the next morning, the police had issued a certificate of good conduct, and Sonko went on to win the party primaries. Kenneth cried foul. But the horse had bolted.

With the president's actions showing that Sonko had his ear if not his explicit backing, the senior civil servants and their patrons had to back down somewhat. But they inserted a condition of their retreat: Sonko would have a running mate of their choice – governors and their deputies ran on a joint electoral ticket. This was meant to keep Sonko's umatatu in check by pairing him with a sober mind, but more importantly, it was meant to secure certain commercial interests: Politics mattered; money mattered more.

For this role, they deployed Polycarp Igate, a loyal protege who had cut his teeth in corporate Kenya. The plan was simple: Sonko would win the votes, and Igate would govern, with the end goal

being to push Sonko out of office and allow their chosen few to run Nairobi, with Igate as the potential governor. We know this thanks to Igate himself, who in an extraordinary slip of the tongue confessed as much in public in June this year, during another significant funeral – that of his benefactor Chris Kirubi, one of Kenya's wealthiest businessmen and a Kenyatta insider.

Rather than fight right then, Sonko played Realpolitik. He acquiesced to the demands of those arrayed against him, feigning a fragile bonhomie with Igate throughout the campaign period, even posing together for Emmanuel Jambo, Kenyatta's official photographer, in an attempt to sell their new-found comradeship.

It was at this time that a video emerged of Igate standing in a circle with a handful of middle aged men. With each of them wearing a matching Cheers Baba – a cynical alias given to sleeveless jackets worn by wannabes and midlife-crisis-approaching Nairobi males – an exuberant Igate proposed a toast to his mates, most of whom were holding their black and yellow cans of Tusker, Kenya's most popular beer. Igate called it an "Australian Toast", and it went something like this: "Here's to you, here's to me; the best of friends, we'll always be; and if by chance, we disagree; well, fuck you! Here's to you!" Generous, perhaps: the toast usually ends with, "Here's to me!"

First victory, then control

The unlikely combination worked. Sonko won with 871,974 votes – breaking his

2013 record for an individual politician not running for president. The bulk of those votes were from the Eastlands proletariat.

For his part, Igate waltzed into City Hall with his head high, scolding workers when he encountered filth in the basement parking lot. City Hall's Igate-led corporate takeover was officially in high gear.

But Sonko was already a step ahead. He packed City Hall with loyal roughnecks from Eastlands. Most didn't necessarily have job descriptions beyond being his eyes and ears. They meant that Sonko became omnipresent. No single piece of paper moved without his authorisation. And he surrounded himself with an entourage of bodyguards, PAs and hangers on from his matatu days.

In this way, Sonko heard all, and saw all. People started looking over their shoulders. Nairobi was now being governed by paranoia. To track the chaos, or perhaps to enhance it, Sonko maintained a handful of mobile phones; only he knew which one was used for which purpose. He chose when to be accessible and when to go missing.

People started looking over their shoulders. Nairobi was now being governed by paranoia.

Afraid that an administrative crisis was looming, Igate frantically attempted to unclog the City Hall bureaucracy. It was too late. Six months later, the man primed

to keep Sonko in check and then replace him tweeted his own resignation.

Another challenger

Sonko ought to have appointed a new deputy. He did not. When the pressure to do so ratcheted up, he'd forward wildcard candidates to the county parliament for approval. They were all rejected out of hand. But each bought him time.

He began ensuring that every phone conversation he had was recorded, building a library of kompromat – cruise missiles that he released online depending on the amount of damage he wished to cause to whomever provoked his ire.

When Igate resigned, Sonko leaked certain of their conversations, painting his former deputy in an unsavoury light. When he got into an altercation with the Nairobi Women MP Esther Passaris, Sonko leaked a plea from Passaris asking him to finance her campaigns.

The same Machiavellianism was practised in Sonko's management of Nairobi. His cabinet walked on eggshells because he shuffled its membership every other week. In the same spirit, Sonko ensured the majority of senior officials served in acting capacity, so that their firing, transfers and demotions wouldn't be complicated.

