

# The Continent

with **Mail & Guardian**

**EXCLUSIVE**

## Secret weapons shipments to Congo- Brazzaville

Ahead of elections,  
Congo's president turns  
to Azerbaijan to amass  
an enormous arsenal



# Inside:

- **Comment:** How do you say 'blackface' in Mandarin? (p8)
- **Resurrecting Musa Mansa**, the richest man in history (p11)
- **Movies:** When Nollywood met Bollywood (p20)
- **In conversation with Kizito Mihigo**, the gospel singer who died in a Rwandan jail (p23)



**Life on Mars: At 10.55pm Central African Time on Thursday, a robot made by humans touched down on the surface of another planet. This is what it saw. The pixels that make up this photograph – the very first taken by NASA's Perseverance rover – were first recorded on Mars, and have travelled several hundred million kilometres to appear in this newspaper. It's not a bad view.**



## COVER STORY:

Rifles, of both the assault and sniper varieties. Anti-personnel rockets. Anti-tank rockets. Rocket launchers. Heavy machine guns. Grenades, by the tens of thousand. Grenade launchers. Millions of bullets.

These are just some of the weapons that have been delivered, in secret, to the Republic of Congo's Presidential Guard. This is revealed for the first time in a *The Continent* exclusive (p13) with the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. The only question that remains: What is President Sassou Nguesso – one of Africa's longest-serving leaders, running for re-election next month – planning to do with all this firepower?

# The Week in Numbers

## 6

The number of journalists injured by Ugandan military police this week. Army chief David Muhoozi has apologised for the beatings and promised to cover all medical bills. The incident occurred as opposition leader Bobi Wine lodged a petition against human rights abuses with the United Nations in Kampala.

## \$50-million

The sum of money allegedly laundered by a "Ghana-based criminal enterprise", whose supposed ringleaders were arrested in the United States this week. "The scams we allege in this investigation include romance scams targeting the elderly, business e-mail compromise scams, and even fraudulent Covid-19 relief loans," said the FBI.



(Photo: Stringer/AFP)

## 1,000 tonnes

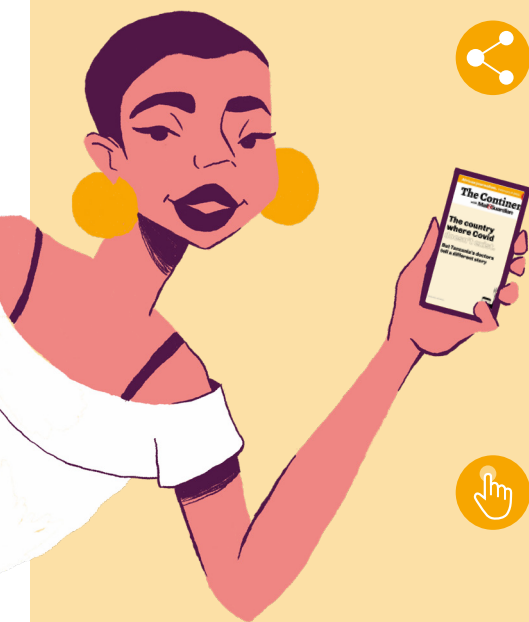
The estimated amount of oil spilled when the MV Wakashio, an oil tanker, ran aground off the coast of Mauritius last July. This week, the ship captain admitted that the accident – which has been described as the island's worst-ever environmental disaster – occurred when he steered the ship closer to the shore in search of a WiFi connection. "There was no internet on the ship and I agreed to dock in Mauritius so that the crew members could communicate with their relatives as it helps keep the morale of the crew high," he said.

## 3.6 metres

The height of a mysterious silver monolith that appeared suddenly in the middle of a traffic circle in Kinshasa. Residents promptly set fire to it. Similar structures have recently appeared in Utah in the United States, Romania and Turkey.

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# Zimbabwe

## Covid vaccine roll-out begins amid concerns over efficacy

Kudzai Mashininga

**Z**imbabwe's vice president and health minister Constantino Chiwenga became the first person in the country to be vaccinated against Covid-19 when he received a jab of China's Sinopharm vaccine on Thursday.

Chiwenga's shot kickstarts Zimbabwe's distribution of the 200,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine donated by China. The government says it has acquired an additional 600,000 doses of the vaccine, which will arrive in early March.

But the immunisation campaign is not without its critics. Former deputy prime minister Arthur Mutambara questioned why the vaccine had not been tested against the 501.V2 variant of the virus that emerged in neighbouring South Africa and is now dominant in Zimbabwe, saying there had been no "meaningful partnership" between China and Zimbabwe on the vaccine.



First jab: VP Chiwenga receives the Sinopharm vaccine

Zimbabwe's Lawyers for Human Rights said they had written to the health ministry seeking assurances that clinical trials of the Sinopharm and future vaccines would be conducted in the country to establish their safety and efficacy before distribution. They were surprised the government planned to gather data on efficacy only during the roll-out. The lawyers said they would approach the courts if they did not receive a response by Friday.

Enoch Dongo, president of the Zimbabwe Nurses Association, told *The Continent* the state had not provided enough information. "Vaccinating people is a better option but the matter has not been handled well. Is it the right vaccine? People are in the dark, even us as nurses."

Zimbabwe's vaccination efforts began a day after South Africa rolled out the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in Cape Town, with President Cyril Ramaphosa among the first to be vaccinated. ■

# Nigeria



## Invictus Obi's fall from grace

**S**ometime in 2018, the chief financial officer of Unatrak got phished. He entered his password onto a dummy website. Once the scammers had access to his email, they sent invoices to finance staff who processed about 15 payments over a seven-day period. The company was defrauded of almost \$11-million.

The ringleader of the scam was a Nigerian man by the name of Obinwanne

Okeke. He's better known as Invictus Obi, and you might recognise him – after all, he graced the cover of *Forbes Africa* in June 2016.

In addition to appearing on the magazine's highly revered "30 under 30" list of African entrepreneurs, Okeke was a motivational speaker and internationally recognised businessman who was invited to a summit at the London School of Economics alongside the Ghanaian president. He gave interviews to the BBC in London, SAfm in South Africa and was covered extensively in the Nigerian press for his business acumen and high-flying lifestyle. He was Instagram famous.

