

with Mail & Guardian

# The Continent



**South Africa's  
superpower  
balancing act**

Photo: Emmanuel Croset/AFP

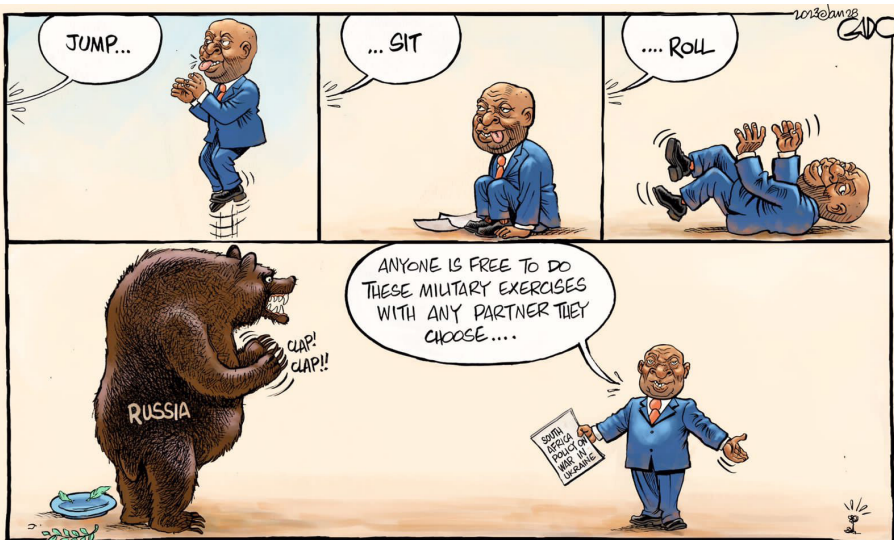


**Cover:** Since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has worked hard to find allies around the world while western countries pushed to isolate it. In that tug of war, South Africa is openly playing the field. This week the country welcomed the Russian foreign minister to Pretoria and one of Russia's prize warships is on its way south for joint naval exercises with China. The three will fire off on the one year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, which South Africa still refuses to condemn. History, it seems, has a way of keeping the ruling ANC loyal to Moscow (p11). But, South Africa has done similar exercises with western powers. Its president recently flew to Washington and got on unusually well with Biden. And the lack of trade with Russia shows where the money really is. It's quite possible that Russia has the short end of the stick (p14).

# Inside:

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Russia needs South Africa's support as it seeks allies after its invasion of Ukraine. South Africa seems to be playing ball, joining military exercises next month. But it is playing a tough hand. And the exercises follow similar ones with Western allies.

## INDIA

### Modi muzzles BBC documentary

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has banned a BBC documentary that said he was "directly responsible" for a pogrom against Muslims in 2002 that killed hundreds. Social media platforms were forced by the Indian government to block it from being streamed, at least in India. Police even arrested people for watching it offline, including students at a mostly Muslim university in the capital New Delhi. Modi's Hindu nationalist government has been accused of being anti-Muslim.

## JOLLOF WARS

### Unesco stirs the pot by centering Senegal

The jollof wars have been reignited after Unesco listed Senegalese jollof – called ceebu jën or thieboudienne – as part of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", noting that the dish and the cultural practices tied to it, are "an affirmation of Senegalese identity". The practices include that: one must lower their knees, hold the bowl with the left hand and not drop any grains of rice when eating jollof. Does this make Senegal, not Ghana or Nigeria, the true originator of jollof? We dare not say.



## SAUDI ARABIA

# Morocco's Achraf Hakimi named Arab Sportsman of the Year in Riyadh

In a glitzy ceremony in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Moroccan football player Achraf Hakimi was recognised as the best Arab sportsman of 2022. The 24-year-old thrilled fans during Morocco's giant slaying run at the World Cup last year. The Moroccan national team reached the tournament's semifinals for the first time in its history, beating the likes of Spain and Portugal on their way there. Hakimi also had an impressive 2022 season with his France-based club, Paris St Germain.

## RUSSIA

# Another African killed in Russia's war in Ukraine

Nemes Tarimo, a 33-year old Tanzanian, is now the second African known to have died for Russia in its war in Ukraine. Like Zambia's Lemekhani Nathan Nyirenda, he too travelled to Russia as a student, ended up in jail and was recruited by the Wagner Group of mercenaries to fight in exchange for being released from prison. Tarimo, who went to Russia in 2020 on a master's degree scholarship, was sentenced to a seven-year prison term in March 2021, on drug-related charges.

## CAMEROON

# Canada announces mediation role, but state says nuh uh

A week ago, Canada's foreign minister Mélanie Joly put out a statement saying the government of Cameroon and some separatist groups in the country's Anglophone regions had agreed to peace talks and "Canada accepted a mandate to facilitate the process." On Monday, Cameroon said it had not agreed to mediation by a foreign country or entity in the crisis, which has killed at least 6,000 people since 2017. Canada says it is in touch with both sides and stands by its statement.

## UGANDA

## Nobody can #StopEACOP

Despite a global climate campaign to stop the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, Uganda, whose oil it will transport through Tanzania, has issued a licence for its construction and begun drilling for oil. The pipeline is expected to cost \$3.5-billion, much of which will be invested by French multinational, Total Energies, and the China National Offshore Oil Company – both of which are drilling for an expected 1.4-billion barrels of crude oil from Uganda's ecologically sensitive Albertine Graben.

