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The Villager
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Algorithms, bots and elections in Africa: how social media influences political choices

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Saied accused of taking Tunisia back towards one-man rule

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Has Harry Kane been given a dilemma by Antonio Conte's side?

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Two New Columns

We have introduced two new columns on **page 6** and **page 8** for Saturday editions only.

Sossusvlei Train Project Won't Destroy Environment - Kandume

■ **Justicia Shipena**

Businessman Laban Kandume says critics of his proposal to construct a motor and railway transport system in the Sossusvlei have nothing to do with the environment.

According to him, the talk on environmental damages is by people who don't want the project to go ahead as they are more interested in raking in profits.

"The issue on the project is going to destroy the environment is just talks of someone that does not want the project to go forth because they are more interested in raking in profits like they've been doing for the past 40-50 years," Kandume told The Villager on Monday.

Kandume claims that the critics come because they are worried about the money they will lose.

"Because of our population, it has nothing to do with the environment. These people don't care about the environment," he said.

He questioned what concessions and monopolies are being played in this matter.

"Why is it okay for other people to pitch their unsolicited ideas to the ministries than get a concession? How is that hand-picked? How many people don't have concessions?

People are complaining about a monopoly. What is a monopoly? People have over 70 lodges in Namibia, complaining about someone having a monopoly," he stressed.

Kandume said a man has been operating a helium balloon for the longest; however, he said he got back the tender after it lapsed.

"He has done so for over 30 years, and his 20 years lapsed as per the agreement. He got back the tender and won it again. Is that not also a monopoly?" questioned Kandume.

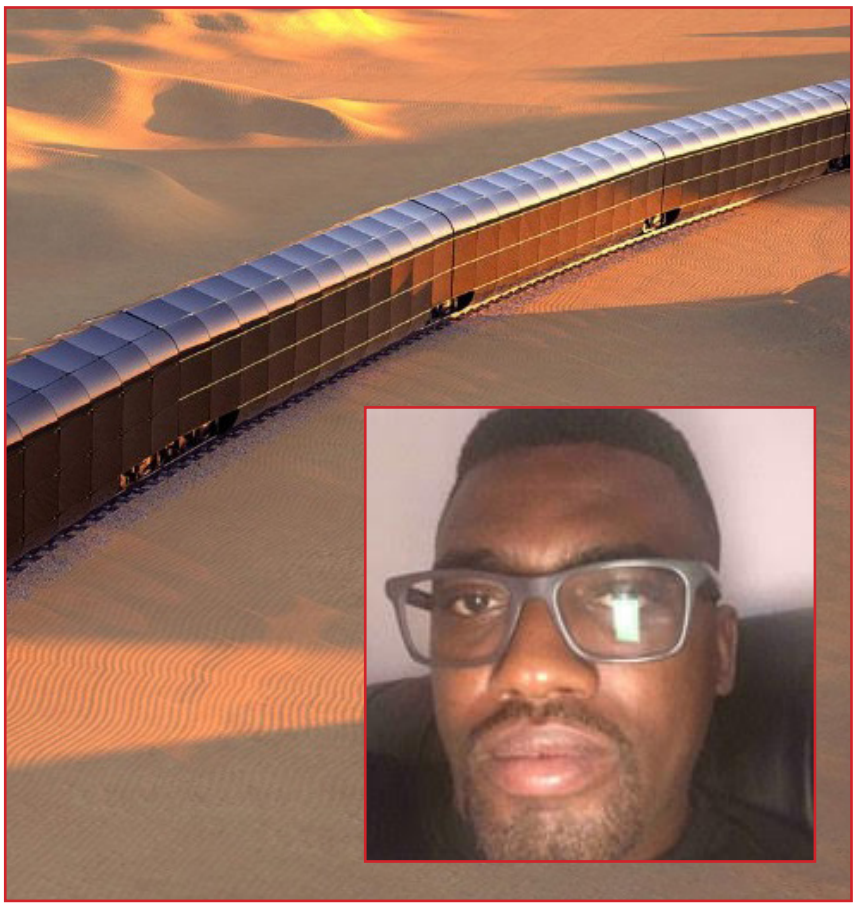
He further said Namibia Wild Resort (NWR) has access to all national parks.

"They are the only ones operating in those parks; is that not a monopoly?"

He also questioned who is to define the term monopoly in this matter. "Who is to define what a monopoly is? If the concession we currently have is a monopoly, then everyone with a concession is a monopoly," said Kandume.

Kandume added that some issues are taken because some people feel entitled to certain areas and sectors. "They feel like other players should not come into the industry. If you go to an area and people ask you, who are you, where are you coming from,

Continued on P2



Walvis Municipality Accused Of PWC Audit Report Secrecy

■ **Kelvin Chiringa**

The Walvis Bay municipality's continued refusal to make public a final PWC audit report into the missing N$24 million mass housing saga has been met with scorn and anger by some councillors.

High placed sources have disclosed that N$6 million was spent on the forensic audit, which found no malfeasance.

The source disclosed that a further N$1.5 million was allocated to lawyers Seena and Kopplinger Boltman, none of it approved by council.

This, according to the source, was done by the mayor and a general manager for finance, who later became the Walvis bay acting CEO.

Lawyer, Richard Metcalfe, confirmed the figures.

"It is on record that the forensic audit cost N$6 million, and another N$1 million-plus has been allocated for payment to Seena Labour Consultants and lawyers for Disciplinary proceedings," he said.

Continued on P2





Walvis Bay

The missing N$24 million of the mass urban servicing project resulted in the suspension of the chief executive officer, Muronga Haingura, general manager Agostino Victor, housing and properties manager Jack Manale, and property clerk Connie Summers.

But these have since been reinstated at the back of ongoing Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigations.

Former Walvis Bay councillor Knowledge Ipinge brought the matter before the ACC, who confiscated the officials' laptops.

Investigations carried out by Eagle FM have unearthed that the matter reached a boiling point last month with questions fired in the mayor's direction.

There are concerns about whether the urban and rural development minister, Erastus Uutoni, was informed about the investigations.

Councillors are said to be in the dark, which has caused outrage. At the same time, the council took a resolution to get legal services to investigate the PWC forensic audit report to take disciplinary steps against the implicated.

The council also seems to be in the dark on how much has been used in taxpayers' money to get such legal service.

The PWC report was presented on 21 July 2021, but there is no clarity on what steps have been taken ever since.

Councillors have thus demanded a progress report to see what action was taken.

There are concerns that since taxpayers' money was used to pay for the audit, action must be taken against those that have stood in the way of implementing its recommendations.

Mayor Trevino Forbes has been asked why, after almost nine months, suspended staff members were reinstated back to work on 1 September 2021 without any discussion on the outcome of the audit report.

Documents also show that until this moment, six months have now elapsed without feedback from the legal services appointed to look into the forensic audit report until this moment.

Concerns on possible conflict of interest have risen on the back of disclosure that some officials implicated in the forensic audit report were allowed to participate in the procurement process of the legal services to look into disciplinary action.

"Why is council not aware, informed or consulted of all the above? How much fairness and justice should such a secretive information process be? Is the municipal council still pursuing legal services? If yes, why are we not aware and informed about any progress?

"Is the municipal council not accountable to Walvis Bay residents and community members anymore, until when should communities wait to know about the most anticipated missing N$24 million, all implicated municipal staff members as per the PWC Audit report and recommendations, how have public funds been spent and how much more public funds will be spent," councillors have asked the mayor.

Sossusvlei

what are you doing in our land? As if I'm not Namibian, these people should clearly state their problem," stressed Kandume.

According to Kandume, in 2019, Namibia received about 45 000 vehicles at Sossusvlei when tourism started to pick up.

"We are anticipating receiving a large number of tourists. What if tourism in the next five years increases to 100 00 vehicles travelling to Sossusvlei? What will happen to the flora and what will happen to the environment if we continue with the status quo," he said.

Kandume added that there was a problem with the current management plan drafted, highlighting the current situation.

"Everyone is aware of the problem. Even the current operators claiming that their employees will lose their jobs or it will damage the environment have admitted that they have neglected the current situation because there is no control."

In her submission to Green Earth Environmental Consultants, Christelle du Toit-Oosthui¬zen, representing Taleni Africa Tourism, which owns Sossusvlei Lodge, said it is unethical to allow a monopoly regarding transportation into Sossusvlei.

Green Earth Environmental Consultants is conducting the EIA on behalf of Kandume.

She had also said that of the 48 lodges in Sossusvlei, at least four tour guides would lose their jobs because personalised guided tours by lodge-owned game-viewer vehicles would no longer be allowed.

She added that the project is not worth it as about 200 tour guides would be losing their jobs compared to nearly 30 staff members operating the project.

Oosthuizen had expressed that setting up generator hubs, ticketing offices, staff facilities, snack vendors, and bar areas would put tremendous pressure on the site itself and already sensitive water reserves.

Last year, environment and Tourism Pohamba Shifeta stripped NWR of its rights to carry out shuttle services into Sossusvlei.

This concession was then granted to Kandume's Skey Eye Hospitality and Tours.

Additionally, the ministry had denied any wrongdoing.

In a document dated 29 March, NWR objected to the proposed development.

RDP President Challenge Nears Trial Stage





■ **Eba Kandovazu**

Today, Deputy Judge President Hosea Angula assigned a full electoral court bench consisting of Judges Marlene Tomasi, Kobus Miller, and George Coleman to preside over a matter in which RDP member Kandy Nehova claims to be the rightful president of the party.

Nehova says the ECN erred when it declared incumbent president Mike Kavekotora as the party's leader.

Three years after his electoral court challenge, Nehova, who still regards himself as the RDP president, said that the matter has been dragging on and that the court is delaying the issue, which he termed as urgent.

"The ECN in 2019 accepted a list presumably of the RDP for the National Assembly and Presidential elections by somebody we do not even know. The party does not authorize him, but the ECN accepted that list. When we went to ECN to present the rightful representative, they told us they had a list and had already gazetted it. After discussing with them, they proposed that that matter be dealt with in court," he told The Villager.

Nehova's challenge started in 2019 when the party held its National Convention, which saw Kavekotora ascend to its presidency.

Nehova immediately challenged the outcome, saying that the convention failed to elect an RDP president because the electoral rules as adopted were not adhered to.

Through his lawyers at the time, he wrote a letter to Kavekotora saying, "You, running for the position of RDP president, only secured 49.5 per cent of the total votes cast. The fact cannot be challenged and was confirmed by a press release in June by Brunhilde Cornelius."

Brunhilde Cornelius was elected secretary-general at the said convention.

Kavekotora, on his part, said that the party stands its ground on his appointment as the leader.

Kavekotora says he was surprised that Nehova took the issue to court three months after he (Kavekotora) was declared the winner.

"Nehova initially accepted the results. I was surprised that he took the matter to court. He started behaving differently. It is, however, his constitutional right, and I am looking forward to putting this issue to an end and moving forward. The party has elected me, and the delegates nominated me.

"From the word go, Nehova's election campaign strategy has been marred by tribalism. He believes that because a Kwanyama started the party, it shouldn't be run by any other tribe. That has been stuck in his mind," Kavekotora told The Villager.

Nehova also said in his 2019 letter to Kavekotora that the election procedures and rules adopted by the convention are clear in that a candidate needs to secure 50+ one per cent of the total votes cast.

According to Nehova, the rules do not say that the candidate with the highest votes is declared the winner.

"As such, you are well aware that the convention failed to elect the RDP president," the lawyers said.

He has since contended that Kavekotora, taking responsibility as president with full knowledge of the outcome of the convention and rules, is illegal and unconstitutional, labelling it as fraudulent.

Katijua Refuses To Hand Over OTA Car



> "That payment was not paid into the Community Trust Fund. Instead, it was diverted to a company in which all the shares are owned by the Ovaherero Traditional Community headed by Katijua."

