

# Africa

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## Where the Contract Begins... Or Unravels

THIS should be the year when democracy becomes a bona fide tradition in Africa. At least 10 countries will hold multiparty presidential and/or parliamentary elections. For South Africa, Mozambique and Malawi, the polls will mark the third straight time that voters will participate directly in the governance of their countries. For Namibians, it will be the fourth. Significant changes are in store. Sam Nujoma and Joaquim Chissano, stalwarts of their countries' liberation struggles, are stepping down. So is Bakili Muluzi, who failed — importantly — in his bid to change Malawi's constitution to seek a third term.

Little more than a decade ago, Africa seemed caught in the grip of apartheid, intractable civil wars and despotic rule. Now, in many countries, former enemies volley rebuttals rather than artillery shells, and the abiding concern isn't whether there should be democracy but rather what kind.

Elections are the pageantry of democracy, but they are no guarantee it will flourish. It has been proven far too often in Africa that

ballots can be little more than pretence, a cloak of legitimacy around the lust for power. Here arises a solemn question, one on which Africa's future pivots: On what basis does power rest in Africa?

Liberation movements and opposition parties that have toppled corrupt regimes sometimes claim the right to rule based on the struggles they waged and won. Therein lay the seeds of ruin, which germinate in stolen elections, puppet parliaments and increasingly restrictive laws.

We contend that the higher motive of Africa's freedom struggles wasn't the pursuit of power but the principle of universal suffrage. When the one eclipses the other, the contract between the governing and the governed begins to fray.

There is nothing mysterious about what makes a free and fair election free and fair. Nor does it take reading the *Magna Carta* to know when the most basic tenets of democracy are being violated. Asked why he was working his fields rather than casting a ballot in recent local council polls, Audu

Ayitogo, a Nigerian peasant, replied: 'Why should I stand in the sun for hours if my vote is not going to be recognised?'

The vote is Africa's pearl of great price. It is not a privilege to be granted or withdrawn at the expediency of those in power. It is a right, and the cornerstone of the public's trust. Those who toy with it betray the past and sacrifice the future.



# Verbatim

**“When will things get back to normal in the country? We are sick and tired of all this.”**

– A Congolese citizen, soon after the March 2004 failed coup in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

**“The international community failed Rwanda and that must leave us always with a sense of bitter regret. I believed at that time that I was doing my best. But I realised after the genocide that there was more that I could and should have done to sound the alarm and rally support.”**

– Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, at a memorial conference on the 1994 Rwanda genocide. At that time, Annan headed the UN peacekeeping operations.

**“We don’t want to take what is good for Zimbabwe away, but we don’t want what is good for Africa taken away.”**

– Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, saying his government would welcome Zimbabwean commercial farmers who wanted to set up business in Nigeria after fleeing their own country.

**“We will proceed with the election in 2005 with or without the MDC. If they boycott, it is because they do not have support and they know they were going to lose anyway.”**

– Nathan Shamuyarira, ZANU-PF information secretary, commenting on the opposition threat to sit out Zimbabwe’s parliamentary elections next year.

**“He’s already started to embarrass us.”**

– Parfait M’bay, spokesman for the government of the Central African Republic, referring to former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who fled to Bangui after being ousted from his country in February 2004.

Mr. Blair Leads British Business to Deals With Col. Khadafi Over Some Old Obstacles



**“The voting arrangements in many of these institutions do not reflect the current global economic environment. Rather, they reflect a picture of development that is 60 years old.”**

– Trevor Manuel, South African finance minister, referring to the World Bank, IMF and WTO in a March 2004 lecture at Oxford University.

**“One cannot ignore the call by the people, because the people are the ones who make the final decisions.”**

– Sam Nujoma, President of Namibia, hinting at running for a fourth term during an interview with the state-run Namibian Broadcasting Company, despite giving previous assurances that he would step down.

**“As a country, we need to revisit our spending pattern if we want to stimulate economic growth and create job opportunities.”**

– King Mswati III of Swaziland, known for his opulent lifestyle, addressing the opening of parliament in March 2004.

**“We are the only continent which is working very practically to narrow the gap between the genders. This is real history and we must be proud of it.”**

– Gertrude Mongella, president of the Pan African Parliament, reflecting on her election to that position.

**“I have asked all Liberians to forgive me for whatever wrong I may have committed; and I equally stand ready to forgive all those who have offended me.”**

– Prince Johnson, a one-time Liberian faction leader turned evangelist and political hopeful, on returning to Liberia after more than 10 years in exile.

**“Libya, assuming this conversion is genuine and long-lasting, could certainly become an important player, certainly in view of its geo-strategic location. Ultimately, it certainly could have the same relationships that we have with other countries.”**

– General James L. Jones, US commander for Europe and North Africa, expressing optimism that the country the US bombed in 1986 for supporting terrorism could become an ally.

# A Posse of Guns for Hire

Discharged and jobless, Africa's former combatants find dubious work as mercenaries

THE foiled coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea in March 2004 provided an urgent reminder of the destabilising consequences when two of Africa's most troubling unsolved problems intersect: poor governance and the platoons of former soldiers and guerrilla fighters left scattered and idling across the continent's former battlefields. The one creates a job market for the opportunistic other.

'I used to command these guys,' said Johann Smith, a former South African Defense Force commander, referring to the 80 suspected mercenaries now awaiting trial in Equatorial Guinea and Zimbabwe, where many were arrested allegedly en route to topple the government of President Obiang Nguema. 'There are 2,500 to 3,000 of them in South Africa. This will definitely happen again, given their current economic realities. One former soldier lamented that he had missed the Equatorial Guinea "recruitment drive" by 30 minutes.'

Just how many ex-combatants are at loose ends in Africa is probably impossible to know. Certainly tens of thousands, given the number of conflicts raging or waning across the continent. At the height of the recent war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, some 21 formal and rebel armies were entangled in just that one splintered conflict. Few jobs awaited those soldiers when the peace accords were signed. Few know how to do anything else.

But with conflicts drawing to a close in several African countries, a new recruitment base for mercenaries is emerging. The World

Bank has allocated \$500 million for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes in Africa's Great Lakes region. Millions of dollars had been spent on demobilising armies, but several studies have nonetheless shown that making contented civilians out of unskilled former soldiers in plodding economies is frustrating work.

Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa, all stable after prolonged conflicts, have successfully built new national armies out of former warring factions. But their societies fester with former cadres who lack the skills to build meaningful lives beyond the bush and barracks. A 2001 report by the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria, South Africa, indicated that 37% of ex-combatants — from both sides of the apartheid divide — were unemployed.

Some turn to crime, many analysts suspect. Others find new ways to practice the old profession.

When Zimbabwean security forces surrounded an unmarked aircraft at Harare airport in March 2004 and arrested its passengers for allegedly plotting mercenary activities, many observers quickly concluded that they were remnants of southern Africa's erstwhile racist security forces up to their old tricks again. They were right — up to a point.

As the facts unfolded, it turned out that most of those detained were black former soldiers in the apartheid South African Defense Force. Many served in the 32 Battalion,

an infamous former South African unit known for its shadowy brutality in the latter years of Pretoria's wars of regional destabilisation. Although many of them were Namibia, Angolan and Congolese, they were given South African citizenship after being demobilised.

The Equatorial Guinea affair highlights weaknesses in national and continental legal provisions for curbing mercenary activity in

Africa. The African Union, for example, has not reviewed the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa — a document produced by its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, in 1977. Six years ago, South Africa hastily drafted the 1998 Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act. The legislation resulted in shutting down Executive Outcomes, a private company offering military services in far-flung African countries. But critics charge it failed to sufficiently tighten the legal environment in which mercenaries operate.