## MADAGASCAR

## Cyclone Cheneso cuts a deadly path

Madagascar's national agency for disaster management said on Thursday that Cyclone Cheneso, which blew through the country between 19 and 23 January, killed at least eight people. Ten others are still missing. The tropical storm flooded several districts in the island's north west, cutting them off from the capital, Antananarivo, which complicated search and rescue operations. An estimated 47,000 people were affected, increasing the number of displaced people on the cyclone-prone island to more than 60,000, according to *ReliefWeb*.



**Belle of the ball: The US's Janet Yellen is the latest suitor to come a-courting**

## GEOPOLITICS

## Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

Janet Yellen, the head of the US treasury has concluded a two-week tour of Senegal, Zambia and South Africa, arriving in the latter just days after the departure of Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. Lavrov also made stops in Angola and Eswatini, and is expected in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania. Two weeks ago, the new Chinese foreign minister, Qin Gang, visited Angola, Benin, Egypt, Ethiopia and Gabon, on his first official trip. Yellen arguably spoke for all, when in Pretoria she spoke of "a simple recognition that Africa will shape the future of the global economy".



**CAPE VERDE-PORTUGAL****'Debt-for-nature'  
swap deal signed**

Portugal will write off the \$150-million debt owed by Cape Verde, if the latter instead invests that amount in an environment and climate fund.

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa said \$12-million of Cape Verde's imminent repayments to Portugal will go into the fund, to start. For its contribution to global emissions, Portugal owes countries on the climate front line like Cape Verde at least \$688-million a year but pays only about a tenth of it, according to data from the Overseas Development Institute.

**BURKINA FASO****France recalls its  
ambassador**

On Thursday, France announced that "in the context of recent developments" it is recalling its ambassador to Burkina Faso. This follows Ouagadougou's announcement last weekend that it had asked all French troops in the country to leave within a month. About 400 French special forces soldiers are in Burkina Faso, as part of a 2018 agreement to cooperate in the fight against militants in the Sahel region. Ouagadougou residents had staged anti-French protests on Friday.

**GOVERNANCE****Africa is not rising  
– but women are**

One in seven Africans lives in a country where security and the rule of law are worse than they were 10 years ago, anti-corruption efforts have stagnated, and citizens are being squeezed by attacks on the freedom of association and assembly and civil society, according to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. However the rights of African women are protected better and have more access to political spaces, economic opportunities and public services.

# Eswatini

## The brazen assassination of Thulani Maseko

**Democracy campaigner murdered hours after King Mswati said activists should expect reprisal**

**Kiri Rupiah**

**O**n 21 January, Eswatini human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko was shot dead through a window of his home in Luhleko by unknown assailants, as he watched TV with his wife and children.

Maseko chaired the Swaziland Multi-Stakeholder Forum, an umbrella body of civil society organisations, unions, political parties, and faith-based and women's groups. He has also been representing two members of parliament arrested during civil unrest in 2021 – protests triggered, in part, by a royal decree banning citizens from petitioning for democratic reforms. A 1973 law banning political parties remains in place.

Hours before Maseko's murder, King Mswati III – Africa's last absolute

monarch – warned in public that those calling for reforms should not “cry about mercenaries coming after them”.

In 2014, Maseko and Bhekithemba Makhubu, the editor of the *Nation* magazine, were convicted of contempt of court for criticising the country's judicial system. He was acquitted on appeal and released after a year in detention.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said on Monday: “His cold-blooded killing has deprived Eswatini, Southern Africa and the world of a true champion and advocate for peace, democracy and human rights.”

Türk called on the country to ensure “a prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigation”. Eswatini attributed the attack to “criminals” and said authorities were looking into it. ■



**Thulani  
Maseko**

# Malawi

## The worst cholera outbreak in over a decade

**With over a thousand dead, the health system is running out of responses to a crisis Malawians saw coming a mile away**

**Josephine Chinele in Blantyre**

**O**n Monday alone, 30 Malawians died of cholera. Since March 2022, the country has recorded over 30,600 cases, and over 1,000 people have died. This is the country's worst, and longest, outbreak in over a decade.

The catastrophe is unfolding despite attempts by people to make the authorities do better.

In 2017, residents of Lilongwe sued their city council, Malawi Housing Corporation and the local water board, after many of them contracted waterborne diseases. The court found the city council and housing corporation guilty of negligence. It ruled that they had failed to maintain the piping network, which

allowed sewage to seep into domestic water.

But the guilty verdict didn't prompt authorities to reinvest in the water sector. "We have few piped water points, which are mostly dry," said Catherine Waiti, who lives in a densely populated part of Blantyre, Malawi's commercial capital. "Desperate for water, we use unprotected sources. Very few of us can afford to treat the water. The health people don't usually give us chlorine to use."

Instead, the authorities are blaming the victims of cholera and shirking responsibility. "We are aware that there are other factors that are contributing such as lack of access to clean water. But we believe things like vending of cooked food among others are under control of the councils," said Adrian Chikumbe, the spokesperson for the health ministry.

**"Desperate for water, we use unprotected sources. Very few of us can afford to treat the water."**

With more than 1,100 hospitalised across the country, the outbreak is stretching the health system to its limit. The health ministry is recruiting temporary staff for the hard hit areas and a presidential task force is begging for donations of supplies such as tents, chlorine, soap, and beds. ■



# DRC - Rwanda

## Another city falls to rebels

**With M23 advancing, Rwanda's near-miss with a missile fired at a Congolese jet has made a bad situation even worse**

**Mwangi Maina**

**R**wanda on Wednesday fired a missile at a Congolese air force jet. It narrowly missed. But it is yet another step towards outright war between two countries that have for years fought through proxies in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Sukhoi-25 was trying to land in Goma, the main city in the eastern province of North Kivu, Kinshasa said. Kigali said it had violated its airspace, the third time it said this has happened. Goma is very close to the Rwandan border.