It all came crashing down in August 2019 when he was arrested at Dulles International Airport in Virginia in the United States for defrauding Unatrak, a UK firm which handles exports for Caterpillar, the construction machinery and equipment company.

He will now begin a 10-year prison term in a US federal prison after being sentenced this week. Unatrak was not his only victim: he was found to have committed a series of wire frauds between 2015 to 2019, along with unnamed accomplices.

"The FBI will not allow cyber criminals free rein in the digital world to prey on US companies," said Brian Dugan, an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in response to the verdict. ■

# Zanzibar

## Maalim Seif Sharif Hamad (1943 – 2021)

**Covid claims veteran  
Zanzibari politician**

### OBITUARY

**O**fficially, Tanzania's government claims that there are no cases of the virus in the country, although doctors are reporting a surge in cases seen in hospitals and clinics.

Maalim Seif Sharif Hamad, who also chaired the opposition Alliance for Change and Transparency-Wazalendo party, went public with his Covid-19 diagnosis, openly challenging the state's narrative.

He was a veteran opposition leader who ran for president of Zanzibar on six occasions, each time unsuccessfully. The most recent election in October, like others before it, was marred by accusations of electoral fraud and irregularities.

Shortly before the vote last year, Hamad wrote a column for *The Continent*, in which he explained his fears that the election would not be free and fair.

"Zanzibar matters," he wrote. "We



cannot and should not be ignored. Zanzibar matters. We cannot and should not be ignored. Let's avert a tragedy and ensure the eyes of the world are focused on our islands."

He did not know then that the tragedy would be his own.

"Words are not enough to describe Maalim's legacy," said his friend and colleague Zitto Kabwe. "Maalim's legacy of a true, modern-day freedom fighter, fighting for the freedom that he believed was fundamental for Zanzibar and for Tanzania. Fighting with the means – whether words or action – that he had at his disposal throughout the decades. Maalim continued the struggle until he could not anymore." ■





'Africa is grateful':  
A Chinese actress in  
blackface at the 2018  
Spring Gala.

## How do you say 'blackface' in Mandarin?

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*The decision to publish the controversial image from China's state TV was taken after extensive conversations within the team here at The Continent, with input from the writers of this article. Undoubtedly, the image is offensive but we decided it was important to show our readers how China, one of Africa's most strategic partners in terms of trade and loans, still views Africans in 2021. It's not a decision we took lightly. Do you agree or disagree with our decision to publish the image? Let us know: [TheContinent@mg.co.za](mailto:TheContinent@mg.co.za)*

**Runako Celina and  
Saron Tamerat**

**T**he world's most watched TV show sees upwards of 800-million people, mostly Chinese, tune in for five hours of

comic sketches, skits, performances and dances arranged and produced by CCTV, China's state broadcaster, as part of its annual Lunar New Year celebrations.

Time and time again, it features offensive portrayals of "Africanness",



and members of China's African diaspora have long complained about it. This year, as in others, our complaints have fallen on deaf ears and, given the events of the past year, many are frustrated.

**Time and time again, the show features offensive portrayals of 'Africanness', and members of China's African diaspora have long complained about it. Our complaints have fallen on deaf ears.**

Back in 2018, the gala featured an extravagant display by Chinese actress Lou Naiming, who paraded around stage in blackface, complete with prosthetic butt and chest in a skit that sought to show how grateful Africans are to China.

The credits reveal that StarTimes, a leading TV-provider in Africa, with over 10-million subscribers across 30 countries, contributed to the selection of the skit. Despite the nature of their business, even they were unaware of — or unconcerned by — the problematic nature of the skit's content.

This year, the display was dialed down a notch, featuring a Chinese dance troupe with dark, tribal bodysuits, though it still included a Chinese actress in blackface singing as part of a segment simply named "Africa Song and Dance".

We never find out where on the continent they sourced their garb, and

the viewer is left with the surprisingly common belief that Africa is simply one culturally homogenous lump.

From film to social media and everything in between, depictions of Africa and Africanness in Chinese contexts continue to be somewhat limited. At best, "Africa" gets a reference as the place to go to for charity work or to help save the planet through conservation efforts, as in the recent film *Vanguard*. It can at times be a place full of colour and dance, or of poverty and war — as in the infamous *Wolf Warrior 2*.

Rarely are any of the continent's many countries the places of knowledge, production and innovation we know them to be, or even of civilisation and humanity — unless of course these are brought to Africa by external actors.

As you can imagine, these prevalent ideas affect the way Africans are perceived and treated in China — just as they do elsewhere: certain Western countries are serial offenders in this regard.

### **Missed opportunity**

What a respectful, culturally-appropriate segment on the nation's most watched TV show could have done to broaden the image of Africanness in the eyes of the Chinese population shouldn't be underestimated.

That this opportunity has been wasted yet again, despite lobbying and offers to educate from within the community feels at best like a sign of pervasive ignorance and at worst, as it is seen by many, as an act "intent on provocation".

The very valid concerns of Africans and people of African descent around the way we are portrayed are normally treated in one of two ways by our hosts.

The most popular response, as seen during mass evictions of Africans in Guangzhou last April, is to insinuate that Western media and other actors are using misunderstandings to push their own agenda.

“China-African friendship will never be shaken by wedge-driving attempt”, we heard then. The response this year: “If anyone wants to seize on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala programme to make a fuss, or even sow discord in relations between China and African countries, they obviously have ulterior motives.”

**Neither of these statements make reference to the legitimate offence taken by many Africans in China towards these incidents. Instead, they suggest that any concerns from African voices are the result of western influence**

Neither of these statements make reference to the legitimate offence taken by many Africans in China towards these incidents.

Instead, they suggest that any concerns from African voices are simply the result of Western influence, nothing more. We don't need to explain the implications

of thinking like this and what it does to diminish African agency.

The second approach is to ignore all critiques and pretend that nothing has happened, which is likely to lead to repeats of these incidents, as has happened now.

The approach that *should* be implemented is one of open dialogue with our community, who have already tried countless times to explain the histories and realities that make blackface and other portrayals of Blackness and Africanness offensive and inappropriate.

The fact that this never seems to happen leads to an uncomfortable understanding of the power imbalance in this relationship, and how it sometimes manifests both for Africans in China and those at home.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping famously tasked Chinese media with going forth into the world to “tell China's story well”. But equal zeal and thought should have been put into the story being shared about the rest of the world on Chinese soil, to Chinese citizens.