As the nature of conflict changes dramatically and rapidly in the post-Cold War global arena, private military activity is on the rise. The challenge, argued Michael Grunberg of Sandline International, a Bahamas-based security company, is to create a legal framework that enables private armies to function constructively while preventing mercenary activity.

'In Iraq, there are currently 10,000 expatriate private military personnel,' Grunberg said. 'As the level of foreign investments in Africa is growing, so is the need for security. Similarly, an increased level of security is conducive to investment and growth.' — **Michael van Winden and Steven Gruz**

**'This will definitely happen again, given the ex-soldiers' current economic realities'**

**'The Equatorial Guinea affair highlights weaknesses in national and continental legal provisions for curbing mercenary activity in Africa'**

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# In Placid Malawi, Shades of Mugabe's Zimbabwe

Political violence by ruling party youth militias threatens credibility of upcoming elections

IT HAS a reputation for being as calm as the lake that bears its name, but as Malawi heads into its third multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections in May, serial attacks allegedly perpetrated by ruling party youth militias against opposition leaders and journalists cast doubts over the stability of the sliver-shaped central African country.

The Malawi Human Rights Commission has warned that rising incidents of pre-election violence by the Young Democrats, the militant youth wing of the ruling United Democratic Front, is polarising the country along ethnic and regional lines. Political analysts, furthermore, worry that voters are losing faith in the democratic process. The upcoming vote marks the second consecutive poll to be marred by ruling-party violence.

'Anywhere in the world, elections are not declared free and fair when violence reigns supreme,' said Rodgers Newa, chairman of the Human Rights Consultative Committee in Malawi.

Scheduled for May 18 at the time *eAfrica* went to press, the elections should present Malawians with an open choice. Having failed in his bid to change the constitution to seek a third term, President Bakili Muluzi must retire. Divisions among the opposition notwithstanding, few expect much of a contest.

In late February, Mary Clara Makungwa, vice president of the opposition National Democratic Alliance, was beaten by a band of

youths in Makungwa in central Malawi. Her vehicle was set ablaze. Another politician, Kizito Ngwembe, a member of parliament for the opposition Malawi Congress Party, was assaulted by youths while addressing a rally in the district of Kasungu.

Party officials, youth leaders and the police deny claims either of their involvement or complicity in acts of political terror.

But human rights advocates say the violence reflects one of the most troubling and

unresolved elements of party politics in Africa: the use of youth squads to perpetuate power and prevent the free contestation of elections.

Since the early 1990s, when multiparty politics began to spread across Africa, militant ruling party youth wings have been a political fixture, violently disrupting elections in Kenya and Zimbabwe and intimidating political opponents in Cote d'Ivoire and Burundi. But Nixon Khembo, a political scientist at the University of Malawi, describes the trend as a gross abuse of youth volunteerism by political parties, reaches back to the earliest years of independence. Botswana had its Boy Brigades, Zambia its National Youth Service.

Even where regimes have changed, practices haven't. Dr. Kamuzu Hastings Banda, Malawi's erstwhile despot, employed the Malawi Young Pioneers

to intimidate budding opposition movements. Five years after Muluzi took power in Malawi's first multiparty elections, the UDF was doing the same. Violence by the Young Democrats during the 1999 elections was well chronicled and has been a mainstay ever since.

During a parliamentary by-election in Blantyre in 2001, for example, UDF supporters attempted to disrupt a campaign rally that was to be addressed by Gwanda Chakuamba, leader of the opposition Malawi Congress Party. In the ensuing chaos, the machete wielding youths accidentally knifed one of their own, Duncan Kanjuchi, killing him on the spot.

The UDF claimed Kanjuchi was a member of the ruling party and that opposition supporters had beaten him to death. Chakuamba countered that Kanjuchi was mistakenly beaten by Young Democrats. The police arrested six MCP supporters, all of whom were ultimately acquitted.

As the May elections near, such incidents have increased. Rafiq Hajat, director of the Institute for Policy Interaction in Malawi, says the violence perpetrated by the UDF Young Democrats demonstrates the fragility of newly democratised countries. 'It is a continuation perhaps of the ignorance that is prevalent regarding the role of the youth wings of political parties,' he said. 'The Young Democrats are certainly a threat to the democratisation process, of which elections are a crucial part.'



Bakili Muluzi



Robert Mugabe

## SPECIAL FEATURE

In a report entitled 'Taking Root: Violence and Intimidation in Malawi,' the Voice of Micah, a political think tank based in Balaka, argued that the Young Democrats operated with the blessings of the UDF leadership.

'There have been reports that, in certain cases cars supplied by the UDF cadres have been used in the execution of the acts of violence by the Young Democrats,' the report states. 'Therefore it can not be doubted that these people act with full knowledge and mandate of party leaders.'

It adds: 'It appears the UDF is gradually pulling one leaf after the other from the tactics of the Zanu-PF of Robert Mugabe. While Mugabe boasts of the political exploits of the war veterans, which have reigned havoc for some time now, bringing to its knees one of the strongest economies in this part of Africa, the UDF with its Young Democrats is bringing to its knees one of the most stable and peace loving people.'

The violence is accompanied by a second phenomenon: the appearance of police complicity.

Following her attack in February, opposition leader Mary Makungwa took the matter to the police. Upon filing a complaint she was jailed for 48 hours without explanation. Deputy Police Spokesman Kelvin Maigwa disputes Makungwa's claim of unlawful detention. 'The police are allowed by law to summon any citizen to question him or her on any issue when they are carrying out investigations,' he said.

Ngwembe, the opposition member of parliament, alleges that he was beaten by UDF youth a second time as he tried to report the initial assault to the police. Eyewitnesses corroborate the claim.

One police officer, speaking on condition of strict anonymity, said any officer who dares to interfere in the operations of the UDF Young Democrats can easily lose his job. 'First of all they transfer you to a police post



*School children stand with a member of the Zimbabwe national service cadets, known as 'green bombers', at a Zanu-PF conference at the end of 2003. Photo: Howard Burditt*

in a remote area and once you make a mistake, you immediately lose your job,' he said, speaking near the Kasungu police station, where he is posted.

Another officer, also speaking anonymously, said when alleged victims of the Young Democrats report the incidents to police, top UDF members and some members of the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) pressurise the police officers to destroy files of such cases.

'The problem is that at every police station there is a member of NIB, and these intelligence officers in a sense work as loyal servants of the ruling party, so every police officer who opposes their informal instructions is treated as a supporter of the opposition,' he said.

'If this continues,' Hajat warns, 'we might face massive upheavals, because when the public lose faith in officers of the law, then they start disregarding the law itself.' He cited an incident in February when police fired shots during an opposition rally at Njamba Freedom Park in Blantyre, wounding two people.

### Party Organisation

Unlike the Green Bombers, Zimbabwean President Robert

Mugabe's youth militias, the UDF Young Democrats don't have torture camps or training facilities. They operate from their homes and have committees at the national, regional, district and constituency levels.

According to UDF deputy publicity secretary Mary Kaphwereza Banda, there are party youth chapters in all of Malawi's 28 districts and 193 constituencies. They report to either district or constituency coordinators. Banda insists that, unlike the forcibly conscripted Green Bombers, the Young Democrats are voluntary.

The UDF party constitution does not define the Young Democrats' role. It merely states that the duties of the national director of youth affairs shall include 'coordinating the activities of the youth, mobilising the youth for the purposes of strengthening the party and looking after the affairs of the youth.'

The UDF officially condemns violence. President Muluzi has personally implored the militant youth to refrain from perpetrating violence. 'I am not the one who instructs the Young Democrats to cause any alleged violence,' he has said. 'I cannot allow that to happen as it would undermine the image of the party.'