Congolese jets are used in the government's ongoing war against M23 rebels. Rwanda is commonly said to support the rebels, a charge it denies.

On Thursday, M23 extended its control to Kitchanga, which it took back from the Congolese army. This means the last open route between Goma and Butembo,

the province's second largest city, is now closed.

M23 has made ground in recent months. But a peace agreement signed in Luanda a month ago was meant to reverse that progress, and give those displaced by the fighting a chance to go home.

That peace is in tatters.

Kenya's former president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and one of the mediators from the East African Community involved in the agreement, warned on Wednesday that the situation was "sharply deteriorating".

Francine Muyumba, a Congolese senator and parliamentary chair of the foreign relations committee, told *The Continent* that mediation efforts are "a waste of time".

**The peace agreement is in tatters.**

An anonymous diplomatic source involved in the peace process told *The Continent* that Rwanda's missile strike was serious and people are waiting to see what happens next. A security analyst, who has worked extensively on peacekeeping in central Africa, said war was possible but that the two countries have to negotiate.

Next month's Great Lakes conference, in Burundi, will be the next opportunity for regional leaders to sit and discuss the ongoing crisis. ■

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House of Brics:  
Sergei Lavrov  
and Naledi  
Pandor

# In Russia's sweet nothings, South Africa sees an invitation to a soviet reunion

**The ruling ANC inaccurately sees Russia as the successor to its historical ally during apartheid, but its stance is also about modern geopolitical chess**

**Mondli Makhanya**

**R**ussian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the country's most visible face of the war on Ukraine, was on a strong charm offensive in southern Africa this week.

He popped into South Africa, Eswatini and Angola in a trip that was couched in the diplomatic lingo of "strengthening bilateral relations". In reality it was to

counter Western nations' concerted thrust to isolate Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. Lavrov's push has already taken him to Uganda, Ethiopia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Algeria. During the course of February, he will circle back to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania.

The charm offensive has seen him promise improved trade, security co-operation and all the jargon that comes

with diplomatic-speak.

In South Africa's case, the charm was hardly necessary. The country has been one of Russia's most strategically important allies in the year since the war began. Even as the ANC-led government proclaimed neutrality and wished for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, its actions and pronouncement have been all but. South Africa has consistently abstained from any vote condemning Russia's actions, including the wanton bombing of civilian targets and life-essential infrastructure.

Betraying the government's real position, this week International Relations Minister Naledi Pandor said it would be "simplistic and infantile" for South Africa to call for Russia's withdrawal "given the massive transfer of arms" from Western countries to Ukraine.

On 24 February, when Ukrainians mark the first anniversary of the invasion of their land, South Africa will be hosting Russia and China in a "war games" naval exercise off the country's east coast. South Africa has been defiantly defensive of this tone-deaf military exercise. Pandor said that "all countries conduct military exercises with friends worldwide" and that "this is just a natural set of exercises that occur between countries."

Defence minister Thandi Modise has previously argued that there was "no hype" when South Africa held joint military exercises with the United States, United Kingdom, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria. She overlooked the fact that those countries were not conducting a savage war on their neighbour.

## The history is key

To understand South Africa's position, which flies in the face of its own foreign policy – premised as the latter is on support for human rights and respect for the sovereignty of nations – you have to go back to the Cold War years, when the Soviet Union was one of the primary backers of South Africa's liberation struggle. What we see today is a case of history meeting geopolitical manoeuvring.

The country hosted many leaders and rank and file members of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. ANC students were educated at Soviet universities and received "ideological training" at the International Lenin School in Moscow. Soviet money poured generously into the ANC and other liberation movements in southern Africa. Importantly, the Red Army gave military training and weaponry to the ANC's military wing.

With western powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with apartheid South Africa, the generous support from the Soviet Union and allies in the communist east forged strong bonds. What's more, the United States was backing surrogate rebel movements that were fighting Marxist and Soviet-friendly governments in Mozambique and Angola, both of which were key bases for the ANC.

Today the ANC inaccurately sees Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union – despite the fascist leanings of Putin's United Russia party and that it is



**Power play: A Russian Tupolev Tu-160, a supersonic bomber, on the tarmac at the Waterkloof Air force Base near Pretoria in 2019. Photo: Emmanuel Croset/AFP**

home to the most rapacious capitalism, which is endorsed by the Kremlin. This line of thinking conveniently overlooks the fact that countries like Ukraine and Georgia, which have been at the receiving end of Russian aggression, were key components of the Soviet Union. ANC cadres studied at Ukrainian universities and received military training at Soviet bases in Ukraine.

### Re-ordering the world order

In addition to this nostalgia for past ties with Moscow, the ANC has a deep suspicion of Western powers going back to those days when the West was on the wrong side of the anti-apartheid struggle.

In the ANC's eyes, these powers still have imperialist and neocolonial ambitions in the world, particularly in Africa. Hence the country's pivot towards powers such as Russia and China, which have expressed the desire to create a

multipolar new world order that is not dominated by the West. South Africa is also a big proponent of this.