By governing with fear and blackmail on one hand; chaos and confusion on the other, everything seemed to be going his way. But the cabal of civil servants and businessmen opposed to him had hatched a new plan to deploy a second apparatchik, in Peter Kariuki – a lawyer and former civil society operative turned

presidential advisor. After a five-year stint at the president's office, Kariuki was considered both an asset and a one-man arsenal, and was seconded to City Hall as county secretary, the equivalent of a company secretary.

Knowing Kariuki and his masters were up to no good, Sonko resisted the

appointment. When he was forced to give way, Sonko employed the same antics he had used against Igate to frustrate Kariuki.

Knowing he was the last man standing in the fight to bring Sonko to heel, Kariuki brawled on until finally he couldn't.

Sonko seemed to have won again.

Part 4: Infamy, they've all got it infamy

With his control seemingly total, Sonko and his umatatu went wherever they wanted, did whatever they wanted, to whoever they wanted. Until one Saturday morning in April 2018, when they went too far.

Timothy Muriuki, the demure former boss of the Nairobi Central Business District Association, was addressing a press conference at the Hotel Boulevard when a gang of heavily built enforcers stormed into Hotel Boulevard in downtown Nairobi and violently disrupted proceedings. Muriuki was considered an inconsequential Sonko critic who nevertheless needed to be taught a lesson: as journalists scampered, the heavies moved in to rough him up.

Grabbing Muriuki by the waist, one attacker tried to throw the smartly suited Muriuki into the hotel swimming pool. Kicking and pushing, Muriuki eventually freed himself from the man's grip as journalists begged the attackers to not drown him.

"Please read my statement," Muriuki

pleaded. "I wasn't attacking the governor."

Unmoved, the goons frogmarched the businessman from the compound. When he fell, they shoved him into the mud, but he managed to get back on his feet and attempt to sprint away, only for the assailants to grab him by his blazer and resume their kicks and blows.

He finally escaped when the journalists convinced guards at a nearby building to rescue him.

The entire Boulevard episode was one of the most embarrassing forms of public humiliation Kenyans had ever witnessed. And it was done in Sonko's name. One attacker had invoked his name. Others were seen in his entourage.

The establishment strikes back

As the public mood shifted against Sonko, the civil servants and businessmen who had twice failed to dislodge him decided to try once more: this time they would use Sonko's own paranoia against him.

Fearing that City Hall was bugged, Sonko oscillated the running of Nairobi's

affairs between a nondescript pied-à-terre in the city's Upper Hill area – which he converted into a personal office – and his gigantic hilltop Mua Hills mansion on the outskirts of Nairobi, filled with ostentatious gold furnishings.

Through their influence in the press, Sonko's detractors sponsored one unflattering headline after another, to a point where Sonko declared he was a target of Kenya's "deep state", naming Permanent Secretary Karanja Kobicho as the puppet master.

Before the ink could dry on these damaging stories – that he drank at work, ran City Hall like a mafia boss, never listened to his cabinet, and was going broke – the country's anti-corruption agency struck.

Various transactions in Sonko's bank accounts were flagged as suspicious, more so in instances where Sonko had previously received payments from companies which later on traded with City Hall. To curtail his operations, Sonko's Upper Hill base was placed under investigation, on account that it had been acquired irregularly.

Determined to fight back, in May 2019 a fired-up Sonko pulled up at a TV station carrying over 1,000 title deeds and 150 logbooks, intent on proving he was already a wealthy man before going into politics.

With tears in his eyes, Sonko attributed his troubles to the Kenyan aristocracy, which he said was displeased that a poor man's son had risen to become Nairobi governor and was willing to share his meagre earnings with the people of

Eastlands.

That being said, Sonko made it crystal clear that much as he came from poverty, he was no pauper. He gloated: "If I liquidate my title deeds, I am worth more than Nairobi's annual budget."

Nairobi's budget for the 2019/2020 financial year was \$320-million.