■ **Justicia Shipena**

Professor Mutijinde Katijua says the Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA) will not hand over the vehicle allocated to the authority until the court of law finalises the matter.

A faction of the Ovaherero community elected Katijua as the paramount chief, succeeding the late Vekuii Rikoro.

Another faction led by the OTA secretary Chief Vipuira Kapuoo has argued that Katijua's election was unprocedural and requested the urban development ministry to ask for the return of the vehicle.

The urban development ministry requested the OTA hand over the vehicle assigned to the authority.

"I have agreed to bring the vehicle after the court cases are resolved and that after that, your ministry shall do the necessary repair and replacement of dilapidated parts," said Katijua in a letter to the executive director of the urban and rural development ministry, Nghidinua Daniel.

According to Daniel, there has been information circulating on social media that the GRN 80742 vehicle of OTA was impounded.

"You confirmed that your division needed the vehicle for repair

after you had inspected the vehicle during the same week. You have also indicated that you received calls from sources that you refuse to disclose that have requested the ministry to impound the vehicle," he said.

Katijua said he asked if it would play a role in impounding the vehicle to be raised in the court papers in the ongoing case in the Windhoek High Court.

"Your response was a no," he said.

He indicated that he and the ministry agreed that he would bring the vehicle for repair after the court judgement.

He added that this court judgement would clarify the roles and responsibilities of either Chief Kapuuo or him in the affairs of OTA.

Katijua stressed that the vehicle would be under his care as the Paramount Chief of the Ovaherero people while the matter is sub judice.

"After that, you shall commit your division to replace bumper, tyres, all seats, fog lights, carry out minor panel beatings on the car and service the vehicle," he added.

He thus raised his suspicion that the ministry seems to have ulterior motives to bolster Chief Kapuuo's agenda to impose himself on the Ovaherero community.

"This is through his newly found "Ovaherero Traditional Authority Office of the Chairman" to which the ministry has taken side by participating in diverting OTA funds to a fraudulent account," he said.

Speaking to The Villager on Monday, Katijua said the process that installed him is the same one that has always been there.

"The traditional authority has a normal process in appointing and electing a paramount chief. That process is within the ministry to sort that out. It is not new, and it has been like that," he said.

He added that they had informed the ministry in writing of the process of designating him.

The OTA has an account with Standard Bank in which government deposits N$1 000 for the fuelling of the vehicle.

"One of our chiefs went to the ministry and instructed them to reallocate the funds to a new account. The question now is, who gave Kapuuo the authority to create a new account? Is it correct for the ministry to take that instruction from chief Kapuuo to change the old account to a new account," he said.

In a letter dated 28 March 2022, the MURD ED agreed to a request by Kapuuo to impound and park the vehicle.

In another letter on Thursday, the ministry had also said that it does not recognise Katijua.

"Kindly be informed that according to the ministry's records, the Ombara Otjitambi of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority passed on, and no official designation to replace him was done," it read.

COURT MATTER

In his answering affidavit in Katjiua's case against MURD, Kapuuo said that in 2021 the first payment of proceeds from fishing quotas to various traditional authorities was made by the government.

"That payment was not paid into the Community Trust Fund. Instead, it was diverted to a company in which all the shares are owned by the Ovaherero Traditional Community headed by Katijua," he said.

Kapuuo said the opening of the account in the name of "Ovaherero Traditional Authority Office of the Chairperson was to, as an interim arrangement, safely house the funds of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority.

"I did this upon the request of the government, who were aware of the dispute and had taken the stance of working with the chairman of the chief's council meeting, which is me. That is the government's decision, and no relief is sought against the government."

He added that government controls the money, and there is no money in the account he opened.

"The funds were paid into the bank account effectively controlled by Mutjinde Katjiua. Those funds have since been recalled by the government. That is not my doing. It is, therefore, a non-issue and certainly one which on the admissible facts provides no basis whatsoever for a final interdict," he expressed.

He also denied that the Senate meeting was correctly or adequately constituted.

"The purported attendance list poses more questions than it does answers and compared to the attendance list to the government gazette, found that 214 of the 354 attendees are not gazetted."

He also denied the allegations that Katijua was lawfully elected as the Paramount Chief.

"Apart from the fact that the meeting was not constituted in terms of Ovaherero customary law, traditions and protocols, no evidence whatsoever is furnished as to the manner in which the meeting was conducted. The applicants speak of an election contradicted by the purported resolution, which refers to the appointment."

Scabies Cases Escalate Countrywide





■ **Vetondouua Tjivikua**

Health minister Kalumbi Shangula says the ministry has recorded 3454 cases of human scabies countrywide from January 2022 to date.

This comes after 93 schools in the Ohangwena region reported an outbreak of scabies last week.

Shangula announced this on Monday at a press conference in Windhoek.

Shangula said the ministry conducted an assessment to determine the magnitude of this medical condition. It revealed that Kunene recorded a number of 1 418 cases Ohangwena 708, Otjozondjupa 402, Kavango West 375, Kavango East 204, Omusati 130, Oshana 104, Omaheke 46, Hardap 20, Oshikoto 20, Erongo 17, Karas 10.

He said at the same time, Khomas and Zambezi did not report any scabies cases.

According to Shangula, the most affected populations are communities living along the northern borders, school learners in the affected regions and migrant populations in urban areas where access to water and sanitation facilities is lacking or inadequate.

Shangula further urged the public to maintain good hygiene and sanitation, including hand washing.

"The public is urged to remain calm and comply with the preventive measures to contain and prevent further transmission of scabies," he said.

Human scabies is a parasitic infestation caused by a microscopic mite that burrows into the skin and lays eggs, eventually triggering a host immune response that leads to intense itching and rash.

"The current transmission of scabies has moved from households to schools with water supply challenges and where personal hygiene practices are less than adequate," he added.

According to Shangula, scabies is usually transmitted from person to person through close skin contact, for example living in the same residence with an infested individual.

The risk of transmission increases with the level of infestations, with the highest risk due to contact with individuals with crusted scabies, he said.

"As there is an asymptomatic infestation period, the transmission may occur before the initially infected person develops symptoms. The incubation period can be up to eight weeks" Shangula said.

He added that the treatment of scabies involves the elimination of the infestation by medication using several creams and lotions, Isolation of infested individuals from common sleeping areas, schools, work, disinfection of clothing and beddings, he said.

He added that further investigations are ongoing to establish the magnitude and cause of scabies transmission.

The MOHSS teams in the affected regions have activated public health measures in partnership with the education ministry.

"All detected cases are undergoing treatment in the health facilities. The public is urged to remain calm and comply with the preventive measures to contain and prevent further transmission of scabies," Shangula said.

Shangula also added that the state health facilities have been reporting cases of scabies in the past, particularly in the northern regions.

However, as of October 2021, he said several scabies cases had been reported throughout the country.

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2,5 Percent of Hyphen Royalty For Environment and Tourism

■ Nghiinomenwa Erastus

The government plans to direct 2,5 per cent of the 5 per cent royalty that will be paid by Hyphen in their green hydrogen production to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to protect flora and fauna.

According to the Minister of Mines and Energy, Tom Alweendo, during his address on Hydrogen Diplomacy-Resetting Global Energy Relations at the 8th Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue last week.

Alweendo was asked if Namibia could scale up the hydrogen project in a manner that benefits all stakeholders and does not conceal the perpetuation of environmentally harmful practices?

He indicated that from the Request For Proposal the government received from the preferred bidder (Hyphen), "we envision to use 2.5 percent of the 5 percent royalty on revenue to fund the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, which remains the custodian of our flora and fauna".

In November last year, the Namibian government gave up 20 percent of the Tsau //Khaeb National Park to Hyphen Hydrogen Energy to develop the country's first large-scale vertically integrated green hydrogen project in the park.

The project, worth an estimated US$9,4 billion, is estimated to produce 300 000 tons of green hydrogen per year for regional and global markets, either as pure green hydrogen or in derivative form (green ammonia).

However, there are environmental concerns, given the magnitude of the project.

Alweendo assured that the country is cognisant of the environment given its environmental stance.

Namibia's protected area system is one of the most comprehensive globally (covering over 42 percent of Namibia's landmass and 12,000 km2.

With the declaration of Dorob National Park in 2010, Namibia became the first and only country to have its entire coastline (1,500km) under protection via a network of four National Parks.

Alweendo indicated that the country's Nature Conservation Act empowers the Minister [Section 17(2)(k)] to establish a renewable electricity source for the management of game parks, nature reserves and other protected areas or protection of the environment or the combating of climate change.

"We believe this shows how visionary the Namibian legislatures were back in 2017 already," he said.

Namibia has 824,000 square kilometres of space shared between 2,5 million people.

The country's existing annual electricity consumption is between 3,5 to 4 terawatt-hours.

According to Alweendo, the country's renewable energy resource (on average, Namibia has solar insolation of 2 200 kWh/m2/year with gross capacity factors above 30 percent at the same time, areas in Luderitz can experience wind speeds north of 12m/s with gross capacity factors that exceed 50 percent).

"We are strategically placed to become a sizable net exporter of clean energy while achieving full electrification within this decade," said the energy minister.

Given the abundance of renewable energy resources and limited carbon footprint, Namibia is uniquely positioned to decarbonise neighbouring states that heavily rely on carbon-based energy systems, according to Alweendo.

He said green hydrogen could provide the impetus that unlocks the ability to deploy renewables at a scale beyond local demand.

Alweendo said the green hydrogen programme could be leveraged to reduce the overall cost of power in Namibia and form a strong base for industrialisation.

Moreover, create jobs and becomes a sustainable source of idiosyncratic wealth, which the country can use to capitalise on the country's sovereign wealth fund.

The energy ministry also indicated that good renewable energy resources are more widespread than hydrocarbons and fossil-based fuel resources.

As a result, the broader distribution could lead to a lesser concentration of potential sources of cheap fuel supply.

According to Alweendo and the team, the broader distribution has the probability of limiting energy-based conflict and geopolitical tension.

Similarly, with international collaboration, the emerging hydrogen market has the potential to be inclusive and decentralised.

He indicated that good market visibility from strategic off-takers such as the EU and Germany would be essential to kick-start and define the market.

Namibia has just signed a joint declaration to intensify collaboration with the BMWK, which includes symbiotic discussions on greater clarity on off-take.

Alweendo explained that collaboration is



crucial for deploying cheap capital, resulting in attractively priced molecules.

Given Namibia's structural limitations in terms of the size of the economy, the demand for green molecules provides Namibia with a distinctive opportunity to deploy assets many times the size of its national energy needs.

This resulted in significant economies of scale that can be tapped for local, regional and international benefit.

The country plans and aspires to utilise the opportunity to deploy large scale renewable assets to produce molecules at competitive prices.

At the same time, we plan to use these significant scale assets to use some capacity to supply local utilities with competitive dispatchable power.

"We believe that with the right partnerships and technology, Namibia could unlock a strong base of cheap renewable energy that can attract energy-intensive industries to locate their regional hubs in our country," explained Alweendo.

Namibia is an energy importer seeking an economically sound and viable pathway to achieve energy independence and export renewable energy to regional and global neighbours.

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Expected Harvest Good, But Not For Potatoes And Onions

■ Nghiinomenwa Erastus

According to the latest expected harvest figures for 18 special controlled agri-products as revised last week, the border will be fully closed for nine products and wide open for only four products.

The Namibia Agronomic Board notice released last week revealed.

The notice shows that for April 2022, Namibian farmers will harvest adequately to supply the local market with beetroot, butternuts, carrots, English cucumber, green pepper, pumpkin, round/jam tomatoes, watermelon, and sweetcorn.

However, the expected harvest figures also show that the local producers will not adequately produce enough washed potatoes, onions, gem squash, and sweet melon.

By 22 April, the country will have had a shortage of 792 tonnes of onions, as it is only expected to harvest 179 tonnes by then.