But Ngeyi Kanyongolo, a human rights lawyer and law professor at the University of Malawi, claims that party leaders, including Muluzi himself, privately reward the Young Democrats after successful operations.

UDF spokesman Ken Lipenga said the party officially does not sanction the use of violence, but admits the Young Democrats have at one time or the other been involved in violent acts. 'It is common knowledge that some UDF politicians have used the boys to perpetrate violence,' he said in a surprisingly frank admission. 'Just recently some of our own boys were used to disrupt our own party primary elections. Politicians who use violence are failures or believe that they will fail

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in the elections.'

UDF National Director of Youth Henry Moyo vehemently rebuffs such claims: 'The UDF Young Democrats are disciplined. Their main duty is to mobilise fellow youths in development activities.'

### History of political violence

**A**lthough Malawi has a peaceful reputation compared to other Southern Africa nations, its people suffered in silence from intimidation, threats, abductions and killings for three decades under the autocratic rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party. Under the late dictator, the red-shirted Malawi Young Pioneers, a youth paramilitary group, were infamous for political violence.

Banda established the Young Pioneers in 1963, the year the country gained independence. Modelled after Kwame Nkrumah's Young Pioneers in Ghana and the National Service Brigade in Israel, they were originally conceived as a means for mobilising the youth in national development causes.

In the early years of their existence, the Young Pioneers were mainly concerned with rural development work and political indoctrination. The Pioneers were indoctrinated to believe in Kamuzuism, Banda's political philosophy of unity, obedience, loyalty and discipline.

'I organised the Young Pioneers so that the youth would make useful citizens of the country,' Banda told a rally in Lilongwe in 1975. 'I did not want our youth to roam the streets of Zomba, Blantyre, and Lilongwe, loafing with their hands in their pockets.'

But with the passage of time, the role of the Young Pioneers evolved. 'The MYPs added a security role to their range of responsibilities, and gradually became competitors in this regard vis-à-vis the formal security organs of state in the form of the police and the army,' said Kings Phiri, a professor at the

University of Malawi. 'Their training for this role involved physical exercises and drill, the use of small arms, and the gathering and analysis of intelligence reports.'

By the early 1970s, Banda was using the Young Pioneers to kill, expel and deport members of Jehovah's Witnesses, who were refusing to buy Malawi Congress Party membership cards because of their religious beliefs. Sources within the Malawi Army say Banda also used the Young Pioneers to torture his opponents, and also dispatched them to support the Mozambican rebel group Renamo in the 1980s.

The end came in December 1993, when members of the Young Pioneers got into a brawl with Malawi Army soldiers at the Moyale Barracks in the northern city of Mzuzu. In the fracas, the overzealous Young Pioneers shot dead two Malawi Army soldiers. In retaliation, gangs of off-duty soldiers went on the rampage.

According to a senior army officer speaking on condition of anonymity, the Army determined to completely disarm and dismantle the Young Pioneers. Soldiers traversed the country, demolishing Young Pioneer bases and establishments. That purge also heralded the defeat of the Malawi Congress Party, which lost elections to the UDF in 1994.

That poll, the country's first democratic elections, was peaceful. But party political violence began to rear its head once again as the country moved toward its second multiparty poll five years later.

Political commentators now say there is no marked difference between Banda's Young Pioneers and the UDF's Young Democrats. Some of the latter were once members of the former. But unlike Banda's Young Pioneers, which was established by an act of parliament, the Young Democrats are not part of the government machinery.

Even so, the Malawi Constitution is very silent on the establishment of militias and no legislation exists to either regulate such groups or make them illegal.

### Regional implications

**V**iolence flared around Muluzi's bid to change the constitution early last year to seek a third term. According to Vera Chirwa, a human rights lawyer, the Young Democrats were responsible for several atrocities. At one point, she said, they assaulted Anglican Bishop James Tengatenga for speaking against Muluzi's bid. On another occasion, they attacked the president of the civil society Movement for Genuine Democracy just 200 metres outside Parliament for his vocal opposition against the proposed Third Term Bill.

Chirwa, who runs the Malawi Centre for Advice, Research, Education and Rehabilitation, charges that it is a mockery of human rights for Muluzi to be involved in mediating peace talks in Zimbabwe when he is failing to control the Young Democrats.

'It is very difficult for African leaders to take tough action against Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe because they are in the same boat of wishing to stay in power for a long time,' she said. 'Just imagine, over 20 MPs were assaulted by the Young Democrats as the UDF campaigned for Muluzi's third-term bid. How can the same Muluzi tell Mugabe to step down from power? How can he tell Mugabe to advise the Green Bombers to refrain from violence when the UDF Young Democrats are doing the same?'

Chirwa, who along with her husband were once imprisoned for opposing Banda, argues that current instruments set by the African Union, Southern Africa Development Community and Nepad do not adequately address the problem of political abuses: 'African leaders who rig elections are hailed by their comrades and some autocratic leaders are elected chairpersons of these regional and continental bodies.'

— Peter Banda

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# Malawi's Young Democrats: A View From Inside the Ranks

*IN 2001, Malawian Journalist Peter Banda was assaulted by a band of UDF youth militias while working on a story. He recently caught up with one of his assailants, a long-serving member of the Young Democrats who spoke with Banda on condition of anonymity. The following are excerpts from the interview.*

**Q: When did you join the UDF Young Democrats and what were you told was your role?**

**A:** I joined the youth wing of the United Democratic Front in 1993. At that time the UDF was an opposition pressure group because during the one-party era political parties were outlawed. Our main duty as Young Democrats was to offer security to the UDF leadership. Some of us worked as UDF intelligence gatherers and others as bodyguards.

**Q: Were you paid for what you did?**

**A:** We were not paid anything because all we wanted was to ensure that the one-party system should collapse. In some instances we were offered some accommodation and meal allowances when we were travelling.

**Q: How tough was your work as Young Democrats when the UDF was in opposition?**

**A:** It was tough work because we had to protect our leaders from the well-trained Malawi Young Pioneers, a paramilitary youth wing of the then-ruling Malawi Congress Party. Our work became easier in December 1993 when the Malawi Army disarmed the Malawi Young Pioneers. Security threats to our leaders became very minimal after that, but we still continued to offer security services to our leaders on a voluntary basis.

**Q: What happened when the UDF won the 1994 elections?**

**A:** As the country prepared for the 1994 elections, the UDF chairman and presidential candidate, Bakili Muluzi,

promised us that when he wins the elections he would integrate us into the Malawi Army, the Malawi Police Force and the Secret Service.

I wept the day Muluzi was sworn in as president. But those of us who protected him when he was in opposition were pushed aside and paramilitary police and army officers became his bodyguards. It was now impossible for us to talk to Muluzi and his ministers. As time went by some of the educated Young Democrats were incorporated into the newly formed secret service – the National Intelligence Bureau. The rest of us, the uneducated ones, lived by begging money from UDF officials. Years passed.

**Q: When did the Young Democrats begin beating up opposition leaders?**

**A:** In the run up to 1999 general elections, the UDF Director of Youth [Henry Moyo] used to mobilise the strong ones amongst our groups and advise us to disrupt opposition rallies. He would offer, say, a group of 20 strong young men a vehicle, crates of beer, and MK1000 (US\$10) each and advise us to disrupt a rally. After disrupting a rally through the use of violence, he would reward us with another MK1000. This has become the trend up to this time.

This time around when we hear that an opposition party is holding a rally we report to UDF officials. They give us money as incentives for causing political violence and a vehicle to use in the operations.