The arrest

Playing to the gallery did little to divert the attention of the authorities. An arrest was planned at the end of 2019. Hearing that he would be facing charges ranging from money laundering to corruption, Sonko went on the run, intent on laying low at one of his coastal hideaways.

Hearing that he would be facing charges ranging from money laundering to corruption, Mbuvi went on the run, intent on laying low at one of his coastal hideaways.

But his convoy was intercepted at Voi, between Nairobi and Mombasa, and Sonko was bundled into a helicopter and flown back to the capital.

The show of power made it clear to everyone that the Matatu King was up against President Kenyatta himself.

That escalation might have had something to do with Sonko committing the cardinal sin of forging an alliance with Deputy President William Ruto, who had fallen out with Kenyatta.

Like Sonko, Ruto fashioned himself as a Robin Hood of sorts, traversing the country dishing out millions of shillings as he preached the pro-poor gospel.

Calling himself a hustler, Ruto – who is campaigning to become president in 2022 – peddled a catchy us-versus-them narrative where he and others like Sonko presented themselves as case studies of the rags-to-riches trajectory, while castigating President Kenyatta and his allies for being offspring and beneficiaries of oppressive dynasties. By becoming Ruto's ally, Sonko chose to become Kenyatta's foe.

On being arraigned in court following his Voi arrest, Sonko was slapped with a staggering \$150,000 bail, and was barred by the court from accessing City Hall until the matter ran its full course.

In this moment of Sonko's weakness, President Kenyatta went for the jugular.

The fall

On the night of February 24 2020, Sonko received communication summoning him to State House, the president's official residence. He arrived two hours late for their 6am meeting. Kenyatta had left.

When Kenyatta returned that afternoon, he instructed Sonko to surrender a number of Nairobi County functions to the national government, including but not limited to planning, health, transport, public works, ancillary services and revenue collection.

As consolation, Sonko would remain the governor, albeit a lame duck.

At 4pm, a visibly subdued Sonko appeared at a press conference with the president, eating humble pie as he

sheepishly signed away his electoral mandate. The aspirant had been put in his place by people used to wielding power on a national scale.

In less than a month, Kenyatta proceeded to set up and deploy the opaque Nairobi Metropolitan Services, which has since been declared an extra-constitutional entity by the courts but now effectively runs Nairobi.

In another signal that he meant business, Kenyatta appointed Major General Mohamed Badi to lead the new entity. Tellingly, Peter Kariuki, the man who had been previously sent to rein in Sonko, was seconded to the entity.

And just like that, Kenya's largest city and capital lost its elected governor and was now being run by a tough-talking military general.

Despite his earlier acquiescence, Sonko



Clean sweep: The Sonko Rescue Team, privately funded by Mike Sonko, disinfects the streets of Nairobi during Covid-19 lockdown.

Picture: Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP / Getty

rebelled. As governor, Sonko was the official signatory for the Nairobi County bank accounts, so he refused to sign funds to the Nairobi Metropolitan Services.

Kenyatta struck back, engineering Sonko's impeachment by the Nairobi County parliament.

Falling back to his *umatatu* roots, Sonko airlifted a sizable group of Members of County Assembly to the coast, to make it impossible for the city's legislature to get the votes required to impeach him. Videos surfaced of tens of assembly men and women showing off bundles of dollar bills as they frolicked with Sonko on one of his many beach-front properties.

Undeterred, Parliament decided that due to Covid-19 protocols, those at the coast could – and must – vote electronically: And, so, just before Christmas last year, Sonko was impeached and removed from office.

The end

Out of work and disgraced, a bitter Sonko went on the offensive. He leaked a recording in which the president's sister, Christina Pratt, appears to lobby him to appoint her friend as deputy governor.

He then joined Deputy President William Ruto on his rallies across the country, standing on podiums and attributing major corruption scandals to the president's family. The attacks aggravated Kenyatta – to the point where his mask of genteel detachment slipped.