As for potatoes, the country needs 3 467 tones for April. However, production forecasts are showing that the country's producers will only harvest 1 471 tones for marketing in the formal market, the NAB report shows.

The country has struggled to increase its potato output and value addition in washing potatoes.

The status quo for onions is that the country's producers can supply adequately. For exports, however, the harvest is mainly done at a particular time of the year. The country does not have an onion storage facility.

The board, however, indicated that despite the border opening for the four agri-producers, it reminded that the bulk buyers (wholesalers, catering companies and importing agents) need to buy from local producers first then import the rest.

This, by implementing the Market Share Promotion rule of ensuring that a minimum of 47 per cent is procured from the farmers who have before crossing the border."

Out of the 18 controlled special agri-products, the remaining five will be supplied by local producers and the outside producers on a pro-rata basis.

These are cabbages, which only 30 per cent of importation of all types, size groups and container sizes, fresh or chilled, should be imported while local producers can supply the rest.

For coloured pepper, wholesalers and import agents can import all types, size groups and container sizes fresh, chilled, whole, or cut coloured peppers but only for the first two weeks of April.

In terms of sweet potatoes, the expected harvest data for April 2022 shows that local producers will be able to supply 80 per cent of the local market. As a result, only 20 per cent importation of all types, size groups will be allowed.

As for lettuce (iceberg) and spinach, the NAB assessment revealed that only 30 per cent of the two should be bought outside (of all types, size groups, and container sizes, fresh, chilled) for April.

The rest should be procured from lettuce and spinach producers in the country.

NAB monitors the production of the special controlled products. It involves a close border period when sufficient local output is expected and implemented according to the market share promotion scheme.

The current notice of border closure and opening is effective from 01 to 30 April 2022, in line with the Agronomic Industry Act (Act 20 of 1992) and the Namibian Horticulture Market Share Promotion Scheme rules and regulations.

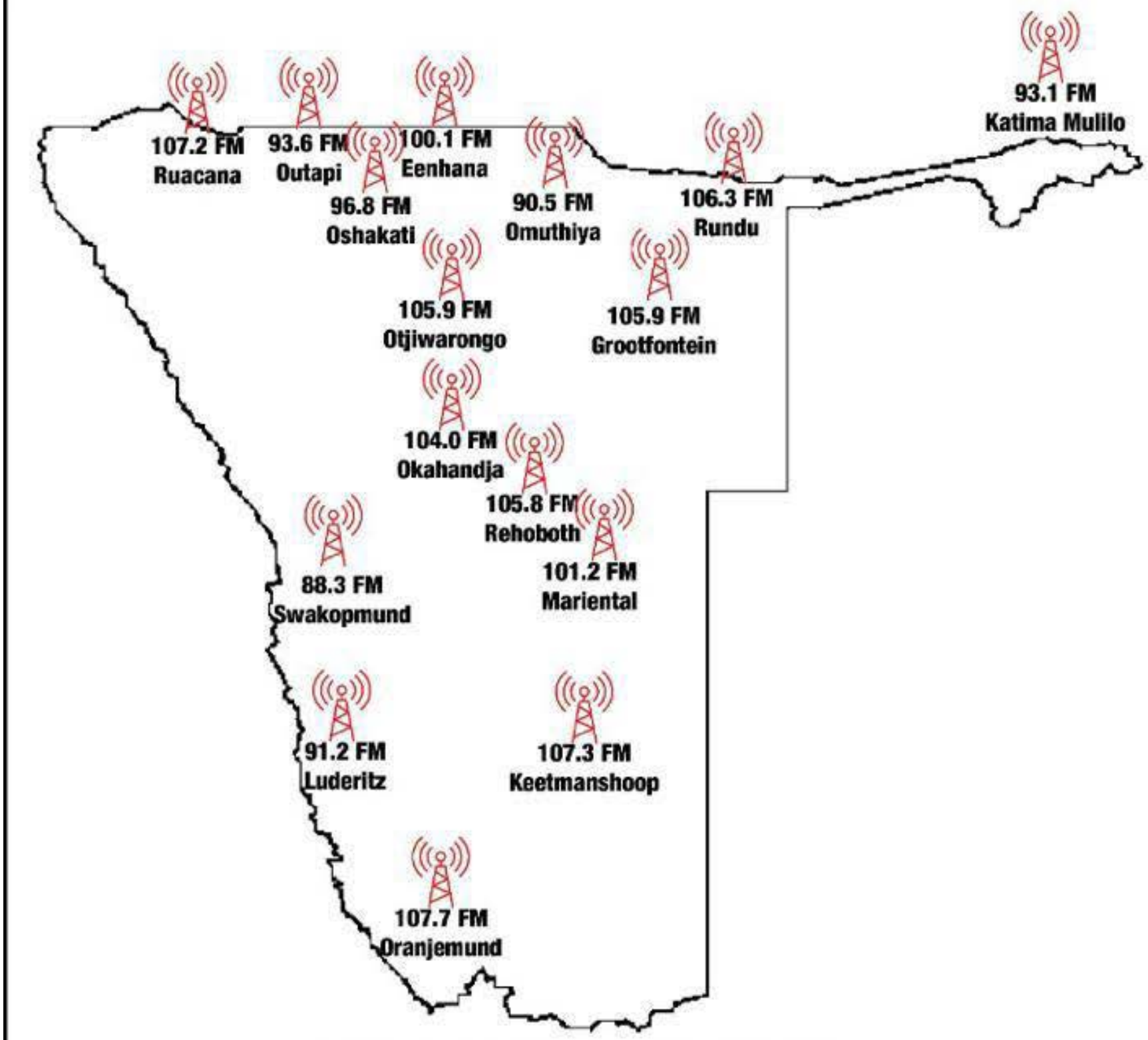
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"As for potatoes, the country needs 3 467 tones for April. However, production forecasts are showing that the country's producers will only harvest 1 471 tones."



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Morbius is one long quick time event about battling bad habits

■ Charles Pulliam-Moore

One of the reasons Sony keeps making movies like Morbius — another Venom-like feature about a classic Spider-Man villain that doesn't actually involve Spider-Man at all — is that, over in Marvel's comics, many have led interesting lives outside of the time they've spent battling the quippiest Avenger. There is more to Michael Morbius than his run-ins with Peter Parker, and director Daniel Espinosa obviously wanted his new film to illustrate that fact. Unfortunately, most everything about Morbius, from its plot and pacing to its lead actors' performances, feels ill-conceived. And the movie as a whole calls into question Sony's grand project of building an entire cinematic universe on Spider-Man's back.

Morbius dives headfirst into the already-in-progress origin story of its titular ghoul, Michael Morbius (Jared Leto), a brilliant scientist and lifelong sufferer of a chronic blood disorder. Though Morbius has found success and fame, thanks to his creation of a synthetic blood-like substance that revolutionized medicine, he would give all of it up in a heartbeat if it meant being able to restore both his own health and that of his extravagantly wealthy childhood friend, Lucien (Matt Smith), who suffers from the same blood disorder.

Morbius' deep affection for Lucien — who begrudgingly accepts being called "Milo" after Morbius saves his life in a flashback to their youth — is why the film opens on him journeying to Costa Rica in search of a remote cave filled with vampire bats. After years of researching in vain to find a cure for their disease, Morbius strongly believes that by isolating certain elements of vampire DNA and mixing it with his own, he might be able to combat the degenerative effects of his condition. Morbius doesn't really try to detail how bat DNA is supposed to factor into Morbius' condition or explain how he manages to transport hundreds of bats back to his laboratory after willingly walking into a swarm of them in the dramatic scene from the movie's trailers. All Morbius wants is for you to understand that, batshit as it seems, Morbius' idea works — at first, just with animal test subjects, but soon, with him as well.

One could be forgiven for not immediately noticing it, but a surprising amount of Morbius' major beats are pulled from his early appearances in The Amazing Spider-Man during the early '70s. This is when the Comics Code Authority's ban on supernatural creatures first lifted, freeing Marvel up to create characters like a "living vampire." Like in the comics, Morbius' treatment and transformation take place on a boat while his colleague Martine Bancroft (Adria Arjona) and a group of hired soldiers watch over him, and everyone save for Martine ends up dead and drained of their blood after Morbius becomes a vampire. Unlike Marvel's early comics featuring Morbius, though, which tended to skew a bit more whimsical and focus on the fact that Spider-Man had six arms at the time, Morbius takes itself so seriously that it's just shy of laughable.

For a time, Morbius attempts to style itself as a horror about a mad scientist battling against the monster of his own making that lives inside him. As fantastic as his new bat-enhanced physiology is, it comes at the cost of a powerful hunger for blood that often plays like addiction. It makes Morbius realize that, through his self-experimentation, he's traded one kind of ailment for another. One of Morbius' few genuinely interesting ideas comes in the form of bags of blue synthetic blood that are always on hand in the scientist's lab and easy enough to find in any of the city's ambulances.

Because Morbius can feel how his bloodlust drives him to kill, he sates his hunger by guzzling heavy hits of



the cerulean liquid in scenes that feel cribbed from True Blood's old playbook — making fake blood look like the most delicious thing in the world. In another universe, Morbius would dig a bit deeper into what might have been an interesting premise: the eccentric founder of a synthetic blood company becomes a pseudo-vampire who also moonlights as a superhero. But in this universe, the movie opts for the road more traveled — one paved with flashy VFX, opaque character motivations, and a climactic action sequence that plays like an overlong quick time event.

Super science in pursuit of curing ailments gone wrong is not unique to Morbius the character. But what does feel distinct to Morbius as a movie is the degree to which it's willing to depict disabled people as frail, weak victims whose entire lives are defined in relation to the able-bodied. Whereas the Morbius of the comics is just straight-up a vampire whose power weakens when he's hungry or in direct sunlight, Morbius' version of the character becomes more feral, and his paraplegic symptoms come back with a vengeance. From the very first moment you see them on-screen, it is often difficult watching Leto and Smith affecting disabilities they do not have.

It is wholly unsurprising when Lucian / Milo is "revealed" to be Morbius' version of a big bad, and after a bit of slap-fighting with their new vampire powers, he and Morbius reach an emotional impasse because of their differing senses of right and wrong. Something else that's notable about Morbius is how the movie sort of sidelines Michael's canonical romance with Martine in favor of focusing on the friendship he shares with Lucian / Milo. More Robert Pattinson in The Batman than himself in WeCrashed, Leto consistently plays Morbius like a brooding recluse of few words, and Smith's Lucian / Milo shifts between simpering dandy and obtuse Doctor Who villain over the course of the movie. Nothing in particular about the two actors' performances sells you on the idea of them being friends. But there is something about the way the script wraps them up in each other's lives that smacks of the subtextual queerness often present in vampire narratives.

Perhaps what's most unfortunate about Morbius is how, despite not working at all as its own movie, you can see how many pieces of its story could readily lend themselves to much better projects — and not just features that would involve Jared Leto fighting Tom Holland. Inexplicable as the trails of colored smoke that follow Morbius around as he's flipping through the air, some of his smaller, more acrobatic fight scenes are pretty cool. (And Morbius actually does a much better job than the Venom movies of giving you the sense that it takes place in a larger world rather than a metropolitan bubble.)

The problem, at least in Morbius' case, is that it's entirely too aware of its existence within a cinematic universe of the Schrodinger variety — one that both does and does not exist. In the end, that awareness feels like it might be responsible for how Morbius closes out feeling both distinctly pleased with and ashamed for even daring to utter Spider-Man's box office-breaking name. The implication, of course, being that Sony's not through yet.