The failure to do such has created the dynamic that many of us are forced to live with today and stands in stark contrast to the claims of solidarity and mutual understanding which we are constantly told drives China's relations with our nations today. ■

*Runako Celina and Saron Tamerat are managers of Black Livvity China, an organisation that documents African and Afro-diasporic experiences both in China and in relation to China*



**Modern History:**  
**Reimagining**  
**the emperor in**  
**modern-day Mali**  
(Photo: Abdou  
Ouloguem and  
Joe Penney)

# Rewriting the myth of Mansa Musa

**Little is remembered about the Malian emperor  
who was the richest person in history**

**Joe Penney**

**I**n Mali, the past is a protagonist in the present. History speaks through the kora and the griots who sing of Sundiata Keita; it reveals itself in the Sahelian architecture of the mosques in Timbuktu, Djenné and Ségou, and it influences all aspects of life through the tens of thousands of manuscripts from the 12th to 20th century found all over the country.

But while working as a photojournalist for Reuters in Mali from 2012 to 2015, I was struck by a major historical absence:

there were no signs of one of the most famous Malians of all, the 14th century emperor Mansa Musa.

There is no gravesite, no living ancestor, no museum or library dedicated to the man reputed to have been the richest person in world history. When I looked for more concrete information about Musa, there were no clear answers and no primary sources beyond a handful of accounts from Arab courtiers.

That historical absence ignited a seven-year journey that has resulted in the short documentary *Sun of the Soil: The*

## Story of Mansa Musa.

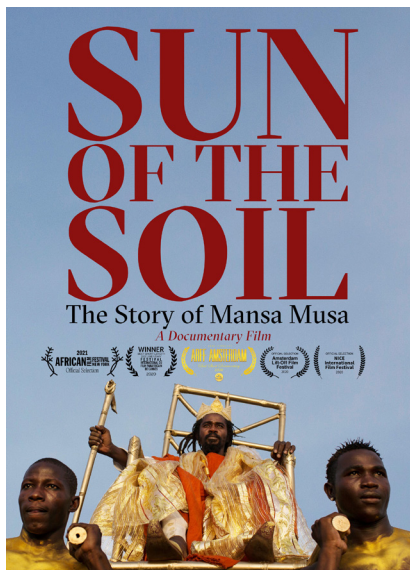
The project first began as a series of photographs in a collaboration with Malian artist Abdou Ouologuem that imagined Mansa Musa's return to modern-day Bamako. Not satisfied with the scope of still photographs, our collaboration blossomed into a short film with writer and filmmaker Ladan Osman: the story of Ouologuem's immersion in the historical myth of the medieval African king.

In 14th century Mali, young Mansa Musa ascended to the throne of the richest kingdom in history and embarked on an epic pilgrimage to Mecca with 60,000 Malians, many of whom were slaves.

Musa and his Malian empire played an outsized role in the making of the modern world. Mali provided two-thirds of Europe and the Islamic world's gold at the time. Word of Mansa Musa's pilgrimage and the dazzling gold wealth he displayed in Cairo got back to Europeans, who began seeking it for themselves. Over time, those early Portuguese and Spanish expeditions morphed into the horrors of the Transatlantic slave trade and colonialism: horrors that continue to shape so many aspects of the modern world.

In our documentary, Musa's story is loosely mirrored by the present-day journey of Ouologuem, who became the head of his family at a young age after the death of his brother. He left his wife and two children in Mali to join a theatre company in France, and toured the world. But he returned in 2012, when Al-Qaeda militants occupied northern Mali, where he was born and raised.

Ouologuem went back to be with



his family, help raise his children, and create value for himself and his work in Mali. As he dives more deeply into Musa's psychology, and compares a king's yearning for Mali's glory with his own dreams, Ouologuem realises history is more complex than he imagined.

The work of structural racism is often rooted in the stories we tell ourselves about the past, but also in the stories that colonisers have erased and de-emphasised.

This film is an attempt to remedy a pain caused by an inadequate and unjust recounting of history. It is an interrogation and a questioning.

Though we spent years researching his life, it is by no means a definitive account of Mansa Musa, nor is it intended to be. It is a call to restructure our telling of the making of the modern world – and it is just the beginning. ■

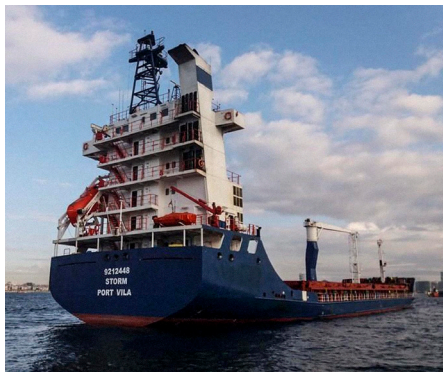
# Congo-Brazzaville's repressive government buys secret weapons haul from Azerbaijan

**For several years, the Republic of Congo has been quietly buying an arsenal from Azerbaijan. Opponents of President Sassou-Nguesso say one recent cache is designed to tighten his grip on the nation.**

**Khadija Sharife, Mark Anderson  
and the Organized Crime and  
Corruption Reporting Project**

**I**n January 2020, at the port of Derince on the eastern shores of the Sea of Marmara, a huge cache of weapons was loaded onto the MV Storm. Registered in the tax haven of Vanuatu, the ship set sail from Turkey with an arsenal of mortar shells, multiple launch rockets, and explosives, en route from Azerbaijan to the Republic of the Congo, better known as Congo-Brazzaville.

In total, more than 100 tons of weaponry wound its way to a building that appears to be the headquarters of Congo-Brazzaville's elite Republican Guard, according to a confidential cargo manifest obtained by OCCRP. The cargo, estimated to be worth tens of millions of dollars, was just the latest



in a series of at least 17 arms shipments sent by Azerbaijan's ministry of defence to the regime of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso since 2015, according to flight plans, cargo manifests, and weapons inventories obtained by OCCRP. Some of these documents were obtained independently by *The Continent*.

Saudi Arabia was listed as the



**Iron grip: President Denis Sassou-Nguesso has been in power for 36 years**

“sponsoring party” on several of the cargo manifests reviewed by reporters. It’s unclear what that sponsorship entailed, but it could mean that Riyadh paid for the weapons or the cargo deliveries.