It will this year host the summit of Brics (the bloc made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and SA). Some of the countries that have either sided with Russia or remained nominally "neutral" have been agitating for the expansion of this bloc so that they too can join in the reformulation of this new world order. As host and incoming chair, South Africa will be central to this process. Russia and China are the dominant members of Brics and South Africa will need to work closely with them in creating what Pandor called "a redesigned global order".

Rather than change course in the face of unrelenting Russian atrocities and international and domestic pressure to side with justice, South Africa will dig in its heels and merely repeat its pointless calls for dialogue. ■



## Russia is losing the superpower scramble for Africa

**Sergei Lavrov's African tour was supposed to highlight the strength of Russia's relationship with the continent. Instead, it did the opposite.**

**Simon Allison**

**W**hen Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited South Africa, Eswatini, Angola and Eritrea this week, he dwelt at length on the historical ties between Russia and the African continent.

The history is real. The Soviet Union – the superpower that Russian President Vladimir Putin appears intent on

resurrecting – played a very active role in supporting liberation movements in this part of the world. For that reason, doors here will always open to representatives from Moscow. Western diplomats who take exception to this, laying claim to some moral high ground, appear to have very short memories indeed.

But for all the glad-handing and photo ops – perhaps Naledi Pandor, South



Africa's foreign minister and the one who initially condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, did not need to be quite so effusive in her welcome – the hard truth for Russia is that it is struggling to find meaningful African allies.

Eswatini and Eritrea are both small, isolated regimes with little diplomatic clout. In the bigger picture, their support is meaningless. Angola is richer and more politically significant, but still carries little weight on the international stage. Tellingly, Botswana, which was initially on the foreign minister's itinerary, cancelled without explanation at the last minute.

South Africa, of course, is the big prize. This is the continent's second-richest economy, and its most influential in the diplomatic arena, by virtue of its membership of the G20 group of countries and the Brics alliance (which also includes Brazil, Russia, India and China).

The planned exercises between the navies of South Africa, Russia and China are an undoubted propaganda coup for the Russian regime, and will be spun as a show of support for Moscow's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Nonetheless, South Africa's relationship with western countries is far stronger. Economically, there is no comparison: South Africa's trade with Russia amounted to a little over \$1-billion in 2021, compared to \$21-billion with the United States. Militarily, South Africa's armed forces regularly conduct large-scale exercises with the United States and European Union member states (like Operation Shared Accord in July last year, in which 700 South African and American




**Old friends: The Soviet Union supported African independence movements**

troops trained together “to improve bilateral military inter-operability”).

And diplomatically, there is extensive cooperation between Pretoria, Brussels and Washington DC. It was only four short months ago that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was in Washington to meet his American counterpart. The pair struck up such an instant rapport that Biden abandoned the planned programme to give Ramaphosa a personal tour of the West Wing.

This was in stark contrast to Ramaphosa's last meeting with President Putin in 2019, at the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, in which Putin pestered him to sign a multibillion-dollar deal for nuclear plants to be built by Russia's state-owned energy company, Rosatom.

This proposed deal, first brokered in secret by Ramaphosa's predecessor Jacob Zuma, has been mired in corruption allegations, and Ramaphosa was having none of it in Sochi. Looking a little exasperated, he told South African journalists: “We have met a few times



**Joint military operations are all the rage these days. This is a NATO one.**

and each time the nuclear issue comes up. I said we are not about to embark on a nuclear power project we cannot afford.”

So for all the talk of historical ties, today’s Russia has not been able to get what it wants from South Africa. That’s why, despite public pronouncements of concern, western diplomats are not especially worried about where South Africa’s loyalties lie. “We think working with the Russian navy is not the best look for a country that is trying to say they are neutral,” an official in the United States State Department told *The Continent*. “But we also understand politics.”

Without much in the way of economic or diplomatic leverage, Moscow’s only play is in the military sphere, in particular through the activities of the Wagner mercenary group.

Wagner is active in the Central African Republic, Mali and Sudan, but its military

footprint in Africa is tiny compared to that of the United States, for example, which maintains an extensive network of secret military bases across nearly half of Africa’s countries. A 2020 investigation in *The Continent* found that on any given day there are some 6,000 American troops operating from at least 27 military outposts in Africa – and those are just the ones that could be verified.

Far from underscoring the strength of Russia’s ties with Africa, Lavrov’s whistle-stop African tour merely highlighted just how fragile its influence on the continent has become. Ironically, his emphasis on the Soviet Union’s ties with Africa – which were far deeper and more meaningful – served only to emphasise this fragility. ■

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*Simon Allison is the editor-in-chief of The Continent*

# Cameroon

## People are ‘disappearing’ – before being found dead

**Enforced disappearances are a hallmark of life in Cameroon, where state and separatists alike are accused of using abduction as a weapon of war – and societal control**

**Louvier Kindo Tombe**

Last Sunday popular radio journalist Mbani Zogo Arsène Salomon, better known as Martinez Zogo, was found dead on the outskirts of Cameroon’s capital Yaounde. Zogo was kidnapped by unknown people five days earlier. His decomposing body showed signs that he had been tortured prior to his death.

The murder is only the latest in an escalating trend of forced and sometimes fatal disappearances across Cameroon.

In one incident last year, 40 commercial motorcycle riders were stopped and taken into what appears to have been state custody: 24 of them later

turned up in detention at a military facility in Bamenda, the capital of Cameroon’s north western region. Later, in court, they were accused of collaborating with Anglophone separatists.