-The Verge



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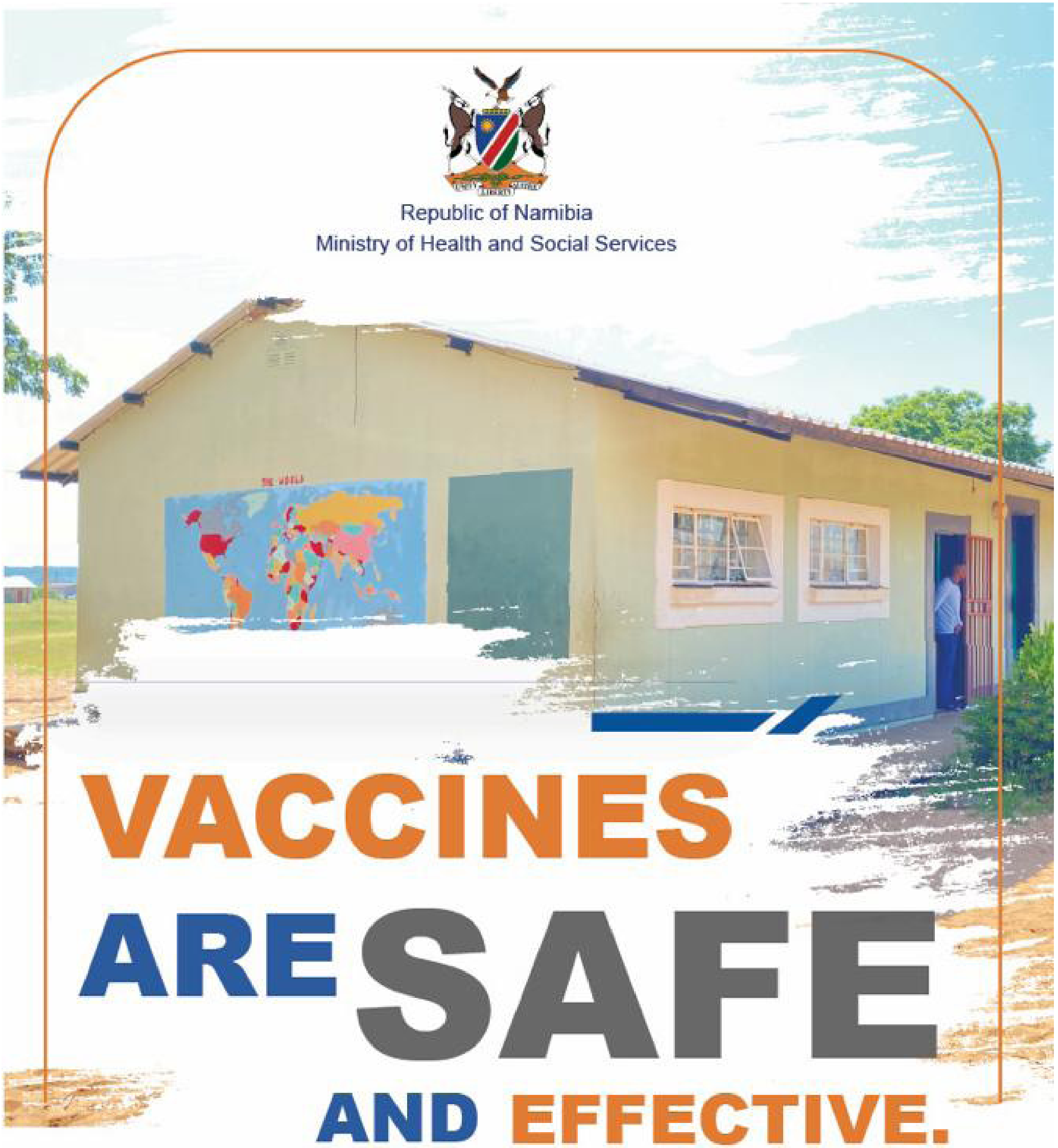
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Big Lips

Peya Mushelenga Joins the World's Top Educated

Today, let me share the list information minister Peya Mushelenga has joined as one of the world's most credentialed men of the letters.

145 Degrees - Professor VN Parthiban

Parthiban has 9 MBA degrees, 8 M.Com degrees, 8 ML degrees, 3 M.Sc degrees, and 12 M.Phil degrees.

30 Degrees - R.K Rai

Some people can't get enough of being a student, and R.K. Rai is one. Over his lifetime, this 65-year-old has earned more than 30 degrees, including a mind-boggling 22 MAs, 5 PhDs, and three D. Litts – all in widely divergent fields. Now retired from his work as a professor, Rai believes that lifelong learning is essential to a happy life, which may be why he plans to keep earning degrees even though he's retired from academics. He's currently working on a MA in astrology from Magadh University and plans to return to college as an administrator in the coming months.

30 Degrees - Michael Nicholson

Dr Nicholson holds the unofficial world record for the most earned college degrees, at 30 and counting. Most of his degrees are master's degrees, all of them are from fully accredited institutions (except maybe the first one), and none was earned online. Most of his degrees are from mid-level institutions of higher learning, and many are in various educational specialties.

19 Degrees - Ashoka J. Prasad

Indian professor Ashoka Prasad is a leader in the medical field in his country, helping advance paediatrics and neonatal care for Indian citizens and has taught at schools like Columbia, U Penn, Harvard, Yale, and Cambridge. While he may teach health-related topics to his students, he has degrees in a much more comprehensive range of studies, totalling 19 degrees. These degrees include an MA in anthropology from Cambridge and an MRC in psychiatry from the University of Edinburgh though he holds others in geography, history, mathematics, and aviation medicine. Prasad has since retired to his home in India, but he still writes and speaks on many psychiatry topics.

15 Degrees - Luciano Baietti

A retired school headmaster in Italy, Baietti has 15 bachelors or master's degrees from various universities across Italy and is getting ready to get his 16th.

14 Degrees – American Benjamin Bradley Bolger

11 Degrees Peya Mushelenga

He attained a BA in History and Political Studies at UNAM in 1995, a B Juris in 2011, an LLB (Honours) in 2014, and an LLM in 2017. In parallel, he studied at the Open University of Tanzania, where he obtained a BA in Economics in 2017 B Ed in 2019, and at UNISA, where he received a BA Honours and an MA in International Politics in 1997 and 2009, respectively, and a D Litt et Phil in 2015. He further studied at the Eastern and Southern Africa Management Institute (ESAMI), where he obtained the Master of Business Administration (MBA) in 2018 with a meritorious award of Best Performer for Namibia's class of 2018. In addition, he is an admitted Legal Practitioner (Attorney) of the High Court of Namibia. He further obtained the Master of Science (MSc) in Finance from the University of London in 2020. He completed his second PhD in Criminal Justice Law from the University of Western Cape in 2021.

7 Degrees - Michael Griffin

While he might not hold the insane amount of degrees that some others on this list do, Michael Griffin's educational history is still impressive. A physicist and aerospace engineer, Griffin was the chief administrator of NASA until 2009. His degrees, seven in all, undoubtedly helped him land that amazing job. He has a BA in physics, an MS and PhD in aerospace engineering, an MS in electrical engineering, an MS in physics, an MS in civil engineering and an MBA. Before being appointed chief of NASA, Griffin was also working towards finishing an MS in computer science at Johns Hopkins. In 2007, Time named Griffin one of their 100 "Most Influential People.

7 Degrees - Daniela Simidchieva

With an IQ of 200, Daniela Simidchieva is one of the smartest people in the world. She's also one of the well-educated. She holds five master's degrees and two bachelor's degrees in fields as diverse as English, economics, and electrical engineering. She managed to do all that learning while still being a mother to her three children, something any parent in school should find inspiring. Currently, Simidchieva works for Progressive Business Solutions as an expert on international programs and projects. Still, even she had a hard time finding a job in this economy with all of her degrees and expertise. (Various Sources)

Algorithms, bots and elections in Africa: how social media influences political choices



■ **Martin Ndlela**

The rise in the use of smartphones and an increased adoption of mobile internet in Africa are fundamentally altering the media ecology for election campaigns.

As mobile phones become commonplace, even in Africa's poorest countries, the uptake of social media has become ubiquitous. Applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and blogs form an integral part of today's political communication landscape in much of the continent.

These platforms are becoming a dominant factor in electoral processes, playing a tremendous role in the creation, dissemination and consumption of political content.

Their influence and embedded power over political content invites further scrutiny, which informed my research. Is the rise in social media uptake in the continent a game changer in political communications? And if it is, does social media influence political campaigns?

To answer these questions, I considered the interplay between elements in the infrastructure of social media and human agency.

The infrastructure refers to the architecture that makes up social media systems. Even though the infrastructure is not immediately visible, it plays a critical role in the (re) production and dissemination of information.

Human agency entails the choices human beings make when they interact with social media systems.

I found that there are three main ways that political campaigns are influenced via social media: through algorithms, bots and the people who use them.

The power of algorithms

Imbued in social media platforms, with the exception of WhatsApp, is a system of software, codes and algorithms that manage, interpret and disseminate large quantities of information across social media networks.

The power of the algorithm is in its ability to search, sort, rank, prioritise and recommend the content consumed by users. The system, therefore, influences the choices we make.

Algorithms watch your behaviour when you interact with certain content in the platform, make assumptions and predictions on your preferences, and then recommend similar content in your feed.

For instance, if you constantly interact with posts – by liking, replying or sharing – from certain individuals, you are likely to see more posts from them. If you have shown interest in watching videos from a political outfit, you are likely to get more videos from them.

Which items are promoted and why? We may never know why the algorithms are coded (by programmers) in such a way as to rank certain items, individuals or political parties higher. What we know is that these algorithms influence what people see or don't see.

They have the power to amplify and marginalise certain content and, like human gatekeepers in traditional mass media, determine what information users are exposed to.

For example, Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm determines what is shown on a user's Top News by displaying only a subset of stories by one's friends. These are derived from a set of factors, such as the type of content (links, videos or photos) and the frequency and types of interactions with these friends (like tags or comments).

Similarly, Twitter algorithms display ranked tweets. That is, first they rank them and then display what they think is most relevant to the user.

These algorithms are not neutral. They encode political choices, influencing the information seen by users. When a user opens his or her social media account, he or she will be met by algorithm-filtered and recommended content, based on prior activities and interactions on the platform. People are then likely to share visible information on non-algorithm-based applications like WhatsApp and Messenger, as well as in mainstream media.

Bots and deepfakes

Social bots can also be deployed to manipulate public opinion and influence votes. They mimic and potentially manipulate humans and their behaviour on social networks. They run automatically to produce messages, post online and interact with users through likes, comments and follows (fake accounts).

Even more worrisome is the rise of deepfakes. This involves the use of artificial intelligence to fabricate images and videos by replacing the face or voice of someone, usually a public figure, with someone else's in a way that makes the content look authentic.

The intention is often to mislead the audience and make them believe that the targeted public figure said something (often controversial or provocative).

As noted by Portland Communications, a strategic communications consultancy, in their report, How Africa Tweets, Twitter bots account for more than 20% of influencers in countries like Lesotho and Kenya.

One of the surprising findings in the report was the limited influence of politicians on the conversation.

Human element

African political parties are spending huge sums hiring consultancy companies with expertise in digital campaigning and even manipulation of social media content.

International consultancy firms like the now defunct Cambridge Analytica (CA) have been accused of attempting to influence digital campaigns in Africa and in other parts of the world. CA worked on several campaigns in Russia, the UK, USA and Kenya.

In Kenya, it emerged that President Uhuru Kenyatta had hired CA ahead of the 2013 elections. CA's activities sparked global outcry when it became known, culminating in its collapse.

It is evident that those with political power and money can easily hire automated systems, like bots, to influence the flow of political content across social media. They can also distort information.

The role of non-human actors should be worrying to anyone keen on democratic processes.

There are indications that social media algorithms and bots are slowly changing the dynamics of elections in Africa. This is seen in the number of political parties hiring a new breed of communicators, such as social media managers.

The interplay between media and politics is central to any understanding of political campaigns, given their role as conduits of political information, persuasion and discussion. Social media provides spaces for participation – but also for misinformation and disinformation.