*[Mr. Moyo responds: 'I don't send UDF Young Democrats to beat up anybody. I must confess sometimes the Young Democrats beat up opposition leaders and journalists. Those who are beaten are the ones who say bad things about our party National Chairman, Bakili Muluzi. Can you blame the patriotic youth for*

*beating up politicians who have no respect for the president?'*

**Q: What are some of the operations that you have been involved in?**

**A:** I burnt a Landrover belonging to Malawi Congress Party in Chiradzulu District. I took part in the razing down of an office belonging to National Democratic Alliance in Mulanje District. I have beaten up more 15 journalists. Don't you even know that I was among the people who beat you up at Chileka Airport? This is a wrist watch you wore. *(He showed me a wristwatch that was confiscated from me in 2001 by unidentified Young Democrats and both of us laughed.)* I have been involved in disrupting more than 50 opposition rallies.

**Q: What happens when a Young Democrat makes a mistake?**

**A:** He is severely beaten.

**Q: Why is it that you frequently disrupt National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rallies?**

**A:** The NDA knows all the dirty tactics of UDF because its leader, Brown Mpinganjira, was Muluzi's right-hand man before he was sacked as a senior minister for opposing the president's bid to seek a third term *(which would have required amending the constitution)*. Mpinganjira vigorously campaigned against it. He is intelligent, powerful and a strategist. The party fears him.

**Q: Do you have a political future?**

**A:** I am involved in these atrocities because I am poor and uneducated. I have nothing to do. I worry about my today's problems and not about the future.

**Q: What will you do if UDF loses the May 18 elections?**

**A:** I will defect to the militant wing of the party.

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# A Year of Checks on Ballots

AT LEAST 10 African countries are scheduled to hold presidential or parliamentary elections between April and December — ballots that could affirm the maturing of democratic practice on the continent and mark a critical turning point in the political evolution of key states.

Overall, incumbents seeking re-election appear to face little threat from weak or fragmented oppositions (See story, page 10). But important transitions are likely even where ruling parties retain power. Presidents Sam Nujoma and Joaquim Chissano, two liberation stalwarts, have vowed to step down, marking the end of the eras they dominated in Namibia and Mozambique. In Malawi, President Baliki Muluzi was set to retire after a decade in power after failing in his bid to amend his country's two-term limit. Although his hand-chosen successor was likely to face little challenge, Malawi's constitutional system has already withstood an important test.

The all-but inevitable re-election of Thabo Mbeki, meanwhile, will render the South African president a lame duck and signal the start of an unprecedented season of inter- and intra-party manoeuvring that could fundamentally alter country's post-apartheid political landscape in the coming years.

As *eAfrica* went to press, three additional countries — Burundi, Central African Republic and Sudan — were still considering whether to conduct elections this year. In two of those countries, Burundi and Sudan, ballots would celebrate years of painstaking progress toward peace after long-running conflicts.

Here's a closer, state-by-state glance at what's at play:

## Algeria: 8 April

Political unrest flared in the days ahead

of the presidential poll as opponents of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika took to the streets in the Berber-dominated region of Kabylie. Several opposition leaders, accusing the authorities of fraudulent preparations, have banded together to boycott the election. Even so, Bouteflika was favoured to win a second five-year term, having secured backing of the National Democratic Rally party of Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and its key ally, the Islamic MSP party. Late last year, a court banned the activities of the country's largest party, the National Liberation Front, even though its leader, Bouteflika's former Prime Minister Ali Benflis, was the most popular of the five challengers. Poverty and unemployment were key concerns among voters.



## South Africa: 14 April

South Africa's third democratic election holds little suspense. A giant among heel-nipping rivals, the ruling African National Congress was coasting toward easy victory. The only question was a matter of size: Will the ANC finally gain the two-thirds majority it covets, which would enable it to amend the constitution without the opposition's help, and deepen its position in the pivotal provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape? A late alliance between the predominantly white Democratic Alliance and the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party is the ANC's only real obstacle. Speculation also centred on potential shuffling in President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet. The ministers of health, land, and foreign affairs, and Deputy President Jacob Zuma, have been lightning rods for criticism during Mbeki's first term. Issues most important to voters this year included land redistribution, job creation, crime prevention and housing. The ANC's



erratic approach to HIV/AIDS and its controversial 'quiet diplomacy' in Zimbabwe were also standard campaign fodder for opposition parties.

## Malawi: 18 May

This will be Malawi's third free elections since 1994, when President Bakili Muluzi's ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) ended 31 years of one-party rule under the late Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and moved the country into a new constitution-based era of multiparty democracy. Muluzi, who has served the maximum two terms, is set to step down. His chosen successor, an economist-turned-diplomat named Bingu wa Mutharika, is expected to face off against a still-forming coalition of challenging parties. The opposition, however, seemed divided and unlikely to rally behind a single candidate. For ordinary Malawians, the main issues were poverty, food security and HIV/AIDS. (See stories, pages 4-7)



## Botswana: October

President Festus Mogae was set to lead his ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) to an unthreatened election victory, as voters were expected to reward the current government for maintaining the country's tradition of careful economic management. In another indication that constitutional democracy is deepening in Africa, Mogae has already announced that, if re-elected, he will observe the country's two-term limit. Botswana, the region's oldest multiparty democracy, has enjoyed peace and relative prosperity since independence in 1966. Concerns among voters included poverty, social inequality and unemployment.



## Cameroon: October

President Paul Biya, seeking his last

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seven-year term allowed by the constitution, was due to face off against an undetermined field of opposition candidates. The contest was unfolding amid ample allegations of human-rights violations by the government, and follows parliamentary elections in 2002 that were marred by broad allegations of electoral fraud. Biya has been in power since 1982.

**Tunisia: October**

The last time President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who has been in office since 1987, sought re-election, he won 99.4% of the vote. That as five years ago, but little appears to have changed. Six months before the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, the opposition was still weak and divided. Ben Ali's critics have raised concerns about human rights abuses, assaults on Islamist opponents and crackdowns on the media.

**Namibia: November**

Like its liberation-era sister movement in South Africa, Namibia's ruling South West Africa People's Organisation was facing little threat of being ousted from power in presidential and parliamentary elections later this year. With President Sam Nujoma, the man who has dominated Swapo for decades, finally stepping down, the one question was whether Swapo would extend its majority? The party's pre-ballot congress in May will crown a successor. Regardless of the ruling party's candidate, however, voters so far appeared likely to reward the government for 15 years of economic growth. The opposition, meanwhile, seems more fragmented than ever. Land reform and HIV/AIDS were key issues.

**Niger: December**

President Mamadou Tandja and his ruling Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement face a growing challenge from its main foe, Mahamadou



Issoufou and his Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme. The latter has been strongly critical of the government's alleged mismanagement of public finances and its attack on the freedom of the press. Tandja's infrastructure programme has also drawn fire from the opposition.

**Ghana: December**

Voters face a choice in both presidential and parliamentary elections. President John Kufuor and his ruling New Patriotic Party, were expected to argue success in stabilising the economy and improving health services and infrastructure. The main opposition candidate, Prof. John Atta Mills of the National Democratic Congress has begun to emerge from the shadow of his predecessor, charismatic former president Jerry Rawlings, who ruled Ghana for a decade before Kufuor's election in 2000. Mills advocates an alternative, social democratic agenda.