The sister of one of the 16 who remain unaccounted for told *The Continent* about the day last April that they were taken. “My brother called and asked me to sun his traditional wear. After that conversation, I have not seen nor heard from him.” This is despite visits to different police stations and gendarmerie brigades for any information.

In 2020, the Cameroonian government admitted that journalist Samuel Wazizi died in prison shortly after he was arrested the year before for his critical reporting on the government’s handling of the separatist conflict.

That conflict, which forms the background for most of these disappearances, began in October 2016, when lawyers’ and teachers’ unions launched street demonstrations against the obligatory use of French in schools and courts in the country’s two English-speaking regions.

The two regions, in northwest and southwest Cameroon, are home to about five million of the country’s 24-million people. When these protests were suppressed by the state, the situation degenerated into an armed struggle for the independence of what secessionists



**Mourners pray at a memorial for slain journalist Martinez Zogo.** Photo: Louvier Kindo Tombe

call Ambazonia.

Disappearances have been a key part of the struggle, with all sides taking people.

The families are left with no closure. "It's been over four years today. I cannot tell where my father is nor if he is alive or dead," said 27-year-old Abedine Akweton Abilitu, whose father was arrested in 2018 on suspicion of collaborating with the rebels. "I had to drop out of school to assist my mother in searching for dad."

His mother died last May without ever knowing what happened to her husband.

Secessionist groups have also been accused of disappearing people. Their main targets are civil servants in the conflict areas.

In June 2021, these groups were accused of kidnapping six high-profile delegates in the southwest of the country. One of the delegates later died.

In December that year, local chief Fon Yakum Kevin Teuvih, head of the assembly for traditional rulers in the northwest region, was taken by

separatists.

Justice and closure are even more elusive when the rebels are the captors. "They don't have a legal structure, no visible and organised command chain, so it becomes extremely difficult to seek justice," said Blaise Chamango, head of Human is Right, a rights body.

Human rights defenders are resorting to unusual strategies to get answers.

"I remember we once sent a lady to go and cry in front of a security post in Buea, where her son was held incommunicado for months," Chamango said. "Three days later he was released unconditionally,

According to reports from Crisis Group and the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs in Cameroon, more than 2.2-million people are affected by the crisis in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.

More than 6,000 people have been killed according to the same reports, and 956,000 displaced, of whom over 70,000 are refugees in Nigeria. ■

# Nigeria

## Observers of indigenous religions want state recognition

**In many quarters of Nigerian public life, observing indigenous beliefs that predate imported religion makes you a target for harassment and bigotry**

**Olúwatóbi Odéyinka**

**O**n a sunny November morning, Olawale Ifafunwa set off aboard a commercial bus from Ibadan to Ogbomosho. The potholes that typically littered this 70km journey had recently been filled in, so he settled in for a nap. But four times in the one hour trip, he was rudely awakened for roadside searches. He was the only passenger on the bus who was singled out at four of the six stops for searches.

The trip, he says, was not the first time he had been repeatedly profiled and

harassed merely for his appearance.

Ifafunwa, who observes the Ìṣẹ̀ṣe traditional beliefs of the Yoruba, richly adorns his wrists and neck with beads. He is one of the fewer than 10% of Nigerians who still adhere to the indigenous belief systems that predate the Christianity and Islam that are the majority practice.

Ìṣẹ̀ṣe, his religion, is a monotheistic belief system whose observance includes ritualistic reverence for different orishas (deities), believed to be representatives of the supreme being, Olodumare. Its theology is held in a scripture called Ifa, an encyclopaedia of Yoruba religious and cultural knowledge. It is practised in many parts of West Africa and the world where the Yoruba people have spread: Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, as well as Cuba and Brazil.

Ìṣẹ̀ṣe adherents wear beadwork to identify with their faith and in many quarters of contemporary Nigerian public life, they draw analogies with the experience of someone wearing a burqa in a French or US airport.

Taiwo Ifaniyi, who resides in Ibadan, recalls enduring discrimination throughout his childhood. In one incident, a new school principal whom he describes as “a Christian and a very religious one”, banned neck and wrist beads. “Mine were not for fashion and the teachers knew that already so I did not stop wearing them.” Then one day, in

front of the other students at the school, the principal accosted him and forcefully cut the beads off. "While doing it, she taunted me by saying I was serving a false god." On that occasion, Ifaniyi's parents stood up for him by going to the school the next day to confront the principal.

Now in his early 30s, he must defend himself and others from similar and routine denigration from many in authority. "Especially the police," he says. "Sometimes when we are going for *Ode Ifa* [a worship event], and wear our religious accessories, they stop us for questioning." Other times, police officers taunt them as "yahoo boys". This is commonly used to mean fraudsters, Ifaniyi says. "But I always stand my ground anyway."

Leaders of the *Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ* and other indigenous religions believe this kind of widespread prejudice and systematic harassment can decrease if the state gives their faith at least some of the recognition enjoyed by Christians and Muslims.

Their major request is that 20 August, which they observe as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ* Day, be designated as a public holiday, just as Christians and Muslims get several notable dates for religious observance as holidays. They also want the *Ifa* to be taught in secondary school in south-west Nigeria, where the Yoruba have their roots.

So far, Osun is the only state that has designated the 20th a public holiday. Leaders in other states have made promises, but often only for political expediency.

*The Continent* spoke to leaders of Traditional Religions Worshippers



Photo: Traditional Religion Worshippers Association, State of Osun (TRWASO)

Association in Ogun and Oyo state who said that for decades, state governments in the south west have either ignored their demands for recognition or made promises they didn't deliver on.