Martin N Ndlela
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Nigeria's Lagos: Life with a disability in the African megacity



■ Viktorija Mickute and Sarah Kim

Around the world, city populations are soaring. By 2050, some 68 percent of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas, up from today's 55 percent. Just three countries are responsible for about one-third of this growth – China, India, and Nigeria. But as cities expand, a large proportion of society continues to be marginalised and excluded — people with disabilities.

Unlike any other marginalised group, anyone can become a member of the disability community at any point in their life. People can develop a physical disability because of an accident, illness, or simply, old age.

Of the more than one billion people who have some form of disability, 80 percent live in the developing world.

According to the United Nations, people with disabilities include those who have "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

Nigeria's Lagos, with its 15 million residents, is one of Africa's largest cities and is among the fastest growing in the world. Notoriously congested roads, chaotic traffic and widespread poverty makes Lagos a tough city to live in and navigate. But add a lack of access to public transport and getting around becomes even tougher for people with disabilities.

So what does it mean to live in Lagos, one of the world's megacities, with a disability?

Getting around Lagos – a snapshot

The average person in Lagos spends at least two hours stuck in traffic every day. With no train or subway system, commuters rely solely on motorised vehicles.

Public transport accounts for 98 percent of the traffic, according to Professor Gbadebo Odewumi, the dean of the school of transport at Lagos State University.

But it is disorganised, largely unreliable and highly inaccessible for people with disabilities.

There are 75,000 yellow unregulated privately owned minibuses, popularly called "danfos", in Lagos. These are 20th-century 14-seater Volkswagen buses with seats and backrests without padding and they run on fume-emitting engines. The boarding experience of passengers with disabilities largely comes down to the driver and conductor duo running the bus: they decide who they will take on board, who they will assist and who they will wait for.

Aiming to improve the formal transport sector, in 2008 the Lagos government entered the public transport business with Africa's first-ever Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, a bus service that runs frequently and is designed to transport a large number of people. The buses themselves are comfortable and have specially reserved seats for people with disabilities. However, there are only 474 of them and they only go on main highways.

The ramps for wheelchair users are often either non-functional or not used, according to people in Lagos with disabilities. Staff are frequently not trained to help disabled passengers board, while other riders are not always sensitive to the needs of people in wheelchairs. For example, seats earmarked for people with disabilities are taken by able-bodied passengers.

Lagos has other privately owned transportation services, such as motorbikes and tricycles, known as keke. They can be especially convenient for some people with disabilities, such as people with visual or hearing impairments, as they can be arranged for pick up and drop off. However, these are not that useful for wheelchair users, for example, since there is no place to store the chair or other medical devices.

The least affordable mode of transport is e-hailing (Bolt or Uber) and regular taxis. A 40km trip with Bolt or Uber costs about 5,000 naira or $12. Rideshare and cab options are not feasible for many people with disabilities, in particular, those who live under the poverty line, that is, living on less than $1 a day. Forty percent of Nigeria's population live in poverty. Nine out of 10 Nigerians with disabilities are estimated to live below the poverty line.

Plans for safer roads, accessible transport

Using the current public transport is a leap of faith for many people with disabilities.

However, the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority in 2018 released a new non-motorised transport policy (NMT) to reduce congestion, injuries and deaths on the roads, noise and air pollution. The policy says "mobility planning should focus on people, not vehicles" and aims to prioritise walking, cycling and public transport over the use of cars.

Pavements are non-existent in many places so pedestrians and vehicles share roads where drivers can drive dangerously, and even against traffic. By creating new and upgraded footpaths, the policy aims to reduce pedestrian accidents and deaths.

The NMT also includes people with disabilities with the plans to incorporate ramps, tactile pavements with textured ground surfaces to warn and guide visually impaired people and other features at public transport stations.

As part of modernising the city's transit system, the Lagos government is also building a light rail. The first two of the seven proposed lines are scheduled to become operational by the start of 2023. Lagos governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu has said it will be part of a wider system that will be "attractive, convenient, affordable, accessible and will reduce urban transportation challenges".

Initiatives such as the NMT and laws including the Lagos State Special Peoples' Law, which stipulates that public transport should be easily accessible for people with disabilities, and the federal Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, assist and protects people with disabilities. However, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of implementation. For instance, the NMT committee to implement changes was inaugurated only three years after the announcement of the policy and there is no set date for completion.

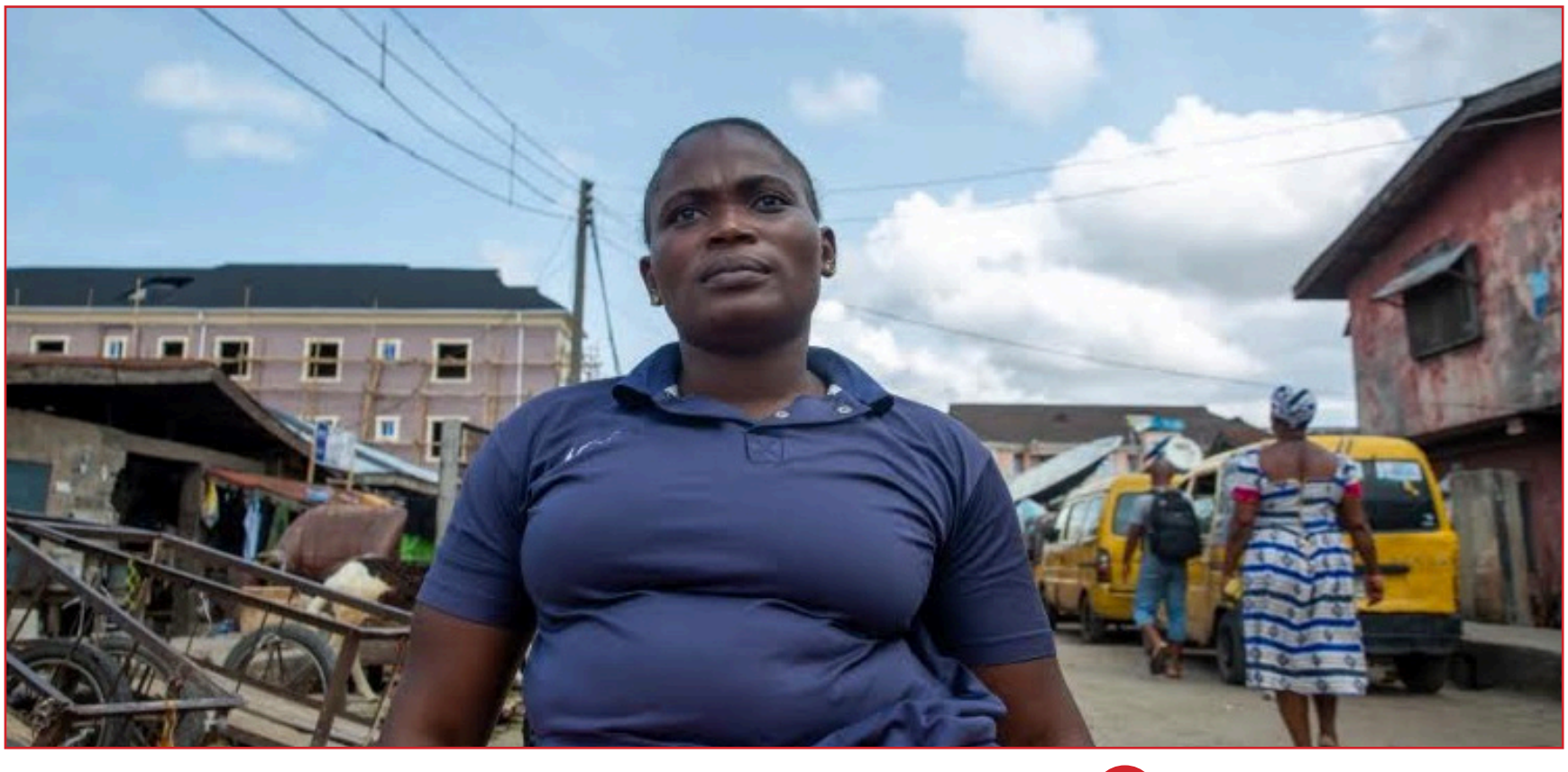
Inaccessible cities: Lagos

Making cities accessible for people of all abilities is the first step towards true equity and inclusion.

To make Lagos more accessible, the city needs a taxi service that can take people with disabilities from their houses to the nearest accessible bus station, while public transport should become more accessible in line with the Lagos State Special People's Law.

Without options to freely and independently move around the city, people with disabilities are forced to stay home and are invisible in Lagos' public life.

Stuck in a vicious cycle, people with disabilities lack access to education, healthcare, employment, housing and systems of social protection. They face stigma, discrimination and even violence.



For Kelechukwu Ogu, a blind journalist from Lagos, being able to move and walk around Lagos freely and safely is critical. Over the years, his foot has slipped into gutters on the street and the possibility of getting stuck – and being hit by a vehicle – fills him with anxiety. Once, when he was 10 years old, he fell waist-deep into an open drain. No one stopped to help him out.

"My interaction with open drainages and the fear of being knocked down by a bike or car has trained me to endure hunger and deprivation while waiting for a sibling or neighbour to help me make purchases," says Kelechukwu.

Learn more about life for people with disabilities in Lagos by joining disabled athlete Olajumoke Olajide as she navigates her city in "Inaccessible Cities," the latest interactive web experience by AJ Contrast, Al Jazeera Digital's media innovation studio.

To understand the state of accessibility in two other megacities, join Rebecca Lamorte, a former City Council candidate from New York City, United States, and Nidhi Goyal, a comedian and disability rights activist from Mumbai, India.

-Al Jazeera

Sri Lanka central bank governor submits resignation amid crisis

■ Tom Espiner

The governor of Sri Lanka's central bank says he has submitted his resignation as the country faces its worst economic crisis in decades.

Ajith Nivard Cabraal's announcement came after all of the country's cabinet ministers resigned.

Angry protestors have also been calling for the country's prime minister and president to step down.

A severe shortage of foreign currency has left the government unable to pay for essential imports, including fuel.

The island nation of some 22 million people is suffering from its most serious economic crisis since independence from the UK in 1948.

The central bank was due to make an interest rate decision on Tuesday.

A spokesperson for the central bank told the BBC on Monday afternoon that there were currently no plans to postpone the announcement.

Lakshini Fernando, of Asia Securities, said she expects the bank to raise its main interest rate by at least two percentage points as it tries to stabilise the Sri Lankan rupee.

The currency has lost more than 30% of its value against the US dollar since it was devalued last month.

While the market is likely to react positively to Mr Cabraal's resignation, "the key will be who takes over at this juncture," Ms Fernando told the BBC.

"We definitely need more clarity on policy for a stronger momentum," she said.

Demonstrators have been taking to the streets of the capital Colombo as homes and businesses have had their electricity cut for up to 13 hours at a time.

Sri Lankans are also dealing with shortages and soaring inflation, after the country steeply devalued its currency last month ahead of talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over a bailout.

It comes as 26 of Sri Lanka's ministers have submitted letters of resignation - but not Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa or his brother, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Meanwhile, President Rajapaksa's former attorney and the country's ex-justice minister Ali Sabry, was sworn in as the new finance minister on Monday.

Mr Cabraal was appointed as the central bank's 16th governor last September.

He was previously the bank's 12th governor for almost a decade, from July 2006 to January 2015.

During his first term in office Mr Cabraal also helped to more than triple the size of the Sri Lankan economy, according to the bank.

With him in charge, the bank said: "Sri Lanka was able to maintain sound and stable macro-economic fundamentals, with inflation being contained at low levels, and financial system stability being achieved in a time of severe global uncertainties and turmoil".

-BBC





In Solomon Islands, Australia's largesse faces China challenge



■ **Ian Neubauer**

When the Solomon Islands, an impoverished nation located 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) east of Australia, announced the drafting of a new security deal with China late last month, Australian officials warned the move could undermine security in the South Pacific and manifest Canberra's long-held fears of a Chinese military base in its back yard.