**Mozambique: December**

The one potentially close contest of the year. President Joaquim Chissano, who held power for 18 years and presided over Mozambique's successful transition from decades of brutal war to a decade of peaceful political coexistence, was set to retire at the end his current term. In his place, the ruling Frelimo party was preparing to field businessman and veteran politician Armando Guebuza against Afonso Dhlakama, its key opponent and long-time leader of the opposition Renamo. Chissano, a champion of the African renaissance, will remain Frelimo's party leader. He has built a legacy of moderate leadership and economic stewardship in office, but his departure provides Renamo with an opening. Dhlakama has broad popular recognition that Chissano's successor lacks. Renamo scored important victories in recent local government elections. — Michael van Winden



## SADC Election Standards

**Elections and Individual Rights**

National constitutions should ensure universal suffrage, unfettered **registration and nomination**, and **secret voting**. Political violence and intimidation should be outlawed. Electoral laws should protect **freedom of association and expression**, with dedicated tribunals to enforce laws and handle disputes.

**Elections and the Government**

Constitutions should enshrine **multiparty democracy**. **Election dates** should be constitutionally determined, with a minimum three months' notice. Electoral laws should prohibit governments from using **public resources to fund political activities**. All public funding for parties must be accounted for and disbursed by an agreed formula. Information laws should protect the **private media**. Opposition parties should have equal access to **state media**. Governments should recognise **civil society's** role in monitoring elections and civic education. **Electoral commissions** should be constitutionally established.

**Transparency and Electoral Integrity**

**Voter registration** should be continuous. Electoral commissions should fund **voter-education** programmes. **Boundary-delimitation commissions** must be constitutionally established. Party **nominations** for candidates should be fair and transparent. All stakeholders must denounce violence during **campaigning**. Impartial state security forces must provide protection at meetings, rallies, polling stations and party premises. **Campaign expenditures** unduly influencing the democratic process should be prevented, and electoral commission should monitor party funds. **Courts** should be strengthened and election procedures subject to due process. The **electoral commission and the media** should maintain a healthy relationship.

**Polling stations** should be in neutral public places. Transparent **ballot boxes** should replace wooden ones. Verification and reconciliation of ballots, sealing and opening of ballot boxes, and **vote counting** should happen with agents from all parties present. Results should be released as soon as counting is completed and confirmed. Parties should be encouraged to **accept electoral results** if observers deem the process fair.

**Election observers** should be present at registration, campaigning, voting and verification stages. Governments should recognise the **role of observers** provided they are demonstrably non-partisan, respect national laws, the electoral commission and the electoral process, and channel complaints appropriately.

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# It's Good To Be the King

## Ruling parties in Africa face little electoral threat from weak and divided oppositions

AFTER a decade in power, the ruling African National Congress was so confident it would retain control after South Africa's third democratic elections on 14 April 2004 that its leaders were treating the campaign more like a dental check-up with the people rather than a robust contest against political rivals.

Opposition? What opposition?

'We have no campaign at all against the opposition,' said Smuts Ngonyama, head of the presidency of the ANC, speaking on his cell phone. 'Right now, I'm with the president, who is in the home of an old lady discussing issues important to her like housing and whether she is satisfied with the ANC's rule. We are going directly to the people to build a foundation for the next decade. There is no need at all to campaign against the opposition.'

Choose any country in Africa. If there's an election, Ngonyama's attitude probably applies. Ten countries have already scheduled presidential and/or parliamentary elections this year (See story, page 8). Three more may follow. With the possible exception of Frelimo in Mozambique, no ruling party up for reelection appears remotely threatened.

Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall sent ripples of pluralism across the African continent, incumbents still enjoy tremendous advantages. Challenged by weak or divided oppositions, they can be magnanimous — if not arrogant. Confronted by more serious contenders, they can bend the powers at their disposal to preserve their place.

'Where the ruling party feels threatened, then there are real problems for the electoral process,' said Claude Kabemba at the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa in Johannesburg.

Opposition politics is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa. Most of the post-colonial period has been marked by authoritarian regimes. But after the Cold War ended and Africa lost its status as a checkerboard for super-power rivalries, donor nations began attaching new conditions to aid packages. Pluralism became a prerequisite.

But a flowering of political parties does not by itself produce democracy. Most opposition movements in the past decade have been fractious assemblies of diverse interest groups that rise up hastily before elections and dissolve immediately after. The one real exception may be the Movement for Democratic Change, a united front of trade unions and civil society groups that has become a powerful and permanent fixture on Zimbabwe's political landscape.

There is little, meanwhile, to prevent ruling parties from marshalling national security forces for party interests, dominating state media, distorting electoral commissions or bullying parliaments and judiciaries.

'Despite the introduction of multiparty competition, African electoral democracies are still characterised by high degrees of power concentration, evident in strong executive presidents, weak checks and balances, and one-party dominance,' said Oda van Cranenburgh, African politics lecturer at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

In the most extreme cases, such as the Zimbabwe National African Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) in Zimbabwe since 2000, threatened regimes resort to violent intimidation of opposition leaders and supporters,

arrests and ballot stuffing. But elections can be manipulated in less overt ways, especially through complex, ever-changing registration requirements.

Some incumbent parties are reluctant to reform electoral systems that work in their favour — as the ANC did in 2003, rejecting proposed amendments to the proportional representation system recommended by an electoral task team. Conversely,

they can also exert enormous influence on the demarcation of constituencies and the relative balance between rural and urban voting areas. Ahead of the parliamentary elections tentatively scheduled for March 2005, Zanu-PF has begun resettling city residents on peri-urban commercial farmland in an attempt to erode the MDC's urban base. Those who take the bait face one condition: They must vote for the ruling party or face repercussions.

The lines between where a ruling party ends and a state begins are smudged. In South Africa, for example, there was enormous controversy in January 2004 over whether to broadcast the launch of the ANC's election manifesto live on state television and radio.

Ruling parties also depend heavily on the charisma and 'struggle credentials' of their leader. Loyalty to liberation heroes runs deep. Ethnic divisions too remain entrenched and powerful determinants of voting patterns.

Former liberation movements 'have very strong party structures,' Kabemba said. 'They galvanise these structures like a machine at election time, to keep the rulers ruling.'

Opposition parties, meanwhile, begin with a raft of disadvantages. Many are



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created around the singular ambitions of individuals. Fractious and diverse, they often pose more competition for each other than the ruling party.

Before Zambia's 2001 election, concerted efforts to bring splintered opposition parties into a coalition to challenge the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) collapsed when they failed to choose a leader acceptable to all. The cleavages in the opposition handed the MMD victory with just 29% of the vote.

'In both Botswana and Malawi, the ruling parties will win this year through sheer weakness of the opposition that is disorganised, not united and seriously disadvantaged in resources,' said Professor Mayuyuka Kaunda, senior research fellow at the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis in Gaborone.

'Electoral districts concentrate on a combination of personality and ethnicity; not on issues. In Botswana, there are no solid issues for the opposition to fight over. In Malawi, there are at least six guys scrambling to be the president. In the end, if they get enough votes, they are hoping to join with the government and eat with it.

They are not principled, but search for which path will get them a Mercedes the quickest.'

Lack of resources and broad-based party structures are another problem. 'Part of the story is that electoral districts in Africa, like everywhere else, make voting decisions based on information,' said Professor Bob Mattes of the University of Cape Town. 'Parties fail to use parliament to mount five-year election campaigns, they just conduct short campaigns. And as they struggle to get onto television, the public simply knows more about the ruling party than the opposition. Many disapprove of the ruling party, but because the image of the opposition is so poor, they see no alternative.'

Often, opposition parties lack serious,

coherent alternative policies and principled, long-term strategies. 'The image of opposition parties in Africa has been severely dented by the apparent readiness to use arms to deal with post-colonial dictatorships,' said Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the MDC in Zimbabwe. 'The results have often been chaotic and unpredictable.'