There are no public records of Azerbaijan exporting these weapons, and no similar records of Congo-Brazzaville importing them. The latest transfer has sparked opposition concerns that Sassou-Nguesso is prepared to use force if necessary to maintain power as the country’s March 21 election nears.

His well-armed security services are a key reason he has ruled the central African country for 36 years, split between two separate terms, making him one of the world’s longest-serving leaders. His party looms large over parliament, which recently changed the constitution to allow Sassou-Nguesso to run for office again, sparking local and international

condemnation. The move means the 77-year-old could, in theory, run in every election for the rest of his life.

OCCRP has obtained confidential documents showing that in the eight months preceding the March 2016 election, and for over a year after it, Sassou-Nguesso’s security services bought more than 500 tons of arms from Azerbaijan in 16 separate shipments. Just weeks after the vote, the government began a brutal campaign against a militia from an opposition stronghold that lasted for more than a year.

Opposition leaders claim the Republican Guard used the Azerbaijani weapons in that post-election conflict, spurring a humanitarian emergency which the United Nations said affected around 140,000 people in the region of Pool, in the country’s south. Satellite imagery obtained by international media



outlet *The New Humanitarian* appears to show widespread destruction caused by weapons like rocket launchers and explosives.

There is no way to be certain that these weapons were from that Azerbaijan haul, since Congo-Brazzaville does not declare its arms imports. But exporting countries are strongly encouraged by the United Nations to report shipments, and there are no public records of similar armaments from other countries being sent to Congo-Brazzaville before 2016.

### Buying weapons in a cash crunch

Sassou-Nguesso's regime is facing one of Africa's most severe debt crises, raising questions about how these arms shipments have been financed. Documents show that at least two consignments delivered between 2015 and 2018 were sponsored by Saudi Arabia, at a time when Riyadh was vetting Congo-Brazzaville's application to join the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Given Congo-Brazzaville's significant oil reserves, the kingdom had an incentive to have a compliant Sassou-Nguesso government in the Saudi-dominated club, according to leading arms expert Andrew Feinstein, author of *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*.

Feinstein added that the latest Azerbaijan shipment could have been intended to give Sassou-Nguesso the arms to enforce his political will.

"The timing of this shipment is extremely suspicious, given Sassou-Nguesso's previous crackdowns around



**Armed and dangerous: Congolese soldiers have been key to maintaining the president's rule.** (Photo: Marco Longari/AFP)

elections," he said. "The government is likely preparing to quash any dissent around the polls."

A spokesperson for Congo-Brazzaville's government did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Azerbaijan's ministry of defence did not respond to a reporter's email seeking comment, and neither did a ministry representative listed on multiple documents. Saudi Arabia's ministry of defence did not respond to questions about the nature of their sponsorship of the arms deals.

### Boulevard Denis Sassou-Nguesso

The most recent weapons load, addressed to the Republican Guard at 1 Boulevard Denis Sassou-Nguesso in Brazzaville in January 2020, included 775 mortar shells and more than 400 cases of rockets designed to be launched from Soviet-era trucks, the confidential cargo manifest shows. The consignment from Azerbaijan was loaded onto the MV Storm at



**Crackdown: The conflict in Pool was blamed on the Ninjas, a rebel militia.**  
(Photo: Marco Longari/AFP)

Derince, about 1,000 km southeast of Istanbul.

The exact price paid by the Congolese regime for the arms shipment could not be verified, though an expert who examined the cargo manifests said it would be worth tens of millions of dollars. A former senior diplomat with access to information about arms inventories, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal from authorities, confirmed the authenticity of the cargo manifest and other documents and noted the sale price for the arms was likely well below market value.

The documents included end-user certificates, which are issued by the country importing the arms to certify the recipient does not plan to sell them onward.

Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher

at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, said arms received at a discount are often either surplus weapons or those produced in Bulgaria or Serbia, which are both known for their cheap ordnance.

“It would be less likely that Congo-Brazzaville would be able to buy some of this equipment from ... other European countries, which have more restrictive arms export policies,” he said.

### The Pool Offensive

The 100-ton shipment from Derince was significant, but separate documents reveal another arsenal sent from Azerbaijan between 2015 and 2017 that dwarfed it — and may have had terrifying consequences.

In total, over 500 tons of weapons, including hand grenades, mortar systems

and millions of bullets, were sent to Congo-Brazzaville in 16 shipments during those years, according to documents including inventories, end-user certificates, and cargo manifests obtained by reporters. One certificate shows 5,000 grenades imported for the purposes of “training, anti-terrorism, security and stability operations”. It was signed by a special adviser to President Sassou-Nguesso on March 3, 2016, just days before the election.

After the vote, the opposition claimed the government had rigged the election in favour of Sassou-Nguesso, and unrest broke out in the capital, Brazzaville. The government blamed the unrest on a militia known as the Ninjas, made up of people mainly from the Lari ethnic group and based in the Pool region, which partially surrounds Brazzaville.

The weapons from Azerbaijan were then used, an opposition leader claims, to help fuel a prolonged armed conflict in Pool targeting the Ninjas.

Amnesty International condemned the offensive as “an unlawful use of lethal force by the country’s security forces”. As the government pursued the Ninjas, witnesses to the carnage told Amnesty that dozens of bombs were dropped from helicopters, hitting a residential area and even a school.

“During the violence in Pool, the regime deployed a scorched earth strategy,” said Andréa Ngombet Malewa, leader of the Incarner l’Espoir political party. “The weapons that they bought from Azerbaijan went straight to that operation.”



### **Secret ally: Azerbaijani armed forces during a military parade in Baku**

(Mustafa Kamaci/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

### **Secrecy**

Azerbaijan has emerged as a key foreign ally of Congo-Brazzaville, providing its regime with discount arms and, perhaps most importantly, secrecy.

Buying from Ilham Aliyev, the strongman president of the notoriously opaque South Caucasus nation, Congo-Brazzaville could stock its arsenal knowing the sales wouldn’t be reported.

Congo-Brazzaville has not reported any arms imports for more than three decades, and since there is no arms embargo in place against the country, it is not required to do so. Nonetheless, a trail exists, with disclosures by other countries showing Sassou-Nguesso has been active in the arms market. In 2017, Serbia and Bulgaria reported exporting 600 assault rifles and 250 grenade launchers, respectively, to Congo-Brazzaville.