As the region's largest aid donor – Australia last year spent a record 1.7 billion Australian dollars ($1.3bn) in development assistance in the South Pacific, as well as billions more on security, health, logistics and telecommunications in the Solomon Islands – Canberra could have imposed economic penalties to pressure Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare to rethink the deal.

Instead, Australia increased its largesse, promising a second patrol boat and outpost, 65 million Australian dollars ($49m) for a new embassy, and 22 million Australian dollars ($16.5m) for government salaries and an integrated police, health and disaster management radio network across the archipelago, which is home to about 700,000 people.

But as Australia seeks to reassert its influence, Canberra's recent rude awakening raises difficult questions about the limits of its ability to check China's growing influence in the Pacific by showering its neighbours with cash.

"When there was large-scale civil unrest in the capital, Honiara, last year, Australia deployed security personal within 24 hours of receiving a request from the Solomon Islands and other countries in the region followed suit," Mihai Sora, a former Australian diplomat to the Solomon Islands and research fellow with the Lowy Institute, a Sydney think-tank, told Al Jazeera.

"But the new deal potentially gives extensive reach for Chinese military personnel, assets and armed police. It shows two things: there are security gaps in the Solomon Islands that Australia simply cannot fill, and that aid won't buy Australia exclusivity even though China was able to impose exclusivity," Sora added, referring to a 2019 decision by Honiara to terminate 36 years of foreign relations with Taiwan in favour of Beijing.

Chequebook diplomacy

Despite Beijing's growing foothold, Chinese aid in the region has declined since 2018, while Chinese loans that Western officials have warned could lead to unserviceable debt have increased in leaps and bounds, now totalling $1bn.

Some critics have accused Beijing of resorting to chequebook diplomacy, by which large sums of money have allegedly been funnelled to political parties and actors.

Taiwanese media have reported that China gifted the Solomon Islands $500m for cutting ties with the self-ruled islands, which Beijing considers part of its territory, although that figure has not been officially confirmed. But deputy opposition leader Peter Kenilorea alleges individual members of parliament also received 250,000-750,000 Australian dollars each for their votes.

When a no-confidence motion was tabled in parliament last year after police used rubber bullets to disperse protesters who carried out looting and arson of Chinese-owned businesses, Beijing gave MPs 40,000 Australian dollars to vote down the motion, according to a number of opposition figures including Celsus Irokwato Talifilu, a political adviser in Malaita Province, the most populous province.

The Sogavare government has rejected claims of bribery as baseless, questioning whether the allegations were aimed at discrediting it "for the sake of justifying criminal actions and political hooliganism." It has also insisted it would not allow a Chinese military base in the country.

Beijing has denied any intention to establish a military base in the archipelago. "The aim of China and Solomon Islands' security cooperation is to protect people's life and property safety and has no military undertones," Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian said during a media briefing last month. "Relevant remarks and speculations in the media are groundless and ill-intentioned."

"Australia is not losing influence to China in the Solomons; the average person in the street has a positive attitude towards Australians because they are the people who help us while anti-Chinese sentiments are very strong because of destructive Chinese logging and mining fishing practices that have caused massive environmental destruction," Talifilu, who advises Malaita Premier Daniel Suidani, told Al Jazeera.

"But Australia is losing influence among the current government because Australian aid is transparent while aid from China goes directly into their pockets."

Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, a senator in the Australian state of New South Wales who served as minister for international development and the Pacific between 2016 and 2018, believes the allegations have merit.

"There is a growing suspicion of Beijing's influence over the political class in the Solomon Islands," Fierravanti-Wells told Al Jazeera, adding that China's actions in the South China Sea and debt-trap diplomacy "give an indication of the insidious nature of Beijing's intent".

While the Sogavare administration has denied all allegations of impropriety, some analysts also believe it is overly simplistic to attribute Honiara's pivot towards Beijing to chequebook diplomacy.

"Prime Minister Sogavare explained the switch from Taiwan to China on the grounds that he expects the country to enjoy more commercial opportunities from China than Taiwan, and there is something in this idea that China has offered a convincing narrative of economic development," said Sora, the former Australian diplomat, who is based in Honiara.

"There is also support in the Solomons for Sogavare's opinion that the country should not be beholden to a single security partner like Australia and is looking to expand bilateral relations abroad."

Michael O'Keefe, a lecturer in international relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, voiced similar sentiments.

"From the standpoint of the Solomon Islands they see that decades of Australian aid has not delivered the security outcomes they were hoping for," O'Keefe told Al Jazeera. "So there are questions about the efficacy of the Australian approach and they are shopping around for other options.

"And from the standpoint of China, well, the US protects its citizens abroad and when China sees its nationals and investments in the Solomons are under threat, why shouldn't China step up?" O'Keefe added.

New thinking

For Australia, bolstering its position vis-a-vis China may require a shift in thinking, according to some observers.

Talifilu said Canberra should redirect aid away from official channels towards grassroots projects.

"Instead of sending huge amounts of money to the national government to build infrastructure like wharves that don't help the common people, they should study how the Americans deliver aid in the Pacific," he said.

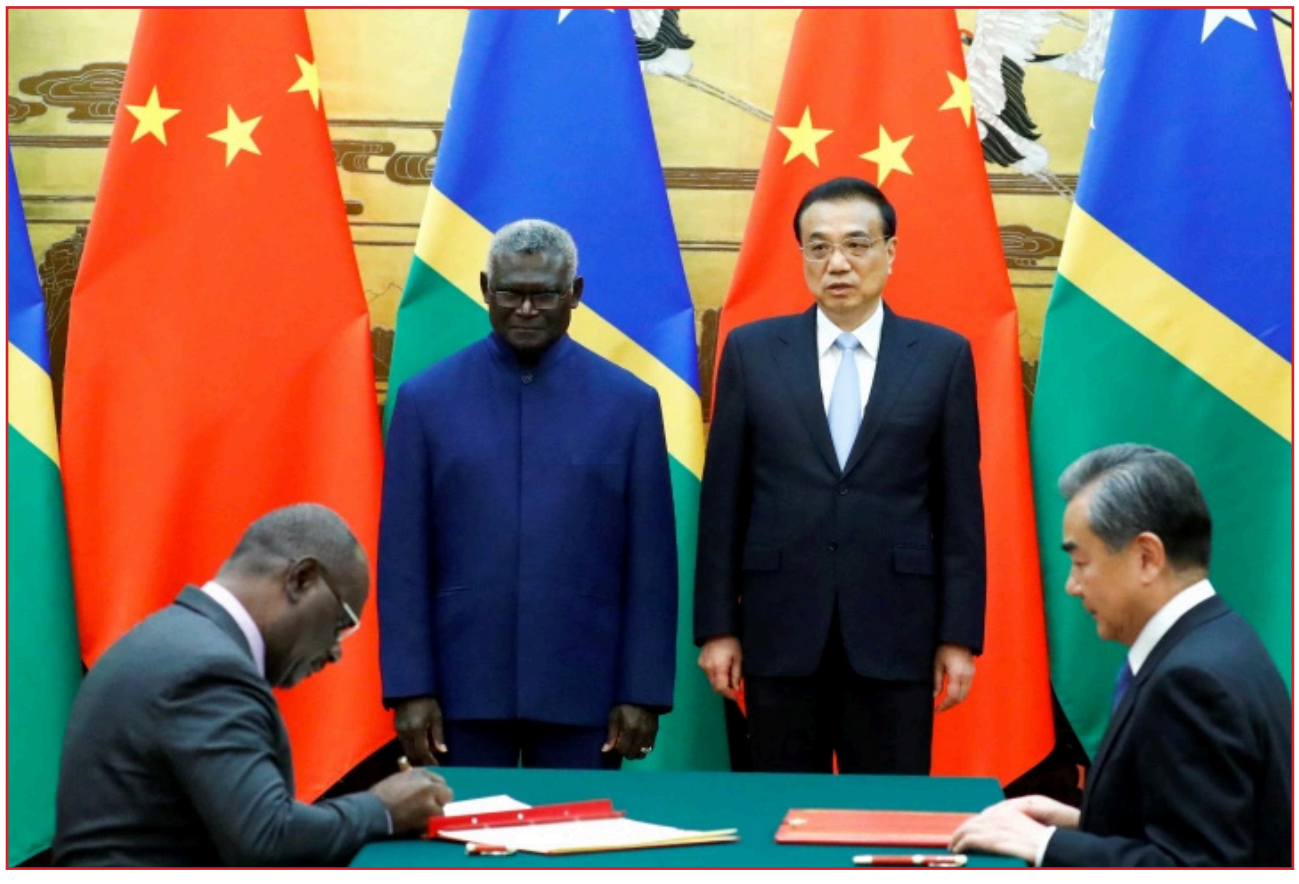
"They recently announced US$25m in funding in Malaita Province for a project called SCALE that will contract NGOs and private companies to look at new ways to deliver capital for agriculture, forests and fishing to improve livelihoods. If Australia did the same, it would empower more people to vote for the opposition, which is pro-Taiwan and pro-Australia."

O'Keefe offers an altogether different solution.

"Australia could consider collaborating with China to meet the security needs of the Solomons rather than just framing this pact as another Chinese threat," he said. "This is actually an opportunity for Australian police to work together with their Chinese counterparts, which is already what Australia does with American, New Zealand and Fijian security personnel in the South Pacific.

"But to do that," he added, "Canberra would have to reset its default mind-frame that sees every move China makes in the South Pacific as a threat."

-AL Jazeera





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Tech Eagle with Frans
12h00-13h00
Brand Conversation with Sally
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On the Radar with Dwight
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Ookundana Dhingi with Helen
16h30-18h30
The Home Run with Frans/ Fanus
18h30-20h00
Business Segment with Gabriel
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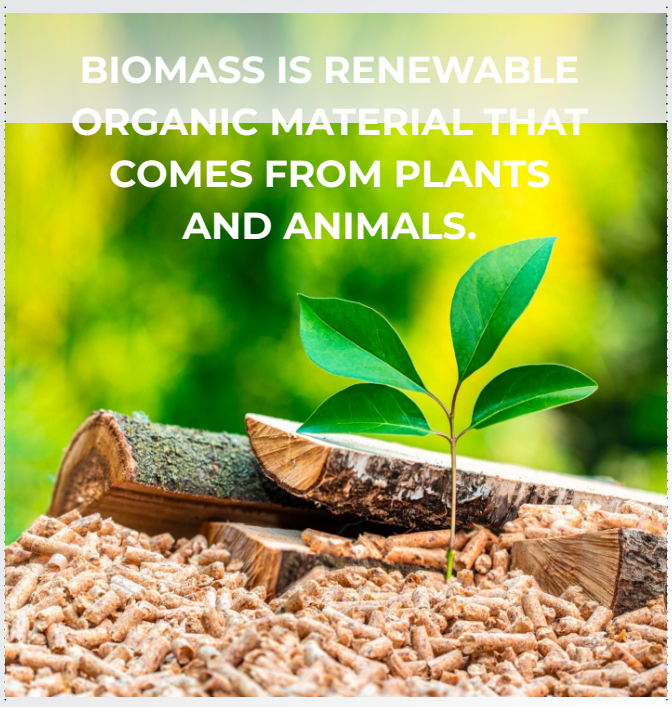
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- Farm income diversification
- Sustainable job creation
- Improved rangeland
- Climate resilience

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- An applicant can also be a processor (legal entity or individual) who buys in charcoal to process and pack for the end market (i.e. retail shops/ restaurants or export/import companies).