Incumbents, however, are not invincible. The longer they retain power, the more vulnerable they become. At some point, popular disillusionment swells. In the December 2002 elections in Kenya, the one-month-old National Rainbow Coalition succeeded in toppling the Kenya African National Union, which had ruled since 1963. The 1992 and 1997 elections were widely regarded as stolen by KANU, and in 2002 the people overwhelmingly rejected them and chose the opposition and its anti-corruption, reformist ticket. NARC's success was also partly attributed to the mobilisation of the people beyond the traditional, restricted media channels.

Organisation is critical. So is broad-based support among civil society. The MDC, importantly, has both. Rising from the trade unions and bolstered by a range of grass-roots movements, it was able to tap those structures to build a national party network.

Ultimately, strengthening pluralism in Africa will probably hinge on a higher sense of civic responsibility. Until parties — ruling or opposition — emerge from under the strong influence of individuals' self-interest, political competition may offer little more to voters than the one-party politics of the past.

'In Malawi, politicians use the election process to get jobs,' Kaunda said. 'Many have no other viable means to economic income if they are not in politics. In poor societies there are so few opportunities, people are attracted to any opportunity promising quick returns. Sadly, politics is one of them.' — **Steven Grudz and Michael van Winden**



Zimbabwe's MDC

## BRIEFLY

**PAP elects a Mama:** Thirteen years after African heads of state first floated the dream of a parliament spanning the continent, 202 MPs from 41 of Africa's 53 countries inaugurated the Pan African Parliament of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in mid-March 2004. The first president of the PAP is veteran women's rights campaigner and Tanzanian politician Gertrude Mongella, known affectionately as 'Mama Beijing' for her role as chair of the UN World Convention on Women in the Chinese capital in 1995. She has four vice presidents, representing Africa's geographical regions. The PAP has no legislative powers. Its main objective is to protect human rights and foster the consolidation of democratic institutions in Africa. The race is on between Egypt and South Africa to permanently house the parliament. A final decision is expected at the AU summit in July in Ethiopia.

**Congo coup crushed:** The Democratic Republic of Congo foiled an attempted *coup d'état* in late March 2004. Simultaneous attacks on military installations and media buildings in Kinshasa by a group characterised as former guards of the late dictator Mobutu Sese Seko were quickly quelled. The rebels apparently entered from the capital of Republic of Congo, Brazzaville, across the river. Mobutu's former guards were excluded from intricate power-sharing arrangements that ended one of Africa's bloodiest conflicts in 2003. The DRC government vowed that this 'isolated incident' would not derail planned elections in June 2005.

**Rwanda repeated?** While the world watches, the Darfur region in western Sudan is experiencing a humanitarian disaster that some are likening to the Rwandan genocide exactly a decade ago. Arab Muslim militia, allegedly operating with the support of the Sudanese government in Khartoum, are carrying out organised attacks on the mostly black Sudanese from the Fur, Masaalit, and Zaghawa ethnic groups — the civilian kin of the rebel Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army. The humanitarian organisation Human Rights Watch estimates that nearly 1 million people have been displaced in the last year, including 800,000 internally. Another 110,000 Sudanese have fled to Chad. Government militias, the organisation reports, routinely rape, torture and kill members of the ethnic groups, pillage livestock and destroy farms and water sources.

# While All Around They Die

Project provides drugs to poor infected with HIV in model for wider approach to treatment

ON THE impassable dirt lanes that cut through her township outside Maputo, Mozambique's capital, very few people know that Sharmila is HIV-positive. She hopes to keep it that way — and even though she lives in the conditions that accelerate the more graphic, tell-tale manifestations of full-blown AIDS, she just might be able to.

Sharmila is one of 28.2 million sub-Saharan Africans living with the virus that causes AIDS. Most, like her, live in acute poverty, where malnutrition and social disintegration enable the disease to thrive, especially among women and children, who are 2.5 times more likely to contract HIV than men, according to UNAIDS. For Africa's poorest and most vulnerable, the countdown from infection to death can be woefully short.

But Sharmila, whose husband died of AIDS-related illnesses more than two years ago, shows no signs of living with the deadly virus. Her smile is as vibrant as her body is strong. The reason is that, unlike the overwhelming majority of infected Africans, she gets free and regular treatment through the Italian-based charity Sant'Egidio.

Roughly 15 years after the world was introduced to the life-prolonging anti-retroviral therapy, it is estimated that fewer than 75,000 Africans have access to such medicines. While governments locked horns with Western pharmaceuticals over drug prices or dithered over the logistics of broad-based treatment plans, Sant'Egidio and a few other international relief organisations are proving that treating Africa's HIV-positive poor is both

possible and affordable.

'The lack of access to lifesaving HIV treatment in the regions where they are needed most is a scandal, and redressing that lack is one of the great moral causes of our time,' said Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, during a recent online dialogue through the International AIDS Economic Network. More than 700,000 children — 14% of all new infections — became HIV-positive in 2003.

Three years after clubbing Big Pharma in a watershed case to cut the prices of name-brand anti-retroviral treatment, the South African government took its first tentative steps toward rolling out those drugs. At the beginning of April, 27 sites around the country had been accredited to provide the drugs. Pretoria has a lot of catching up to do.

The Sant'Egidio initiative, now two years old in Mozambique, is one of a few that have mushroomed in various parts of Africa, marking a change in thinking and tactics about fighting the devastation left by HIV/AIDS.

**'97% of children born from the HIV-positive women in the programme have tested negative for the virus'**

For most of Africa, the main message has always been prevention: abstinence, fidelity and use of condom. But this never fully

achieved the required results. Infections have risen steadily over the years, especially among women. Although more than half of all worldwide infections occur in sub-Saharan Africa, not 1 in 30 HIV-positive people in that

region has access to anti-retroviral treatment.

To reverse that trend, Sant'Egidio has made generic antiretroviral treatment freely available to the poorest in a project initiated in the townships

around Maputo and beyond. A church lay association, the organisation depends on private, public and individual sponsors for funding. The UniCredito Italiano group of banks has

been its main sponsor thus far. The directors and many of the professional and specialised employees volunteer their services.

Through the organisation's Drug Resource Enhancement against Aids and Malnutrition (Dream) project, the most affected population group — women — have access to free drugs and first-class support at hi-tech laboratories. HIV-positive pregnant women are given generic three-drug therapy, now combined in a single dose, from the 25<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy, instead of the single-dose nevirapine treatment given during labour in most of Africa. The Sant'Egidio results so far have been outstanding: 97% of children born from the HIV-positive women in the programme have tested negative for the virus.

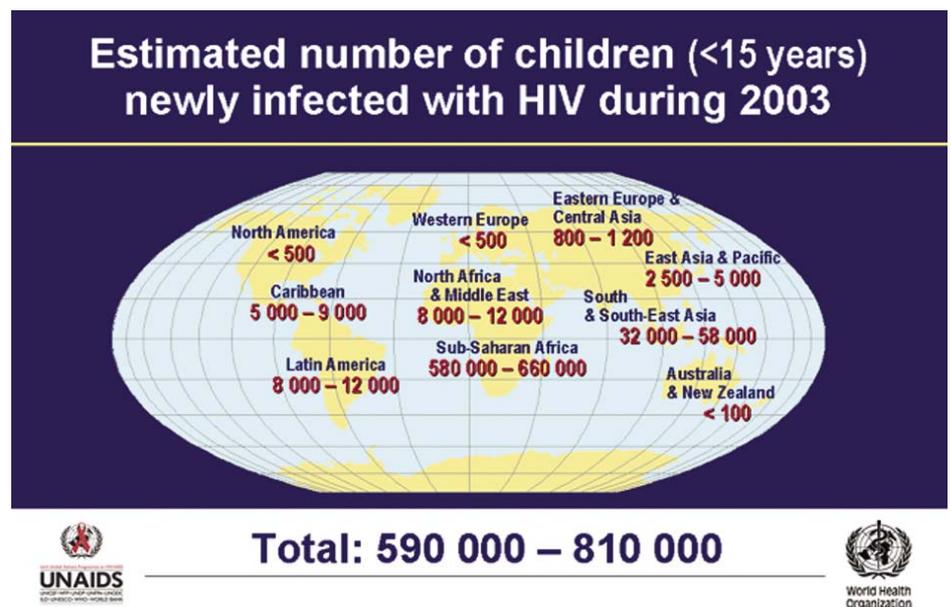
The provision of the drugs, said Mario Marazziti, spokesman for Sant'Egidio, has been a critical factor in developing more effective overall strategies for fighting the epidemic. 'Therapy is making prevention more effective because people can find out their status and know that therapy is available,' he said.