In fact, documentation seen by OCCRP shows Azerbaijan has been exporting lethal weapons to Sassou-

Nguesso since at least as far back as September 2015. The weapons were initially sourced by Azerbaijan from Transmobile, a Bulgarian company. Other weapons manufacturers have included Yugoimport, a Serbian manufacturer. Neither company responded to requests for comment.

These weapons deals weren't the only transactions between the two governments that were conducted from the shadows.

Around the same time that it began sending arms to Congo-Brazzaville, Azerbaijan's air force was also running a passenger route to the country. It stopped in early 2017 and was replaced later that year by Silk Way Airlines, a controversial operator with past ties to the country's ruling Aliyev family. The airline did not respond to a request for comment.

In addition to previously winning lucrative contracts with the US government to move ammunition and other non-lethal materials, Silk Way was found, in leaked correspondence reported by Bulgarian newspaper *Trud*, to have used flights with diplomatic clearance to secretly move hundreds of tons of weapons around the world, including to global conflict zones, between 2014 and 2017.

## Expected landslide

As his regime heads to the polls on March 21, strongarm tactics mean Sassou-Nguesso is expected to win. He will face Mathias Dzon, his former finance minister from 1997 to 2002, and Guy-Brice Parfait Kolélas, who finished

second in the 2016 presidential election.

In 2016 he claimed 60% of the vote, with Kolélas securing just 15%. The US slammed the government for "widespread irregularities and the arrests of opposition supporters".

Experts don't believe the opposition will fare any better this time around. Abdoulaye Diarra, a Central Africa Researcher for Amnesty International, said the government is carrying out a pre-election campaign of intimidation, harassment and arbitrary detention against its political opponents.

Fears that press freedom could be under threat ahead of the polls have risen after Raymond Malonga, a cartoonist known for satirical criticism of the authorities, was dragged from his hospital bed by plainclothes police at the beginning of February.

The weapons haul from Azerbaijan has the opposition concerned about the prospect of violence around the polls.

"We are worried that the weapons that Sassou-Nguesso's regime bought from Azerbaijan could be used to crack down on the opposition during the upcoming election," said opposition leader Ngombet.

"They don't want the world to see how much the Congolese people are eager for political change." ■

*Simon Allison, Sasha Wales-Smith, and Juliet Atallah contributed reporting.*



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

Take this quiz to find out how much attention you paid to the news in 2020

1. What is Ghana's capital?
2. Who was Femi Kuti's father?
3. In which country would one visit Fort Jesus (pictured)?
4. What is the demonym for people from Togo?
5. Name the Zimbabwean dancehall star who passed away this week.
6. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala previously served how many terms as Nigeria's finance minister?
7. Libya this week marked the 10th anniversary of the overthrowing of which ruler?
8. Which footballer holds the record for most (four) African Player of the Year wins?
9. How many African Great Lakes are there: 10, 15 or 16?
10. Which island's vice president died of Covid-19 this week?
11. What are Uganda's two official languages?
12. Brazzaville is the largest city of which country?

### How did I do?

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

**0-4**

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

**5-8**

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

**9-12**

"I aim to take the BS out of suBSaharan Africa"



# When Nollywood meets Bollywood

Wilfred Okiche

**T**ruth be told, there is almost nothing uniquely original about *Namaste Wahala*, the erratic new Netflix Nigeria original film by first-time writer, director and actress Hamisha Daryani Ahuja.

Two incredibly attractive people meet-cute while jogging. Love at first sight. They meet again under circumstances so contrived, romance novelists must be sending nods of approval. Cue the swoons and the cheesy grins.

*Namaste Wahala*'s unique selling point lies in the nature of the complication that it introduces for the couple. And everyone knows every serious romance must have one. She is Nigerian. He is Indian. They decide to get married anyway. Is happily ever after within the realm of possibility?

Raised in an Indian household in Lagos, Nigeria, a place she considers home to this day, Daryani Ahuja envisions *Namaste Wahala* (a conjoining of Hindu and Pidgin English words that literally translates as "hello trouble") as a meeting point of not just two film influences, but of the two worlds with which she strongly identifies.

Her film bites heavily from Nollywood and Bollywood, two of the biggest film traditions in the world, leaning into the

well-established flair for big drama, broad comedy and loads and loads of color. Did we mention musical numbers as well?

Somewhere within the chaos that Daryani Ahuja creates with *Namaste Wahala* – and indeed fans of this particular genre of filmmaking wouldn't have it any other way – there is an interesting study of the tensions that must occur when two people from far-flung cultures come together to find common ground. *Namaste Wahala* is not interested in making any compelling cross-cultural arguments, though, and Daryani Ahuja is quite happy to reach for tried-and-true formulae in place of deeper introspection.


For folks who aren't fans of either Nollywood or Bollywood, the key to embracing the unique charms of *Namaste Wahala* is to go in with zero expectations: You might be charmed by the ridiculousness of it all.

Or not. ■



*Namaste Wahala* is now streaming on Netflix





**Beyond bars: As the state targets protesters, terror flourishes elsewhere.** (Photo: Olukayode Jaiyeola/NurPhoto)

# The Nigerian government is going after peaceful protesters – again

**Aanu Adeoye**

**T**he Nigerian government and its agencies have shown time and again that they support the violence — physical and otherwise — being visited upon peaceful protesters.

On October 20, at least 10 people were killed at the Lekki Toll Gate, shot by members of the Nigerian Army. Despite the government's shameful insistence that no-one was killed and the army's shifting retelling of the events of that night, the evidence — presented by local and international media outlets and human

rights groups — is overwhelming.

When the Nigerian government isn't inflicting physical violence on its own citizens, it is imposing financial sanctions on them. Bank accounts belonging to more than 20 #ENDSARS protesters were frozen by the Central Bank of Nigeria in November, with the apex bank accusing them of money laundering and sponsoring terrorism.

Never mind that these were bogus charges, the CBN appeared to not follow regulatory procedures in obtaining the court order freezing the accounts, and a federal high court in Abuja ordered the

accounts to be unfrozen last week.

Last Saturday, peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate were arrested. They had gathered to protest the reopening of the site of the killings of October 20, arguing that the panel investigating police brutality and the events of that night had not finished its work.