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BIOMASS LOAN SCHEME SUMMARY

BIOMASS FINANCING SCHEME

Loan for charcoal production

- Working capital
- Tractors / trailers
- Storage sheds
- Debushing equipment
- Kilns
- Personal protective equipment
- Workers housing including clean water & sanitation

→ No collateral required, if client has an offtake agreement with a processor or retailer
→ If no offtake agreement, client to provide collateral based existing policy

→ Monthly debit order
→ Session of income / Tripartite agreement (if debit order is not feasible)

Loan for charcoal processing

- Working capital
- General equipment & Vehicles
- Maintenance workshop
- Office to operate from
- Charcoal processing plant
- Warehouse & equipment

→ Working capital - no collateral if there is an offtake agreement
→ Capital investment loans are subject to collateral based on the principle of 100% Loan-to- Value.

→ All loan payments is to be done via monthly debit order.

LOAN TERMS UNDER BIOMASS PRODUCTION LOAN

LOAN CATEGORY	LOAN TERM	REPAYMENT FREQUENCY	GRACE PERIOD	COLLATERAL	INSURANCE
Working capital (PPE, Kilns, Debushing Equipment, packaging materials, food rations)	2 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	No Collateral required under contract financing	Credit life cover as per the current arrangement of the Bank
Labourers housing (including FSC certification cost	2 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	No Collateral required under contract financing	Credit life cover as per the current arrangement of the Bank
Storage shed	5 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	No Collateral required under contract financing	Credit life cover as per the current arrangement of the Bank
Vehicle, tractors, truck and equipment	6 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	No Collateral required under contract financing	All vehicles, tractors, trucks to be insured from accident and veld fire (short-term insurance as per ERFP policy). Credit life cover as per the current arrangement of the Bank

LOAN TERMS UNDER BIOMASS PROCESSING LOAN

LOAN CATEGORY	LOAN TERM	REPAYMENT FREQUENCY	GRACE PERIOD	COLLATERAL	INSURANCE
Working capital	2 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	No Collateral required	Insurance for equipments and plants is required but a responsibility of the client.
Equipment & Vehicles	6 YEARS	MONTHLY	3 MONTHS	Collateral 100% LTV	Insurance for equipments and plants is required but a responsibility of the client.
Processing Plant	5 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	Collateral 100% LTV	Insurance for equipments and plants is required but a responsibility of the client.
Warehouse & Plant	5 YEARS	MONTHLY	6 MONTHS	Collateral 100% LTV	Insurance for equipments and plants is required but a responsibility of the client.

Saied accused of taking Tunisia back towards one-man rule



■ Alessandra Bajec

Political crisis in Tunisia has intensified following President Kais Saied's decision to dissolve the parliament after freezing it in a power grab on July 25 last year.

The decree came on Wednesday just hours after the members of the last house held a plenary session online and voted to end his exceptional measures, which included the suspension of the chamber and the sacking of the prime minister, along with the seizure of legislative and judicial powers.

The president also promised that the legislators who had opposed presidential rulings in the virtual meeting would be prosecuted on heavy charges of "conspiring against state security".

Tunisia's justice minister launched a judicial investigation against more than half of the members of the now-dissolved parliament who took part in the online session.

As many as 121 out of 216 of them were summoned for questioning by an anti-terrorism unit on Friday. The mass investigation marked a major escalation in the president's targeting of his opponents who have been openly defying his attempts to remake the political system in what they call a coup.

"Kais Saied planned well before last July to seize broad powers, sideline political parties, and change the system," a democratic activist who chose to use a pseudonym, "Haythem", told Al Jazeera. "He just suspended the parliament then not to make his intervention look like a coup".

The centre-leftist partisan noted how the head of state has over time lost trust from the educated segments of Tunisian society and the major parties, while he continues to enjoy popular support.

'Rule and legislate by decree'

Many Tunisians welcomed the actions undertaken by Saied, who deemed them necessary to save the country from a corrupt, self-serving elite he held responsible for years of political paralysis and economic stagnation.

To date, the president has not taken concrete steps to tackle needed reforms while he has made moves that have triggered accusations that he is taking the country back towards a one-man rule.

"He's progressively dismantling the institutions created since 2011, destroying all the counterpowers in the country," Haythem argued. "Most MPs now believe he has no intent to restore democratic rule of law."

Radwan Masmoudi, a member of the moderate Islamist Ennahdha party, observed that Saied did not dissolve the chamber back in July knowing he had no constitutional right to do that.

Wednesday's parliamentary vote, he continued, offered the head of state a chance to step in, while being aware that it was still unconstitutional to order a dissolution, emboldened by a number of presidential decrees that he used to assume near-total power.

Masmoudi alluded specifically to Decree 117, issued last September, which suspended most of the country's constitution, extended the freezing of the parliament, and granted the head of state the right to rule and legislate by decree.

"Right now, Tunisia is in no man's territory. We are without a constitution and have a president who can do whatever he wants," the Ennahdha member told Al Jazeera.

Sarah Ben Hamadi, an observer of the Tunisian political scene and Twitter influencer, thinks the president could have terminated the parliament in the wake of his July 25 "coup de force", instead of eight months later, and initiated a democratic process to hold quick legislative elections.

"Saied has a very personal reading of the constitution, and is applying his own interpretation of the text," she told Al Jazeera. "He's also very unpredictable, so we can't really anticipate his decisions, we don't know what to expect."

The dissolution of the assembly

Under Article 80 of Tunisia's 2014 Constitution, Saied cannot dissolve the parliament during an exceptional period of the kind he announced last year.

Even Article 72, which the head of state invoked, does not allow him to do so. The dissolution of the assembly can only occur if the majority of deputies vote a motion of no-confidence in the government twice, and should prompt a new election within 90 days as stipulated by Article 89.

Despite dissolving the legislative assembly, Saied late on Thursday ruled out parliamentary elections within the next three months. Instead, he said, he will move to rewrite the constitution, which will be put to a referendum on July 25, before conducting elections on December 17 – in line with the political roadmap unveiled last December – while suggesting that opposition politicians may not be allowed to run in future polls.

"Legally, since it's dissolved, parliament must remain in session until a new vote is held within the 90-day period," Masmoudi, the Ennahdha member, maintained qualifying the president's latest move as another breach of the constitution.

He also indicated the possibility that the upcoming constitutional referendum and legislative polls may be run under either the interior ministry or the defence ministry. It is unclear whether they will be organised by an independent body.

Members of the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) fear that Saied may dissolve the independent body and institute a provisional election commission to oversee the next elections.

Parties from across Tunisia's political spectrum and the powerful UGTT labour union urged the head of the state to call early polls after the dissolution of parliament.

More political parties have been actively opposing Saied. Ennahdha, the biggest party in parliament and main opposition force, and the Free Constitutional Party, which leads in opinion polls, have said they will reject his plans for July's referendum.

"The danger is Saied wants to push through his own constitution, under the cover of a national referendum, change the rules of the game, keep out his opponents, and see his planned elections through," Haythem warned.

"We're watching a one deaf man show. The only hope is to have snap elections," he pointed out.

Intimidation and persecution against opposition figures

Without an elected, functioning parliament in place, and in the current climate of intimidation and persecution against the country's main opposition figures, any national voting will happen outside the framework of rule of law, analysts say. Meaning it is unlikely that Tunisians will see free or fair elections under the present conditions, they say.

Monica Marks, a prominent expert on contemporary Tunisian politics, articulated in a tweet thread how the sequencing of elections is critical.

"If Saied gets his referendum before legislative elections, it's entirely possible new free and fair parliamentary elections won't be held in Tunisia," she posted. "Whereas if everyone determinedly rallies around the demand to hold new elections within 90 days, it's possible that an exit ramp off Saied's highway to consolidated dictatorship in Tunisia could materialise."

For Ben Hamadi, the referendum scheduled for July, which is called to restructure the political system, will find sympathy among a population largely dissatisfied with the deadlocked political establishment.

"I believe the president is well aware there's popular will to shift toward a presidential system of government," the observer commented hinting at recent national surveys and interactions on social media within the country.

Results of Tunisia's online public consultation on a new constitution showed that more than 86 percent of respondents favour a presidential system instead of the current quasi-parliamentary system.

Yet, with the government desperately seeking an international rescue package to avert a crisis in public finances, and mounting economic pain for the populace, many Tunisians too have grown disenchanted with Saied's focus on constitutional change.

His popularity could be put to the test, as analysts have alerted, with the oil and wheat prices soaring due to the Russian-Ukrainian war amid a grinding economic crisis and food price increases.

-Al Jazeera



The real magic mouse is made by Logitech, not Apple



■ **Sean Hollister**

We may never know why Apple doggedly insists on you charging its mouse upside down, like a beetle with its legs in the air, year after year after year.

But I do know this: if you want a mouse that actually feels magical, price be damned, Logitech has the gadget for you.

When I want to charge my wireless mouse now, I don't need to plug in a cord or place it on a dock. In fact, I don't think about charging at all. It just... does. Because this past Christmas, a very generous brother-in-law effectively bought me a wireless mouse that charges itself.

What you're looking at here is the Logitech Powerplay Wireless Charging System, effectively a mousepad with a wireless charger that magnetically beams electricity to a special puck. Logitech's been selling it since 2017 — nearly as long as Apple has subjected us to the upside-down beetle.

I have never reviewed a perfect product before, and I'm not saying this is one — I'd hate to jinx myself. Particularly when some customers do claim their mice eventually stopped charging or that the mousepad peeled apart and had to be taped or glued. Plus, it's incredibly pricey at $120 for the mousepad alone, no mouse included, for a product that's arguably unnecessary because these mice come with a cord that lets you play while you charge too. And no, the Powerplay doesn't double as a phone charger or use Qi: it only works with its own magnetic puck, which only fits into a handful of the priciest Logitech mice, including the G502 Lightspeed, G703, G903, G Pro Wireless and G Pro X Superlight.

Still, it carries a 4.7-star rating on Amazon with surprisingly few negative reviews. The most common complaint is that nearby speakers or headphones can pick up a hum when it's charging, and I haven't noticed that myself.

What I have noticed so far is that there's nothing to notice. It just works. No disconnects, no on-off switches, nothing to adjust. It is true that the charging coil doesn't cover the entire mousepad, but I've never had to think about it, never come back to a dead mouse. It's always sprung to life every morning at work and every evening I game.

It probably doesn't hurt that I'm using it with the Logitech G502 Lightspeed, our pick for the best wireless gaming mouse, whose comfortable grip, loads of well-placed clicky buttons, incredible performance and adjustable weight put it head and shoulders over the also-excellent, also-wireless Razer Mamba and Logitech G900 I owned before. But that's a $140 mouse, and there's no discount on a bundle with both. Even the least expensive compatible mouse, the G703 Lightspeed, will typically cost you $70 on sale — and the Powerplay charging pad rarely goes on sale at all.

But you could do what I did: get the mouse, use it until the battery bugs you, and then add Powerplay. (Find a generous brother-in-law while you're at it, too.) For a year, I plugged in my mouse to charge and kept on using it with a little bit of drag. It was fine. But this is better.

That was kind of the idea, recalls Andrew Coonrad, who was technical marketing manager on Powerplay (and wrote the reviewer's guide) back in 2017. It was designed to be the ultimate solution for demanding gamers willing to spend extra to solve charging once and for all.

At the time, there was still a stigma against wireless gaming mice, and battery life was part of that — while the Razer Mamba and Logitech G900 convinced me that low-latency gaming was possible over wireless, neither could hold much of a charge after a couple years of use. With the G900, Coonrad says that's because while its PMW3366 sensor was capable, it used an order of magnitude more energy than Logitech's newer Hero sensors.

While it was developing Hero, Logitech also looked at wireless charging — but at first, it didn't like what it saw. Qi wireless charging meant keeping your mouse in a fixed spot. Same with wireless charging cradles like this HyperX. Razer and Mad Catz eventually put instant-charge supercapacitors in some ill-fated mice, but that meant they stopped working if you removed them from their charging pads, and those pads and mice had to be sold as a pricy set. "We wanted to create a modular solution," says Coonrad.

So Logitech charged its R&D lab in Lausanne, Switzerland, with that idea, and they came up with a set of loop antennas that could slowly charge the mouse — think days, not hours — even while you're moving it around.