The Dream project is housed within existing public hospitals and maternity wards, reflecting its partnership with government. Of the 8,000 Mozambicans getting assistance through the project, more than 1,400 are on the generic three-drug therapy. These are people whose viral loads are extremely high and are in need of immediate intervention. Once they go on the full treatment, they never come off. The others receive assistance ranging from home care and medication for opportunistic infections to food parcels to meet nutritional needs.

The project has 13 centres and three laboratories in Mozambique. Sant'Egidio has just opened another facility in Malawi and has plans to expand into Angola, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, South Africa and Swaziland by next year. Its emphasis on women is driven by a key concern: Within six years, if nothing changes, Africa will have between 20 million and 40 million AIDS orphans, according to the UN Children's Fund and the US Agency for International Development.

Free assistance, however, does not come cheap for the Dream project. It costs the project \$800 a year to give full therapy to one person. Out of that \$300 is for medication, \$320 for the tests and the rest for other miscellaneous costs. To lower costs Sant'Egidio is engaging big pharmaceuticals such as GlaxoSmithKline, Merck and Boehringer Ingelheim to get better deals on drugs and test kits.

Most of what is being offered through the project is what better-off countries have yet to fully introduce. Part of the problem with anti-retroviral therapy is that once a person gets on it, he or she should never get off. Doing so risks building up immunities to the drugs. An open-ended treatment programme done on a massive scale, however, is prohibitively costly — or so governments have argued. The South African government hopes to establish



53 stations in the first phase of its roll-out programme with an initial budget of less than \$500,000. Health officials still don't know how much it will cost per person or which companies will supply the drugs.

But critics raise a question of priorities. If South African can spend close to \$1 billion on arms, they ask, surely cost is not the primary obstacle to tackling the AIDS epidemic. During the past four years, Médecins Sans Frontières has been running a number of HIV/AIDS projects in various parts of South Africa. The humanitarian organisation is also active in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Zimbabwe. By the end of 2002, the group was dispensing anti-retrovirals to 50,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A critical element of effective anti-retroviral programmes, Marazziti said, is proper infrastructure. 'We are working with the World Health Organisation to raise an alarm that no therapy programme should be started without adhering to excellent standards. You need the correct approach, otherwise Africa will disappear,' he said.

It is also highly important, he said, to target specific groups, such as doctors,

nurses and teachers, who work in vital sectors of the social and economic spheres. In South Africa, for example, teachers have been mentioned as one of the professional groups most affected by the epidemic.

'Contexts and needs vary widely, but the core elements are always the same,' Piot said. 'Comprehensive efforts, which simultaneously extend HIV prevention, deliver treatment and care and mitigate the impacts of the epidemic. Above all, what is needed is a concerted attack on HIV-related stigma, which is the pre-condition for ensuring people living with HIV cannot only exercise their basic human rights, but can also take their rightful place at the core of society's efforts against the epidemic.'

As she threads her way through the lanes and footpaths of her township, Sharmila's feet kick up little puffs of dust with each step. In her arms rides a little girl, three-year-old Anita. Had Sant'Egidio come a year earlier, Sharmila knows, her daughter might have been spared the virus. All she can hope for now is that the organisation stays long enough to give them a shot at sharing a life together. — **Luleka Manguku**

# Icibemba, Easy(er) English: New Approach in the Classroom

More and more African countries embrace early mother-tongue instruction as foundational

LUNGILE Mlaba stares quietly into her lap when her father speaks about her future. 'I am no good in English and I have got no good job,' he said. 'Lungile will go to university and be a lawyer.'

An unskilled labourer, as haggard in the face as in the clothes, Skhonzi Mlaba has spent a lifetime traversing the outer edge of the formal economy, warding off hunger with serial odd jobs — gardening, painting, sweeping. He lives in a shack on the industrial eastern fringes of Johannesburg, but he has always managed to send his only daughter to formerly all-white schools in the leafy suburbs closer to town. If Lungile masters English, he has always passionately assumed, she will go to university and pave their way out of the squatter camps.

Ironically, a father's selfless ambition may be a daughter's undoing. Eight years into her school career, Lungile can read only haltingly in English. She struggles to communicate and comprehend in it. Her grades, probably too poor to pass scrutiny by a college admissions board, reflect poor critical thinking skills.

'English is hard,' she demures with a whisper of shame. 'I cannot ask anyone for help because at my home people like to speak Zulu too much.' Switching to a township school where her peers study in the languages of their parents isn't an option for Lungile. Having studied only in English, she is illiterate in Zulu.

Lungile's plight is all too common. Millions of African children go through school systems that do not provide instruction in the languages they speak at home — a crucial factor, education specialists increasingly recognise,



*As parents send their children to schools where they study only in English, there are more children who are illiterate in their mother tongues.*  
Photo: Southphoto

contributing to Africa's persistently high rates of illiteracy and resulting in people entering the workforce with poor cognitive skills.

Unesco and the World Bank have been stressing for decades that teaching children in their mother tongue lays the ground for the introduction of a second language as a medium of instruction. In the first decades after independence, however, most African countries continued to use the language of their former colonial masters as the medium of instruction.

Now that's starting to change. Zambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana have all started to incorporate mother-tongue instruction in the early years of schooling. Zambian education

officials were so encouraged by increases in literacy among students in pilot projects that the government has now adopted mother-tongue instruction nationwide at the primary school level.

'African pupils who start their education in their mother tongue have a better chance of excelling at their studies,' said Geoffrey Tambulukani, a language and education expert from the University of Zambia. 'Setting a foundation with a home language creates a solid base to introduce new languages. When pupils learn a second language they need to have a good understanding of a first language.'

Six years ago, alarmed by persistently low literacy rates, Zambian education officials launched an experiment. Starting in a selected number of schools in the country's Northern Province, they introduced mother-tongue instruction to the youngest learners. In their first year, pupils were taught how to read and write in their home language, Icibemba. English was phased in over the next three years, becoming the sole medium of instruction from Grade 4.

Two years later, an evaluation of pupils from 800 schools who were taught in their home languages found that close to 60% of children entering Grade 2 were proficient at their appropriate reading and writing level — a significant departure from the trend 10 years earlier, when 70% of pupils entering high school were illiterate, according to government studies.

Overall, officials found, the Grade 1 class of 1998, now in Grade 7, display increased cognitive skills and are performing better across the range of their studies than previous classes

who did not have early instruction in Ibibemba.

‘Our motto in Zambia is: If you teach a child to first ride a Zambian bicycle, that child will then learn how to ride an English bicycle faster and better,’ Tambulukani said. ‘The pupils are more confident. They understand English better and are performing very well in their other subjects. Teachers also find it easier to work with the pupils. Overall it has contributed to good classroom ethos.’