Lekki is a cash cow for the Lagos state government, which defended the toll gate with policemen in riot gear arresting dozens of protesters and even passersby.

Both the federal and state governments had given ominous warnings to the protesters ahead of the planned event. Two days before the protests, the Lagos police commissioner said “no protest in any guise will be allowed”, fundamentally misunderstanding that the right to peaceful protest is enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution.

The past five years under President Muhammadu Buhari have seen a waning respect for human rights and a drastic turn towards authoritarianism. Let’s not fool ourselves: Nigeria was never a beacon of freedom or champion of human dignity before Buhari came to power, but on his watch even what little we had is eroding.

Buhari, a former military dictator who presided over Nigeria for two years following a coup in 1983, campaigned in 2015 as a “reformed democrat” willing to govern in a multi-ethnic democracy that respects human rights. The spirit of that campaign is not reflected in his rule.

In a tweet from January 6, 2015, which has since gone viral, Buhari said: “Let me make you this promise today: We will protect your children. We will protect

your wealth. We will make this country work again.” But children have not been protected. Nor any other citizen. Nigeria is buffeted from all sides by unending security crises.

Boko Haram, “technically defeated” according to Buhari, is still waging a war in the northeast, with many parts of the region virtually uninhabitable. Even the convoy of the governor of Borno state, the epicentre of the insurgency, is not safe: the governor was targeted as recently as November, in an attack that left nine dead.

Local villagers in the northwest are being killed by “bandits”, armed groups involved in terrorising communities and kidnappings. Nomadic herdsman from the north are engaged in running battles with farmers in the south over grazing land, and Buhari has been accused of staying silent in the face of violent attacks by his northern clansmen on southerners. A newspaper columnist recently argued that the “ethnic war” bubbling just under the surface will be Buhari’s legacy.

And while the organs of the state are clamping down on peaceful protesters, repentant Boko Haram members are being released back into society, much to the chagrin of soldiers involved in the war and many people across the country.

As we have seen in its response to #ENDSARS, the state has the personnel and the wherewithal to act decisively. But Buhari’s administration would do well to refrain from expending its considerable resources fighting citizens who demand accountability, and focus instead on delivering Nigeria from the very real threats terrorising its people. ■

# 'The only thing they want is for us to sing the praises of President Kagame'

**Kizito Mihigo, one of Rwanda's most popular singers, died in a police cell almost exactly a year ago. Today *The Continent* publishes extracts from one of the last interviews before his death**

**Benedict Moran**

**I**solated from friends and family, struggling to pay bills, and blacklisted from the nation's airwaves: newly-released recordings reveal why the popular gospel singer and peace activist Kizito Mihigo attempted to flee Rwanda in February last year.

His escape was unsuccessful, and he died in a Rwandan police cell a few days later, on 17 February 2020.

Speaking prior to his attempted escape, Mihigo said he planned on crossing into a neighboring country to seek asylum due to threats and constant censorship imposed on him as a musician. He said he felt increasingly constrained by the straitjacket imposed on artists from Rwanda's authoritarian system.

"You can't work or draw inspiration from your Christian faith, to give a universal message. You must only be inspired by those in power, from the



**On repeat: Kizito Mihigo was released from prison in 2018, but arrested again in 2020. He died soon after.**  
(Photo: Cyril Ndegeya/AFP/Getty)

president [Kagame]... The only thing they want is for us to sing the praises of President Kagame," he said.

The recordings were made with his permission in January 2020, one month before his death, and go against Rwandan government allegations that Mihigo sought to leave Rwanda to join

an opposition movement.

He died in police custody shortly after he was apprehended while attempting to unofficially cross into Burundi.

The 38-year-old Mihigo was once hailed as a national icon, and saw it as his mission to compose healing music that promoted reconciliation.

A survivor who lost his father in the genocide, his songs were broadcast nationally across Rwanda, receiving the praise of both the Rwandan masses and of President Paul Kagame himself.

But it was that popularity, as well as his deep Christian faith, that opened him up to the suffering of the victims of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which has ruled the country since 1994.

As he toured the country with his music, Mihigo befriended Hutus who had lost family members or witnessed RPF massacres.

In 2014, he released *The Meaning of Death*, a song that mourned both Tutsi and Hutu killings. It crossed a red line by challenging the official narrative that only Tutsis were killed.

He was abducted, and, after allegedly being forced to falsely confess to state crimes under threat of death, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. In a separate conversation recorded in May 2018 while he was still incarcerated, he explained what happened and what compelled him to write the song.

"I became aware that there are so many Rwandans who experienced violence, but it's not recognized as genocide. All suffering must be recognised," he said.

Mihigo was released from prison in

2018 after receiving a presidential pardon, but he was blacklisted by authorities and subject to constant surveillance and intimidation.

Mihigo said he had then written two new compositions for the 2019 genocide commemorations. Both were rejected by Rwanda's censors.

Other musicians and officials avoided him for fear of being seen with a perceived "traitor" of Rwanda, he said. He was unable to recoup royalties for past compositions, including a song he wrote that was often played at RPF rallies.

To pay his bills, Mihigo gave music lessons to children, and admitted to being lonely, fearful of the consequences of sharing his thoughts with anyone. "I live an isolated life," he said. "I don't have friends. Even my family, I can't talk to them."

Mihigo was required to check in with police every month and was banned from international travel. In the recording, he said he felt increasingly confined by his inability to use music to express his message of healing.

"I prefer to live badly, to live with difficulty, but being free inside, than to do what they want and being really chained up, without being myself," he said.

Near the end of the conversation, Mihigo said he feared for his life.

"Sometimes I ask myself if I'm really safe," he said. "It's not clear that these people don't have plans to do me harm."

International human rights officials cast doubt on his official cause of death as "suicide by hanging" and called for an independent, transparent investigation. ■

...the right to decision of "nationalities, nationalities, peoples," and rightly noting that the article would not pass the threshold of two-thirds support, its enactment would require a constitutional convention of freely elected delegates. Much like the story, they see no being in want to undergo, by him or any, what is to them the world's last complete and best of it, less than clear, we, the people of this country of 1975, have the moral, legal and political responsibility to debate the issue.