Lagos state governor, Babajide Sanwolu, has promised *Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ* recognition twice in less than four years. "They only give us recognition during campaigns," said Chief Ifayemi Ifakayode, the general secretary of the Oyo state chapter of the association.

Meanwhile, ordinary residents must navigate anti-native prejudice on their own. Adebayo Ifawale, who lives in Lagos, says that he sometimes hides his religious accessories when going out. "To avoid harassment from police," he says. "And scornful stares from ordinary people." ■



# Cameroon

## The woman griot opening a new chapter in storytelling

**Oral historians have been weaving their stories for a millennium – about births, deaths, marriages, affairs and all the bits in between**

**Beng Emmanuel Kum**

**T**he first time Aissatou Bouba saw a good griot, at a wedding in Gazawa, over 100km from her own hometown, she was so entranced that she didn't return home. "When my sisters asked us to return home, I refused and decided to stay back. I spent one year there (in Gawaza) learning the art from older experienced singers," she tells *The Continent*.

It was the beginning of her journey to becoming the sole woman griot in Maroua, a town of over half a million people, and one of the very few women who have become griots in the Sahelian part of Cameroon. It was also the beginning of a major rift with her father, who was outraged that she had decided to

become a praise singer and dancer.

A griot is a West African oral historian who narrates family and social histories through songs about births, deaths, marriages, affairs, battles and so on. The tradition dates at least as far back as Sundiata Keita's Mali empire in the 1200s. But in contemporary life, griots are most often hired for social events to tell the life stories of the hosts, in songs of praise.

The modern business is male dominated and competitive.

After six years away, learning, she returned home to Maroua. When her father died, she took up the duty to provide for the family. She has grown into such a respected griot that the local chief honoured her with the title Saky Marta, a Fulfule phrase that can be loosely translated as "leader of women".

"We are three prominent griots in Maroua. There is a lot of competition but they respect me because I take my job seriously," Bouba says.

### **A griot is a West African oral historian**

During peak periods like Ramadan, she can make up to \$490. Performing at weddings can fetch her as much as \$165 a day. And with that she has been able to build a home for herself and her mother, where she continues to build her own legacy, and live out a story of her own. ■



# Journey to the Seychelles Islands

Anse Intendance Beach. Photo: Audrey Donkor

**Rediscover nature and experience tranquility in this archipelago paradise where time itself seems to slow all the way down.**

**Audrey Donkor**

The Seychelles is Africa's smallest country, an archipelago with a total land area of just 460km<sup>2</sup> and a population of a little over 100,000.

Most visitors flock to the islands for their beauty and stunning beaches, but Seychelles offers more than just idle days sipping sundowners. The country is a lesson in merging the past

and present, conserving nature and blending people and cultures.

Its multiethnic population can trace their roots to European and African influence, threaded through with the heritage of traders from China and India over time, which also led to the development of the Seychellois Creole language – a mix of 17th century French with words from English, Bantu languages, Malagasy and Hindi. Seychellois Creole is the most widely spoken language in the Seychelles and is also an official language, together with French and English.

The Mission Lodge on Mahé, Seychelles' most populated island, memorialises Seychelles' prominence



**View of Mahé from Mission Lodge.** Photo: Audrey Donkor

as a destination for the resettlement and integration of slaves that were freed from British ships and Arab dhows following the abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1834.

Nature lovers can explore the endemic and indigenous plants of the Seychelles at Le Jardin du Roi, a privately-owned spice garden in the Anse Royale district of Mahé. The 25-hectare garden is modelled on the 18th century plantations the French cultivated in their tropical colonies for the spice trade.

Of course, no tour of an island can be complete without a bottle of rum. Seychelles cleverly hosts the headquarters of the Takamaka Bay Rum Distillery (a private commercial enterprise) at La Plaine St André, a refurbished plantation house built in 1792 that is a national heritage site.

Tourists can also enjoy some



**Aldabra giant tortoise.** Photo: Audrey Donkor

traditional Creole dishes at Maison Marengo, just a kilometre away in Au Cap. The restaurant is on the site of La Domaine de Val des Pres, a restored traditional Creole village that is also a national heritage site.

Popular choices are octopus curry





Vallée de Mai

and prawn curry, taken with passion fruit juice.

Most tourists visit more than one island in the Seychelles. Praslin, the second most populated island is a major draw largely because it is the location of the Vallée de Mai, a prehistoric palm forest and Unesco World Heritage Site where the legendary endemic coco de mer palm grows. The large seed of the female coco de mer can weigh more than 20kg and is the world's heaviest seed. It bears an astounding resemblance to the pelvic region of a

human female, while the long catkin of the male coco de mer curiously takes the likeness of a human phallus.

Travel between the islands is fairly simple. The ride from Mahé to Praslin by catamaran ferry takes an hour. Returning from Praslin to Mahé by Air Seychelles' twin otter jet takes 15 minutes and offers splendid views of the blue and green waters below and the islands between Mahé and Praslin that together comprise the Sainte Anne Marine National Park.