The mother-tongue instruction strategy in Zambia and several other African countries is modelled after a programme started in South Africa three decades ago called the Molteno Project. In 1974, education experts from Rhodes University began pilot tests with Xhosa and Zulu in the nominally independent homelands of Ciskei and Transkei.

The apartheid government’s system of Bantu education — forcing African students to learn in Afrikaans — was resulting in low rates of matriculation. Building a foundation of learning in a language spoken at home, the researchers hoped, would ease the transition later to instruction in English.

‘It was found that many African pupils were failing Grade 12 because they did not understand English well,’ said Patience Lekganyane of the Molteno Project.

The Molteno approach proved adaptable. In South Africa’s Free State province, for example, 65% of Grade 2 pupils subjected to the Molteno approach demonstrated proficiency in English, compared to only 9% of students taught in English from Grade 1.

Now, 11,000 schools in South Africa use the Molteno approach to instruction. So do schools in Zambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda and Ghana. Molteno’s Breakthrough to Literacy programme has been translated to 39 languages. A curriculum for instruction in the marginalized Khoisan languages

!Xun and Xhwedam is still being developed.

But not everyone is convinced. Kathleen Heugh, director of the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa, a programme run through the University of Cape Town, questions whether three years of mother-tongue instruction is sufficient to establish a foundation for learning.

‘A six-year project on Nigeria from 1970 showed that children who had six years of mother-tongue medium plus good teaching of English did better in English and other subjects when compared with schools which used three years of mother tongue followed by a switch to English,’ Heugh said, citing a study by the Nigerian government.

Clinton Robinson, an education and development consultant from the UK,

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**‘If you teach a child to first ride a Zambian bicycle, that child will then learn how to ride an English bicycle faster and better ’**

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sees other potential consequences. Children who learn in another language get the message, he argues, that if they want to succeed intellectually it won’t be by using their mother tongue.

Starting a basic education in mother-tongue and then switching to English, French or Portuguese when learning becomes progressively more difficult, Robinson contends, may make pupils feel that their mother-tongue is inferior.

Peter Mwaura, deputy director of the United Nations information centre in Nairobi, Kenya, notes that African languages are not codified or standardised. There is also a critical paucity of qualified teachers and teaching material in those languages. And then there is a question of what language to teach. Africa has more

than 1,000 distinctive dialects — 400 in Nigeria alone, spoken by 250 ethnic groups.

Namibia solved this problem through its Early Language and Literacy Project, which produces teaching material for lower primary classes in all of the country’s indigenous languages. The Namibia Teacher Development Projects, meanwhile, aims to increase the language proficiency skills of educators.

In many African countries, language instruction policies are 40 to 50 years old. There is a dire need, Tambulukani said, for curriculum reform, but the process is often costly and tedious. African governments, he said, should lobby for aid funding specifically earmarked for curriculum development.

Joanna Mogodiri, a curriculum developer at Molteno, said the project strives to ‘make sure that the curriculum we develop is relevant to different cultures and also that the teachers know how to use it. We go to schools to identify the problems that they may have in the classroom and see how it can be overcome.’

The push toward mother-tongue instruction will also require an evolution in the languages themselves.

‘Any language can be developed to the highest level,’ said Ron Madiba, a language expert at the University of South Africa. ‘English was not always where it is today. So why do we rule out the possibility of improving African languages? African languages are central to an African renaissance.’

But even if it is currently not possible to study nuclear physics or advanced mathematics in Zulu or Swahili, Tambulukani argued, the benefits of early instruction in African languages are too important to miss.

‘If literacy rates increase,’ he said, ‘it would be for the betterment of Africa and all its people. Africa will be able to solve Africa’s problems and be a formidable and equal partner to the West’. — **Peroshni Govender**

# Ghana and Civil Society Clash Over Allegations of Corruption

WITH a stroke of chutzpah or very bad timing, the government of Ghana has provoked a feud with civil society organisations just as Accra becomes the first to fall under the lens of the African Peer Review Mechanism.

In an attempt to purge the private voluntary sector of alleged graft, the government has ordered all non-governmental organisations to register with the Registrar General and submit annual reports and financial statements by the end of April 2004 or risk being black-listed.

'This is not a crackdown on NGOs,' said Kojo Amoakwe, chief director in the Ministry of Manpower, Development and Employment. 'We want an NGO sector which is credible, transparent and accountable, not one which squanders money it is given by overseas donors and the government. Now if an organisation does not provide the ministry with its annual reports, it will not be able to operate in Ghana.'

People in the sector are doubtful. 'Now the perception is that government wants to intimidate and manipulate NGOs and that government is trampling on their rights. There is a lot of unpleasantness,' said Charles Abbey of the Ghanaian Association of Private Voluntary Organisations in Development.

The battle between Ghana and its private organisations is important. Civil society has an integral role to play in ensuring the transparency and credibility of the peer review process. If the government's crackdown undermines civil society's ability to participate in the review process, an unfortunate precedent could be set.

NGOs specialising in everything from development to human rights, a fixture in Africa since the 1960s, have proliferated quickly since the early 1990s as more and more countries adopted

multiparty reforms. Despite the good that many do, they sometimes draw local ire for their ubiquitous 4x4s or, as many critics say, for deepening a culture of dependence.

Some 3,000 foreign and local NGOs operate in Ghana. The government alleges that many HIV/AIDS organisations, which were given funds by the Ghana AIDS Commission to run education and counselling programmes, either disappeared or spent the bulk of their money on administrative issues.

'Some used 80% of the money for administration and only 20% for the project they were to run,' Amoakwe said. 'This is what we don't want repeated.'

Sakyia Amoa, the director general of the Ghana Aids Commission, disputes this claim. 'This is an exaggeration and creates the wrong perception of HIV/AIDS organisations in Ghana,' he said. 'We are not just dishing out money.'

The AIDS Commission distributed money to 2,700 civil society movements. Last year, Amoa said, the spending patterns of 609 organisations in Ghana's southern region, which were the first to receive money in 2002, were scrutinised. The commission found that 17 had 'misapplied' the money, using most of the funds for operational expenses like salaries, office supplies and premises instead of intervention programmes. Those organisations were asked to return the funds, totalling roughly \$273,700. Eleven have done so.

Tension between the Ghanaian government and civil society has, in fact, been mounting over the past four years over the absence of a national policy to regulate the sector. At present nongovernmental organisations in Ghana operate as companies.

Kumi Naidoo, the secretary general of Civicus, an international alliance of 600

organisation in 110 countries, said it is imperative that there is a clear distinction between NGOs and businesses. There is a dire need, he argues, for a political framework in every country which would outline the role of NGOs and their relationship to government.

In 2000, civil society movements drafted a National Policy for Strategic Partnerships. It called for a national council for NGOs that would be able to evaluate, monitor and regulate the sector and even weed out corrupt organisations. Four years later, the government has neither responded nor instituted an NGO policy. 'Government is not going to let NGOs dictate to us,' Amoakwa explained. 'We are working on our own policy.'

Civil society movements can be the traditional voice of dissent and provide services that governments struggle to offer. But many governments, said Barney Afako of Justice Resources in Uganda, are very hostile to nongovernmental organisations.

In the early 1990s, as Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, the new government kicked almost all foreign groups out. Many are now back, but the relationship remains awkward. Zimbabwe's Private Voluntary Organisations Act gives the minister of public service, labour and social welfare powers over accounts, source of funding and other issues relating to NGOs.

'The perception that civil society is corrupt is a view held by governments around the world,' Naidoo said. 'But the reality is that NGOs which do not deliver perish. This is an important feature which governments fail to acknowledge. The simple fact is that NGOs are accountable to their donors and if they do not deliver the goods they will not be funded.' — **Peroshni Govender**