But to us who have stood counter-poised to their majority, we who live, in this age of conflict, contentedly and consciously enmeshed by the Biblical and humanist tales about the country of our birth, we who pass our days as custodians of a holy nation both to Christians and Muslims, we cannot as a constitutional which is an affront not only to our religious and political sensibilities, but also the very fabric of our Abrahamic faiths both in spirit and words.

This quarrel of ours over the constitution is much more than politics in its normative sense. More so, it is the Ethiopian variant of America's culture wars, or the clash for the very soul of a nation and its people. On one side stand the counter-culture with their disdain for religion, for moral absolutism, for history and its legacy, for tradition, for the social hierarchy, a meritocracy entirely, for all things established, for much of what was. On the other side stand we who cherish much of what was, we who uphold religion, we who cherish much of what was, we who study history and look upon

...the right to decision of "nationalities, nationalities, peoples," and rightly noting that the article would not pass the threshold of two-thirds support, its enactment would require a constitutional convention of freely elected delegates. Much like the story, they see no being in want to undergo, by him or any, what is to them the world's last complete and best of it, less than clear, we, the people of this country of 1975, have the moral, legal and political responsibility to debate the issue.

To this end, we shall exercise our right as a people of antiquity, united and sustained through the ages by the will of God, to come up with a new constitution, which is worthy of who we are, as a people, as a nation dear to God, worthy of our place in the present, and our destiny as the enduring people of faith.

All in due time.

Eskinder Nega,  
President of Congress  
Kaliy, Addis Ababa  
December 25, 2020

# Thoughts on Ethiopia's stillborn Constitution

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*Eskinder Nega is an Ethiopian journalist and politician who has been repeatedly jailed by his government. He is now in jail again, after being accused of plotting to assassinate the mayor of Addis Ababa last year. He rejects the allegations. In this letter, handwritten in his cell on Christmas Day and published exclusively in The Continent, Nega argues that Ethiopia's Constitution is no longer fit for purpose.*

## Eskinder Nega

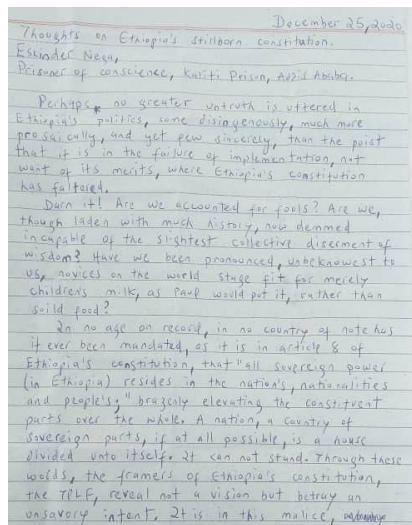
Perhaps no greater untruth is uttered in Ethiopia's politics – sometimes disingenuously, much more often prosaically, and not often sincerely – than the posit that it's the failure of implementation, not want of its merits, where Ethiopia's Constitution has faltered.

Damn it!! Are we accounted for fools? Are we, though laden with much history, now deemed incapable of the slightest collective discernment of wisdom? Have we been pronounced, unbeknownst to us, novices on the world stage fit for merely

children's milk, as Paul would put, rather than solid food?

In no age on record, in no country of note has it ever been mandated, as it is in Article 8 of Ethiopia's Constitution, that "all sovereign power [in Ethiopia] resides in the nations, nationalities, and peoples"; brazenly elevating the constituent parts over the whole. A nation, a country of sovereign parts, if at all possible, is a house divided unto itself. It cannot stand.

Through these words, the framers of Ethiopia's Constitution, the Tigray People's Liberation Front [TPLF, with whom the Ethiopian government is currently at



### Writ large: The handwritten letter smuggled out from Kaliti Prison

war], reveal not a vision but betray an unsavoury intent. It is in this malice, whereby they meant to unravel Ethiopia at an opportune time, when their hold on power at the center begins to ebb, where the fundamental spirit and purpose of the Constitution lives.

Note the proverbial question in constitutional interpretation: What had the framers intended? Well, in the case of Ethiopia, nothing less than the undoing of the state, the last written words in the inevitable closing chapter of the story of "an anachronistic nation", if such a term could be coined on their behalf.

But to us who long stood counter-posed to their trajectory, we who live, in this age of unbelief, contentedly and consciously enamoured by the Biblical and Koranic tales about the country

of our birth, we who pose in earnest as custodians of a holy nation both to Christians and Muslims, we confront a Constitution which is an affront not only to our historical and political sensibilities, but also the very fabric of our Abrahamic faiths; both in spirit and words.

This quarrel of ours over the Constitution is much more than politics in its normative sense. More so, it is the Ethiopian variant of America's culture wars, an epic clash for the very soul of a nation and its people. On one side stand the counterculture with their disdain for religion, for moral absolutism, for history and its heroes, for tradition, for the social hierarchy a meritocracy entails, for all things established, for much of what was. On the other side stand we who uphold religion, we who cherish much of what was, we who study history and look up to its heroes, we who embrace tradition, we who see no offence in hierarchy, we who are adamant about continuity.

Constitutions derive their most essential legitimacy from the process of their enactment. This process is not absolute, varying in standard from age to age. The American Constitution, for example, was indisputably the premier standard for the 18th century world to contemplate with awe, but falls far short of the bars of the 20th century. It was elevated to the standards of the later times through amendments.

But a recourse to amendments would not have been possible if there was no original legitimacy to build on. Only total nullification and replacement with a new one would have sufficed. Such was the



**Eskinder Nega**(Photo: Sarah  
Mwangi/Amnesty)

fate of the apartheid-era South African Constitution, which created an island of democracy for whites, and could have conceivably worked for blacks as well through amendments but was abrogated for its original sin. Ditto for Ethiopia, albeit sometime in the future.

Here are rudimentary ABCs: A Constitution in our age demands – requires would be too light of a word – first and foremost a free and fair election to elect delegates to a Constitutional convention. Those delegates alone command the legal and political legitimacy to formulate and ratify, invariably by two-thirds majority, a Constitution. Those who are for amending rather than scrapping Ethiopia's Constitution are mostly a militant minority, aided and abetted by the ruling party, that holds dear to Article 39, which enshrines the right to secession of "nations, nationalities, and peoples"; and rightly believe that the article would

not pass the threshold of two-thirds support its enactment would require in a Constitutional convention of freely elected delegates. Much like the TPLF, they too are lying in wait to untangle, by hook or crook, what is, to them, the world's last empire.