And if you aren't satisfied by all these thrills, then you might want to embark on a hunt for the buried treasure of French pirate Olivier Levasseur, estimated to be worth \$150-million. ■

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*Audrey Donkor is a writer and a global affairs analyst.*

**Sainte Anne  
Marine  
National Park.**  
Photo: Audrey  
Donkor



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## The winner takes it all

**A new dynasty drama fails to break new ground, but don't let that put you off**

**Wilfred Okiche**

**T**he premise that powers *Riches*, the new soap opera-style drama created by Abby Ajayi (*How to Get Away With Murder*, *Inventing Anna*) is quite familiar, clichéd even. Patriarch of a proudly family-run company kicks the bucket unexpectedly. His surviving clan gathers from far and wide to battle it out for the inheritance and the soul of the business. Or what's left of it.

At stake? Legacy, wealth, empire and the thrill of standing tall as the ultimate victor. *Riches*, with its racy scenes and bingeable drama, adopts the well-worn tropes of similarly themed dramas

like *Dynasty* to *Empire*, but what does set *Riches* apart is the makeup of the family at the centre of the narrative. The Richards are a British-Nigerian family with tentacles in the United States and the Caribbean. And it is to the show's credit that it strives for authenticity, casting Black actors from the diaspora who wear their heritage openly.

Theirs is a black-owned cosmetics empire named Flair and Glory that represents the promise and persuasion of capitalism. The unlikely success story of an African immigrant in the United Kingdom. The battle for succession pits Nina (Deborah Ayorinde) and Simon (Emmanuel Imani) – estranged, America-based children of the late Stephen Richards (Hugh Quarshie) – against the British brood led by matriarch Claudia (Ted Lasso's Sarah Niles). *Riches* is the kind of show in which the protagonist is perfectly sensible, her adversaries are spoiled silly and the stepmother is fashionably villainous.

There is a mystery at the centre, and everyone is a suspect. It gets messy real fast. The false leads are obvious and the visual depiction of wealth is not quite as lavish as the title promises.

In a bid to stand out from the streaming crowd, the writers sprinkle some Yoruba language and plenty of jollof rice. The effort is corny – but appreciated. And ultimately so is the show. ■

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*Riches is streaming now on Amazon Prime Video*

## Africans still want (better) democracy

**H**ave you heard that democracy is in trouble? We certainly see red flags, in Africa as elsewhere. (Look no farther than the unelected military governments of Mali, or Burkina Faso.)

But democracy advocates might take heart from what ordinary Africans tell us they want – and from the consistency of their aspirations. In four Afrobarometer survey rounds in 30 African countries over the past decade, about seven in 10 respondents (69% in 2019/2021) consistently tell us they prefer democracy to any other system of government.

Even larger majorities consistently reject the idea of their country being ruled by the military (75%), by a single

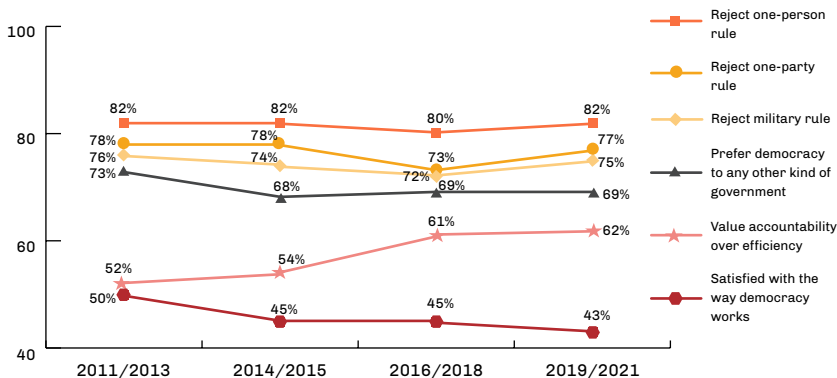
party (77%), or by a single person or “strongman” (82%).

Growing stronger, climbing from 52% to 62%, is the share of people who would rather have a government that is accountable to the people (i.e. democratic) than one that “gets things done.”

These numbers vary depending on the country – one reason that red flags pop up. But continent-wide, the one line here showing a significant downward trend represents people’s satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country, which has dropped from 50% to 43%.

In other words, they want better democracy. ■

Views on democracy | 30 African countries | 2011 - 2021



**Source:** Afrobarometer, a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



# THE QUIZ

0-3

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

4-7

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

8-10

"Nice try, but I know which side of the Zambezi the crocodile hunts."



Photo: Issouf Sanogo/ AFP

- 1\_** In which country was billionaire businessman Mo Ibrahim born?
- 2\_** Which country does Spanish-born Achraf Hakimi represent in international football?
- 3\_** Thieboudienne is considered the national dish of which country?
- 4\_** Afar is a minority language in Djibouti and Eritrea but an official language in which country?
- 5\_** Which country's currency is the ouguiya?
- 6\_** *Grazing in the Grass* is a song by which South African jazz musician?
- 7\_** What is Libya's capital city?
- 8\_** True or false: Emmerson Mnangagwa is Zambia's president.
- 9\_** Name the series of African lakes where flamingos are commonly found.
- 10\_** Unesco World Heritage Monument Elmina Castle (pictured) is located in which country?

## HOW DID I DO?

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

# One step forward



## Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Dearest reader, look to your faves. They are going through the absolute most, after witnessing an event so traumatic, so unexpected and so unprecedented that it has left our beloved leaders quaking in their boots from pure existential terror.

In a move previously thought unthinkable, in a crime against the natural order of things so, a head of state has... stepped down.

Stepped down! Without even a single colonel pointing a gun at their head.

In an announcement sure to haunt the nightmares of our leaders for generations to come, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had the *audacity* to say good leadership involves knowing when you are not the right person to lead.

"I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice," she said.

