

Dateline Africa

An uneasy year in review

The Institute for African Alternatives looks back on 2021, a year of much upheaval in Africa. The continent has been hit hard by the twin challenges of climate change and the pandemic, a combination of forces that has exacerbated political tension and deepened economic deprivation and already severe inequality.

Introduction

It was a tumultuous year in Africa, starting with the ongoing war in Ethiopia that broke out at the end of 2020. Tigrayan rebels retreated from their advance towards Addis Ababa, but military forces of the Abiy Ahmed government came under extreme pressure. The result was ongoing atrocities, hunger and civilian suffering. The year was also marked by ongoing conflict in northern Mozambique, which devastated villages and displaced people; Nigeria faced insurgents in the north; Somalia's armed conflict continued unabated. The continent as a whole tried to face down the threat of Covid-19 by imposing travel restrictions and lockdowns, all of which resulted in an unprecedented economic and social impact. IFAA's Africa diary looks at the year as it unfolded, including some lesser known events and some good news, which rarely gets much global media exposure.

January 2021

- After a rigged election, the electoral commission of Uganda announced Yoweri Museveni the winner, giving him his sixth term, which brings his total number of years in office to 34, so far. Opposition politicians, including Bobi Wine, were arrested and brutalised, and there were deaths too, in the run-up to an unfair decision.

February 2021

- Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former Nigerian finance minister, was appointed director-general of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) -- the first woman and first African to lead it.

March 2021

- Makhtar Diop, a Senegalese economist and politician, was appointed managing director of the International Finance Corporation, the first African to hold the position. IFC, linked to the World Bank, has an investment portfolio of US\$64 billion.
- Mahamadou Issoufou, who stepped down as President of Niger after two five year terms, was announced the sixth recipient of the US\$5m Mo Ebrahim Prize, which recognises and celebrates excellence in African leadership. The candidates for the prize are all former African executive heads of state who have left office during the last three calendar years, were democratically elected and who served their constitutionally mandated term.
- Amia Suluhu Hassan was sworn in as the first female president of Tanzania. She took office after the death of former

president John Magufuli from a heart condition, and indicated a shift away from Magufuli's contentious and authoritarian rule by immediately having a Covid vaccination in public. Her predecessor was a firm denialist and had refused to allow Covid vaccinations in Tanzania.

- The president of the Republic of Congo, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, was re-elected with 88% of the vote. Africa's third-longest-serving president, behind the leaders of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, he has been in power for almost 37 years.

April 2021

- Chad was hit by a coup after long term "elected" leader Idriss Déby (who seized power in a rebellion in 1990) was killed in a battle. The military inserted his son, Mahamat Déby (see photo below) into the presidential seat, setting aside the constitution in doing so. The country's former colonial power, France, approved.

May 2021

- The elegantly curved Kazungula road and rail bridge over the Zambezi River between Zambia and Botswana was opened -- after two decades of planning and construction. >>



Photo: Mahamat Idriss Déby

- Germany acknowledged it committed colonial genocide in Namibia and promised to pay reparations – although the total amount was immediately contested.
- For the second time in nine months, Col Assimi Goïta seized power in Mali through a coup.
- Kenya’s president Uhuru Kenyatta formally launched the first berth of the new US\$5 billion port at Lamu in Kenya. Chinese funded and built, this is part of an even bigger project, the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, which plans an oil and gas pipeline, as well as railways and roads linking Lamu Port to Ethiopia and the South Sudanese oilfields.

June 2021

- South Africa’s Constitutional Court sentenced the former president, Jacob Zuma, to 15 months’ imprisonment for contempt of Court. He had failed to obey an earlier order of the Court requiring him to appear before the Zondo Commission inquiry into state capture.

July 2021

- An “insurrection” broke out in South Africa. In the wake of the jailing of Jacob Zuma, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal were plunged into violent looting and unrest. More than 340 people died, damage exceeded R50 billion and 150,000 jobs were lost. To date no credible

insurrectionist has been held responsible.

- President Kais Saied of Tunisia suspended parliament and grabbed power – in a move supported by many Tunisians fed up with their public representatives and the ineffectual government.
- South Sudan, the world’s youngest country, marked the 10th anniversary of its independence – from Sudan.

August 2021

- Zambia reclaimed its democracy in a peaceful transfer of power following a general election. Support for Hakinde Hichelema was so large that vote rigging by supporters of the toxic incumbent Edgar Lungu failed.



- Journalists at risk: Al-Jazeera producer Rabie al-Sheikh was arrested before an interview with an Egyptian journalist who had posted a call on Facebook for Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi to resign. Al-Jazeera has been banned from operating in Egypt since 2013. Egypt was Africa's top prisoner of journalists in 2021, with 25 journalists incarcerated. Africa was a world leading oppressor of journalists in 2021 with 64 imprisoned. China was the leading country with 50.

September 2021

- Guinean president Alpha Condé, in power since 2010, was deposed in a successful coup d'état.
- China confirmed it would not fund a controversial coal-fired power station in Limpopo, South Africa. This is part of a world-wide policy announced by Xi Jinping. Question: Does Africa have much-needed plans in place to generate the necessary electricity?

October 2021

- A 25 October coup in Sudan unleashed wide popular protests, but a month later the ousted prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, was back in "office," under the military. He resigned on 2 January 2022.

November 2021

- In Eswatini, four months of brutal and deadly oppression of peaceful pro-democracy protests ended when the king reluctantly agreed to a "national

dialogue" to be held in 2022. Cyril Ramaphosa, representing the Southern African Development Community, had attempted to intervene.

- Malawian voters elected the first MP with albinism.
- The African Union's peace mission to Somalia announced that a Ugandan court martial on 12 November found five of its soldiers guilty of killing seven Somali civilians in August 2021. Two of the soldiers were sentenced to death while the other three were each sentenced to 39 years in prison. They will be repatriated from Somalia to Uganda to serve their sentences.
- The 88-year-old president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, the oldest African leader in 2021, celebrated his 39 years in office. He won 80% of the votes in the last election held in that country in 2018.
- The 30-year old ceasefire between the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic/Polisario Front and Morocco ended, re-opening the potential for conflict between Algeria and Morocco. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is a member of the African Union, and is supported by Algeria – and South Africa.
- Morocco hosted Israel's defence minister on a first official visit to that country. Morocco seeks to buy weapons from Israel as relations deteriorate with Algeria, mainly over the disputed Western Sahara.
- Senegal hosted the triennial Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC). Félix Tshisekedi, president of the

Democratic Republic of Congo, said the partnership would be of greater benefit to Africa if African countries were given better access to the Chinese market.

December 2021

- Peaceful presidential elections in the Gambia entrenched democracy in the face of a failed challenge by the former president and 1994 coup leader.
- The presidential election in Libya, long scheduled for 24 December, was postponed, dragging out the protracted chaos bedeviling that country since the 2011 killing of Muammar Qaddafi by rebels, assisted by NATO.
- Sudanese protesters opposed to military rule faced live bullets, heavy teargas and a communications blackout in ongoing major demonstrations that followed the 25 October military coup. Demonstrators demanded that the military play no role at all in government during a long-agreed transition to free elections.

In addition, writers of African origin won a slew of international literary awards in late 2021: Abdulrazak Gurnah (Tanzania) won the Nobel Prize for literature; Damon Galgut (South Africa) won the Booker Prize for the best novel in English; Mohamed Mbougar Sarr (Senegal) won the Prix Goncourt, France's premier literary prize, the first African ever to do so and David Diop (Senegal) won the International Booker Prize for the best novel translated into English (see book review on pg 47). **NA**