Lest it be less than clear, we, the people of this country of ours, have the moral, legal and political responsibility to disable the crook.

To this end, we shall exercise our right as people of antiquity, united and sustained through the ages by the will of God, to come up with a new Constitution which is worthy of who we are, worthy of our past as a nation dear to God, worthy of our place in the present, and our destiny as the enduring people of faith.

All in due time.

Eskinder Nega  
Prisoner of Conscience,  
Kaliti, Addis Ababa  
December 25, 2020 ■

# The Rocky road to the presidential palace

Samira Sawlani

Sport is making a comeback at last, and so are some epic rivalries.

When Serena Williams squares off against Naomi Osaka, or Man United take the field against Liverpool, or Ted Cruz plays against the entire state of Texas, we really get to see the grit, the determination and the last-minute plane tickets that got them where they are today.

These are traits we on the continent have witnessed at the highest level.

Just look at President Yuweri Museveni, who has dazzled us with his exercise routines. As a man of considerable flexibility (of principles if nothing else), he knows the importance of stretching better than anyone, especially when it comes to term limits.

He's certainly been an effective mentor for Uganda's security forces, who themselves have proven to be quite creative on the field. Just this week they invented a new sport, one that sees the audience as the team to beat – literally.

They were inspired by former presidential candidate Bobi Wine, who headed to the UN Human Rights Commission Offices in Kampala to deliver a petition calling for action over electoral violence, in which his supporters

were targeted, abducted and tortured.

It seems the security forces were eager to help demonstrate Wine's point, violently assaulting not just his supporters but also journalists who were covering the event.

Afterwards, army chief David Muhoozi conceded that his lads got a bit out of hand and offered to pay the medical bills of the journalists who were assaulted – but if that was meant to be a display of good sportsmanship, we *really* don't want to know what bad sportsmanship looks like.

## Ref and ready

Many a sporting great earned themselves an impressive nickname. Indian cricketer Rahul Dravid was known as "The Wall" and Kobe Bryant became "The Black Mamba".

In the Game of Presidents, President Magufuli of Tanzania earned himself the *nom de guerre* "The Bulldozer" for his no-nonsense manner, while Congo-Brazzaville's President Denis Sassou-Nguesso has been crowned "The Emperor" by Guinea's President Alpha Condé and Côte d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara.



**Go all the way:  
Michael B Jordan  
helped reframe  
Sly Stallone's  
Rocky films. Now  
it's Niger's turn.**

On the field, however, even emperors are meant to defer to the authority of the referee. Integral to any game, refs are meant to ensure a level playing field and recognise no favourites. But we've all seen enough home fixtures to know impartiality isn't guaranteed.

That said, we wouldn't dream of suggesting the Constitutional Court in Congo-Brazzaville was in any way biased when it validated the candidature of "The Emperor", so that he might hang on to his imperial title after 36 years in power.

To be fair, the court also gave seven others the go-ahead, and none of them has even been a president before, let alone an emperor, so it's perhaps quite generous to allow people with no previous experience to take part.

### **'It ain't about how hard you hit'**

Meanwhile, over in Niger there's a very strange fight under way. President Mahamadou Issoufou is inexplicably stepping down after completing *just* two terms, which means that a new rivalry

has been born: In the ruling party corner, contesting a presidential run-off for the first time on 21 February: Mohameeeeeed Bazoum! And, in the opposing corner, returning to the ring after years on the bench, deposed former president Mahamaneeeeeeee Ousmane!

While Bazoum led with 39% of the vote in the first round, other opposition candidates have now thrown their support behind Ousmane.

It's like a Rocky movie. But which one? The first, where the rookie prevails despite the odds stacked against him? The fifth, where the hard-bitten veteran comes out of retirement for one last bout? Or *Creed*, where Michael B Jordan reframes the entire franchise?

Whoever is named winner has a huge task ahead of them in terms of the myriad security and development challenges in Niger. But, all being well, this will be its first democratic transition of power, and for many that is a victory in itself.

We've got ringside seats.

See you there. ■

# Isaias Afwerki breaks silence, hints at Abiy's master plan

Yohannes Woldemariam

**T**here is growing controversy around the role Eritrean forces played in the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Against stern denials by the Ethiopian government, numerous media outlets and foreign governments have concluded that Eritrean troops played a significant role in the offensive by Ethiopian government forces. So far, Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki has been silent on these accusations, but on 17 February he gave a long interview in which he set out his perspective on the crisis.

So what did we learn?

The “interview” was given to Eritrean state television, but was really more of a monologue. Afwerki said the peace and security of Ethiopia concerned him greatly and he had been working to promote it – but stopped short of admitting that his military was actively involved in Tigray.

He then went on to pronounce on what Ethiopia needed, in order to find a way back to stability. These thoughts are interesting not only because they help us triangulate his position, but also

because it seems unlikely that Afwerki would publicly say anything to alienate his new ally, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed – and so his comments may provide a valuable hint at the future direction that Abiy himself plans to take.

Notably, Afwerki reiterated his long-held conviction that the Tigray People's Liberation Front's commitment to ethnic self-determination and secession was a major weakness – a time bomb waiting to happen. If Abiy is of a similar mind, then Ethiopia will likely see a further centralisation of power and restrictions on the rights of ethnic communities.

The Eritrean president also accused unspecified powers of being behind the growing tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan and offered advice on how to promote regional harmony.

Given some of the challenges that Afwerki faces in maintaining support for his unpopular regime in Eritrea, avoiding involvement in regional conflicts would be the most prudent. But, if his interview is anything to go by, Afwerki sees himself as a regional statesman and will struggle to avoid the temptation to meddle – making further controversy likely.

Also, keeping Eritreans on a constant war footing serves him well, by preventing any resistance to his iron-fisted rule. ■

*Yohannes Woldemariam follows developments in the Horn of Africa closely. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa*





## The Big Picture

**Modernising tradition: Celuxolo Stewart, known as Gogo Simenjalo, has adapted her Johannesburg-based practice as a traditional healer to cater for virtual consultations during the pandemic. Covid-19 rules mean rituals and face-to-face interactions are often not possible, but healers have learned to improvise. Gogo Simenjalo also runs a media company focusing on traditional healing called AfroSavvy. (Photo: Delwyn Verasamy/Mail & Guardian)**

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