At a meeting with leaders near Mount Kenya, he owned up to having orchestrated Sonko's ouster. "I tried to help my friend the other day... he eventually declined my

offer for assistance because he wanted to keep wearing goggles and boasting, and keep stealing... so I told him if that's the case, then goodbye. Nowadays he is busy insulting me. I have no problem with him but I know Nairobi is in better hands."

Aggrieved, Sonko countered the president's remarks within the hour, disregarding the Kiswahili idiom *usishandane na ndovu kunya, utapasuka msamba* – a warning that you shouldn't get into a shitting contest with an elephant because you'll split your bowels.

Speaking at a roadside rally in Machakos in February, he played Kenyatta's speech on loudspeaker, before calling the president a drunkard, with whom he used to smoke marijuana.

"I won't mention his name because if I do he will either get me arrested or killed, that is his problem," Sonko said. "But what my friend is not saying is that he is the one who introduced me to goggles back when we used to smoke marijuana together. He taught me to put on goggles to hide my bloodshot eyes after smoking... he taught me about goggles, drinking and marijuana."

He was wrong, though: he had not needed to mention Kenyatta's name.

Sonko was arrested 48 hours later and held in custody for over a month, charged with terrorism – the state now alleging that Sonko runs a private militia that poses a threat to national security.

Umatatu worked for Sonko until it didn't. Those that he sought to defeat – the businessmen, civil servants and dynastic politicians – have outmanoeuvred him.

The Matatu King has fallen. ■

President Samia Suluhu Hassan's honeymoon fizzles out in Tanzania

Aikande Kwayu

Given the imperial powers of the Tanzanian president, it is easy to assume that the executive can run the country as they wish. This assumption was certainly borne out during John Magufuli's administration when his every statement on any subject – regardless of the constitution, laws or norms – was implemented as if it were a royal decree.

Samia Suluhu began her own tenure with lofty words and promises of democratic reforms. But it is clear that the new president is not powerful enough to change the system.

To her credit, the government quickly changed its stance on Covid-19 and embraced scientific measures and for the first time in five years, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)'s main opposition, Chadema, could carry out meetings without police interference. But this breath of fresh air soon grew stale. On July 23, Chadema leader Freeman Mbowe was charged with terrorism.

The charges are deeply problematic. First, there is no evidence that opposition leaders are engaged in terrorist activities. Second, the nature of the charges means bail is not possible; they are

clearly designed to undermine the opposition. Indeed, the government's hardline response was motivated by Chadema's decision to revive the issue of constitutional reforms. CCM is deeply hostile to this issue because its survival is a function of the existing constitution.

The most likely explanation for President Samia's failure to assert authority within CCM is that she lacks sufficient political clout both inside and outside the party. Consequently, she is forced to side with the powerful "Magufuli faction". Having come to power in flawed elections, this group needs CCM to maintain Magufuli's hardline approach – without it they would not be in power.

If this interpretation is correct, President Samia's time in power will fail to deliver either political reform or transformative leadership. ■



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THE QUIZ

- 1_ What is the capital of Liberia?
- 2_ What is Nigeria's currency?
- 3_ Bujumbura and Gitega are both capitals of Burundi. Which is the political capital and which is the economic?
- 4_ Which country recently won its first-ever gold medal at the Olympics? (Hint: it was won in the 3,000m women's steeplechase.)
- 5_ The Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda

- were all colonised by which European country?
- 6_ In which country can one visit the Cape Coast Castle? (pictured)
- 7_ True or false: the African penguin can be found on the north-west coast of Africa.
- 8_ True or false: "Mensah" is said to be the most common surname in Ghana.
- 9_ What colour beret did Thomas Sankara famously wear?
- 10_ Which country is called "the Red Island"?

How did I do? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you

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

"This wins me a medal, yes? Better be real gold this time."



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

THE BIG PICTURE

Deep dive: Egypt's Mohab Ishak competes in the preliminary round of the men's 3m springboard diving event during the 2020 Olympic Games at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre in Japan. Photo: Oli Scarff/AFP



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