Justice? Responsibility? Whatever is she talking about! And why doesn't she just get another tank? Not everyone is sending theirs to Ukraine, she could have just asked her tear-gas dealer to hook her up with a second-hand T-90 from Russia, like a normal head of state.

Instead, she's only gone and triggered

all the other leaders, who we hope convened an emergency group therapy session to work through the trauma and share tips on how to keep this quiet. Imagine if their own people started getting, you know, *ideas*.

One does not simply step *down*. Heck, one does not even step *up*!

Step *on*, that's the ticket. Hopes, dreams, liberties, you name it. Not *down*.

## How did the *merde* manage to hit the fan so spectacularly in Francophone Africa?

Round here leaders don't leave, they make other people leave – as all fans of *Keeping Up With The Coupdashians* will know from the latest episode, in which the military government of Burkina Faso gave France its marching orders, saying it had one month to remove all of its soldiers from the country.

"We don't know how to be clearer than this," said government spokesperson Jean Emmanuel Ouedraogo, confirming the deadline. Paris has now confirmed that they will "honour" the request to pull out troops and have recalled their ambassador for consultations aka a grilling on how the *merde* managed to hit the fan so spectacularly. Considering they just went through the same thing

with Mali's Coupdashians, it's starting to look like Africa is seriously hanging up its Francophone.

## OK boomerang

Problem with making people leave is that sometimes they come back. Like Tanzanian opposition figure Tundu Lissu, who arrived back in the country this week after spending two years in exile.

His return follows the decision by President Samia Suluhu Hassan to lift a ban on political rallies and meetings, which had been put in place by her predecessor, John Magufuli.

The Chadema opposition party also held its first political rally in years, leaving many cautiously optimistic about the potential for greater democratic reforms in the country ahead of its 2025 elections.

But while things may be thawing ever so slightly in Tanzania, the opposite appears to be the case with Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo after Kigali said it had taken "defensive measures" against a DRC fighter jet that had violated its airspace.

Kinshasa was not having any of it and denied the claims saying the plane had been fired on despite being in Congolese territory and that Rwanda's actions were "deliberate" and "an act of war".

For months the DRC has accused Rwanda of backing M23 rebels, a claim Rwanda has continuously denied. So far it seems like relations between the two countries are getting more tense, something we can all agree is the last thing the continent needs.

What's needed is less shooting



**Guess who: Opposition figure Tundu Lissu has returned to Tanzania after a Magufuli-era ban was rescinded.**

Photo: AFP

altogether. This week prominent human rights activist, lawyer and government critic Thulani Maseko was shot dead at his home in Eswatini.

Maseko had been calling for reforms in the country, where pro-democracy protests have been taking place since 2021. Calling for an independent investigation into the matter, Human Rights Watch said that the brutal killing "is the latest in a series of chilling attacks on pro-democracy activists in Eswatini".

And in Cameroon journalist Martinez Zogo was kidnapped and later found dead after speaking out about high-level corruption in the country.

Members of the media observed a day of mourning in memory of Zogo and demanded action from the government, who eventually said they would look into it. But as we know, our leaders do not look into things. They step on them. ■

# Africa's insurgent opposition

Across the continent civilians are growing tired of oligarchs and turning to their opposition

**Mbulle-Nziege Leonard**

**A**fter a period of African “elections without change”, opposition candidates in the last decade defeated sitting presidents in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, The Gambia and Zambia. Among them were “insurgent candidates” who took advantage of societal frustration against the establishment to build popular support.

Now, a new wave of opposition is sweeping the entrenched old guard aside. Although a seasoned politician and multimillionaire, William Ruto won the Kenyan presidency in August 2022 by branding himself a “hustler” – in stark contrast to his main rival Raila Odinga and Odinga’s most prominent endorser Uhuru Kenyatta, who were seen to embody old-school political dynasties. On the campaign trail, Ruto, a former chicken seller, promised a bottom-up economic agenda focused on creating jobs.

In Lesotho, the October 2022 election of another millionaire, Sam Matekane, followed a similar process. The renowned businessman grew up raising donkeys and created his party just six months before the election. Like Ruto, he ran for prime minister as an “anti-establishment” politician and promised to re-establish the

social contract with the population, fight corruption and boost employment.

In February, all eyes will be on Nigeria’s election to see if the trend holds for Labour Party candidate Peter Obi, popular among both Nigerian youth, who have become more politically engaged since the October 2020 #EndSARS campaign, and the Nigerian diaspora.

Although Obi has a long history in Nigerian politics as the former governor of Anambra State, the fact that he is not representing one of the two main parties has enabled him to run as a “change” candidate. By contrast, his main rivals – Bola Tinubu, one of Nigeria’s foremost political “godfathers” and Atiku Abubaka, a former vice president and regular presidential candidate – embody Nigeria’s characteristically oligarchic and paternalist political scene.

If Obi wins, don’t be surprised to see more insurgent opposition leaders in future, challenging established governments in South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe and beyond. ■

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Mbulle-Nziege Leonard is a graduate

researcher at the Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa at UCT. This analysis was produced in collaboration with DIA.



# The Big Picture

Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

Déjà-fu: Amabutho Zulu regiments knock down a British soldier during the re-enactment of the Battle of Isandlwana, in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa last Saturday. The battle, fought on January 22, 1879, proved a decisive victory for the Zulus facing the first invasion of their kingdom by the British Empire, who had a massive colonial freak-out and sent heavy artillery reinforcements for a second invasion.



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