"I called it the dogbone when I first saw it," says Coonrad, who took a trip to the R&D facility during development. "They were like, 'Yes, but it's because of the way the concentric fields overlap that creates that hotspot in the middle.' The entire pad can be covered because of those lobes."

It's basically just a giant modular, movable transformer," he explains. "You have that smaller winding coil that transfers to the higher winding coil, and the field is wide enough that the energy charge is always more than the total energy of the mouse."

According to an FCC filing, it operates at 6.78MHz, the same as the old A4WP / Rezence standard that fell by the wayside once Samsung and Apple gave Qi the nod instead. Coonrad wouldn't say how much credit Logitech's partners might deserve: for instance, both the charging pad and the transmitter circuit board are labeled LG Innotek, though it's possible it just served as manufacturer.

The other thing I find interesting about the Powerplay mousepad is that it's not just a charger. It also doubles as the wireless receiver for the mouse, so you don't need to leave the mouse dongle plugged into your PC anymore — I keep it inside the mouse for easy grab-and-go. The FCC filing shows there's a full 32MHz Arm Cortex-M3 computer and a working Bluetooth antenna inside there — though Coonrad suspects the Bluetooth was never actually used. He says it's not a functional part of the final product, and Logitech uses its own proprietary 2.4GHz "Lightspeed" wireless stack to connect to the mouse instead.

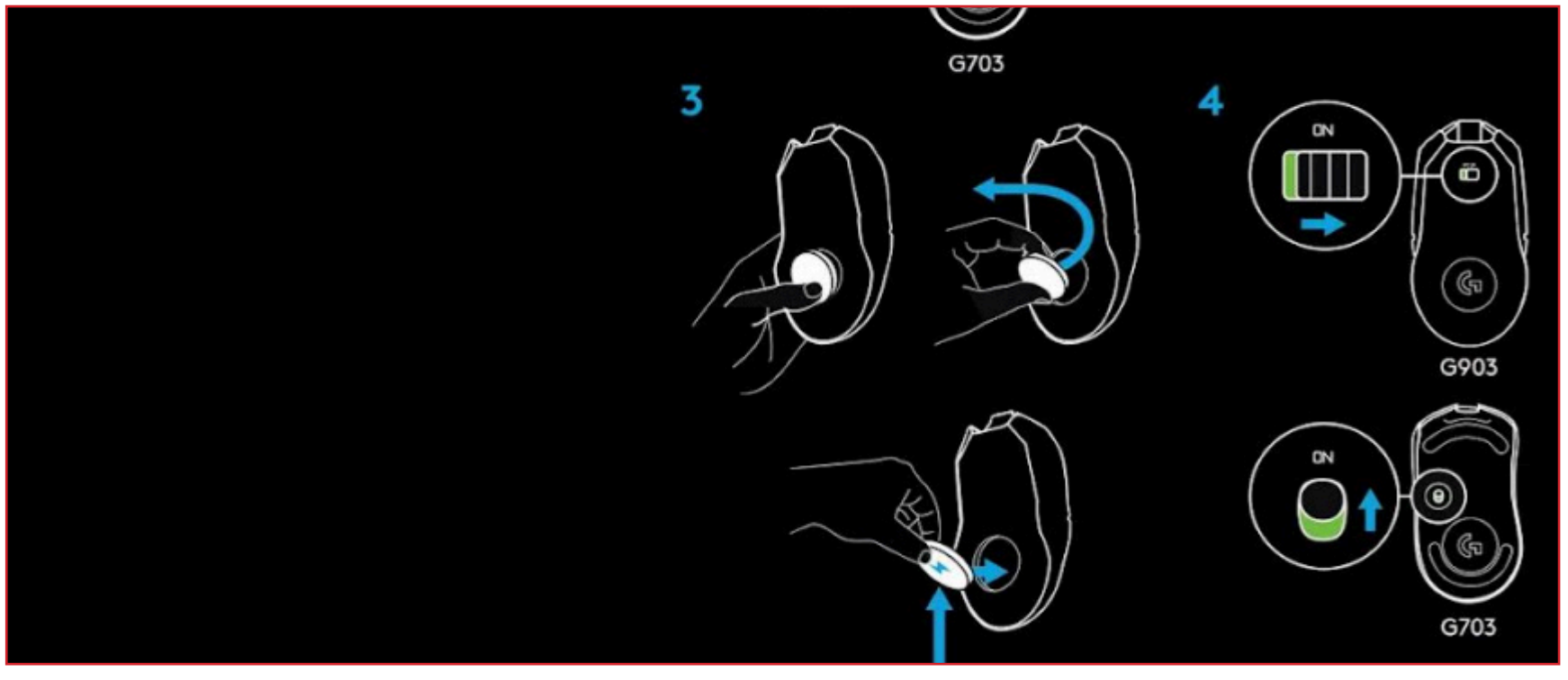
But, to me, the most unusual thing about the Powerplay system is how long it's stuck around without fanfare — even the packaging hasn't changed since 2017. Does this product actually sell? Coonrad says it does, that "people buy them like crazy," and it helps that the compatible G502 Lightspeed, G Pro Wireless, and G Pro Wireless Superlight are becoming its most popular mice of all time. But he can't share sales numbers. And he also admits that he doesn't use them himself, but rather the smaller G305 that doesn't have a space for a Powerplay puck. Instead of a wireless charging mousepad, he keeps a box of Energizers under his desk. "It pisses me off once every six to eight months."

By and large, gaming mouse battery life has significantly improved since 2017, with the recent G Pro X Superlight boasting 70 hours a charge, compared to 60 hours for the previous generation, which itself was double that of the generation before. Less feature-filled mice — like Coonrad's G305 and mice from competitors — can easily cross the 200-hour mark now.

Says Coonrad: "If this is so awesome, why isn't Logitech making a bigger stink about it? The war on wireless is won."

In 2022, you most definitely do not need to spend hundreds of dollars just to get a wireless mouse that doesn't die every week. But it's nowhere near as magical as never needing to charge at all

-The Verge





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10h00-12h00
Tech Eagle with Frans
12h00-13h00
Brand Conversation with Sally
13h00-14h30
On the Radar with Dwight
14h30-16h30
Ookundana Dhingi with Helen
16h30-18h30
The Home Run with Frans/ Fanus
18h30-20h00
Business Segment with Gabriel
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INTERNATIONAL

Iranian women denounce violence in film industry



■ Maziar Motamedi

Hundreds of women working in Iranian cinema have slammed "systematic" violence against women in the film industry and called for mechanisms that would make perpetrators and enablers accountable.

In a strongly-worded statement on Friday, more than 200 women – including some of the most well-known Iranian actresses locally and internationally – condemned sexual violence and harassment, which they said has become endemic in Iranian cinema.

"Not only is there no mechanism to prevent powerful individuals from committing violence, there is also a non-written agreement that inflicting violence against women in work spaces has been normalised, with no serious ramifications threatening the aggressor," they wrote.

Among the signatories are Taraneh Alidoosti – who had a leading role in Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning The Salesman in 2016 – Hedieh Tehrani, Niki Karimi and Pouran Derakhshandeh, all household names in Iranian cinema.

The women also denounced financial inequality and disparity in decision-making powers with male peers, and demanded "this most basic human right, meaning working in a safe space away from bullying and violence and sexual extortion".

They urged industry figures to mobilise through entities such as the Iranian Alliance of Motion Picture Guilds to form a female-majority committee consisting of people educated in dealing with sexual violence that would securely and privately receive and review claims of aggression.

They also proposed adding mechanisms in movie contracts to shield women and make aggressors accountable through financial penalties and suspension from future work in the industry.

Industry, judiciary response

In response, the guild alliance said in a statement on Sunday that it already has a committee in place, consisting of a board, industry insiders, a representative from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and a legal adviser, that is ready to review any complaints.

It also said "we must not allow a minuscule number of potential undesirable behaviours by some cinema people to be generalised to the majority of talents working in Iran's proud cinema", a sentiment that was echoed by veteran actor Reza Kianian in a statement posted on his Instagram account.

The women's statement came days after several women used Twitter and other social media to both openly and anonymously share their experiences with sexual violence on film sets.

After one woman working as second assistant director openly accused a renowned male actor of verbal and physical violence, and also said the movie director knowingly ignored the issue and blamed her, the Tehran Association of Film Assistant Directors (TAFAD) issued a statement supporting her.

The association confirmed knowledge of widespread similar instances of abuse – even against men – and said it has previously pursued accountability through various means, without elaborating.

It pledged support for its members and urged them to report any cases without "feeling worried, and allowing abuse of position and power with your silence".

Kazem Gharibabadi, who heads the country's High Council for Human Rights, which operates under the judiciary, said on Sunday that women in film should be protected. He called on the culture ministry and guild associations to come up with mechanisms that would support women, and said the judiciary is also ready to review claims.

Legal protection

Moreover, Gharibabadi expressed hope that a longstanding bill aimed at protecting women from violence would soon be ratified by parliament.

The legislation in question, called Protection, Dignity and Security of Women Against Violence, has been in the works for over a decade and was approved by the government in January 2021, when former President Hassan Rouhani was in office and incumbent President Ebrahim Raisi was chief justice.

It was, however, shelved by the conservative parliament and has not been put on the agenda since, despite its promise to herald some positive changes in rules protecting women.

Iranian cinema is well-known around the world, having produced many actors and talents behind the camera that have showcased their work at international film festivals and won awards.

But this is the first major public expression of sexual harassment in the industry. Iran's first major #MeToo moment came in September 2020, when many Iranians including celebrities took to social media to recount their experiences of sexual abuse.

-Al Jazeera



Texas abortion: The 'ranch' for mothers with no place to go



■ **Linda Pressly**

Texas has passed one the strictest abortion laws in the US, banning the procedure after around six weeks' gestation. That has left many women looking for options.

It was shortly after the birth of her second child, when Dallas-based Aubrey Schlackman had an epiphany.

"We'd been to the grocery store and were driving home. And I passed a big ranch for sale, and I just suddenly had the idea," she says.

She wanted to open a place that could provide accommodation and support for single mothers facing an unforeseen pregnancy.

"I feel like wide-open spaces give a natural space for healing and contemplation. And I think God uses nature as a way to heal," she says.

Aubrey and her husband Bryan had been working with Christian ministry programmes taking care of pregnant women.

"A lot of them were first-time moms," Bryan says. "And then we discovered there were lots of situations where a mother with existing children who got unexpectedly pregnant did not have many places to go."

So the Schlackmans founded a non-profit, Blue Haven Ranch. Although it does not yet exist as the ranch Aubrey envisages, the charity is currently supporting five single mothers who are either pregnant or who have recently given birth, providing cash to rent an apartment, and help towards utility bills.

Eventually, the couple hope to purchase 100 acres of Texas farmland to build Blue Haven Ranch from scratch: cottages for 20 single mothers and their children, a community hub where families can cook and eat together, fields for animals and land for vegetable cultivation.

The Schlackmans estimate it will cost around $15 million (£11m), and their fundraising efforts are going well, buoyed perhaps by the passing of the Heartbeat Act, also known as SB8 - Senate Bill 8 - last September.

That law prohibits abortions from as early as six weeks into pregnancy, after the detection of what anti-abortion campaigners call a foetal heartbeat - a flutter from a group of cells that will regulate the rhythm of a heart when it later forms. This can happen even before a woman knows she's pregnant.

One of the most restrictive laws in the country, SB8 gives any citizen the right to sue another individual suspected of "aiding and abetting" an abortion. Those individuals could be a doctor, or even an Uber driver taking a woman to an abortion clinic.

"A lot of women are really scared," says Qiana Arnold of the Afiya Centre, a reproductive rights NGO in Dallas supporting Black women, about the impact of SB8.

"[Pro-life] protesters are getting more aggressive. And the way the language of the law has been communicated in the media, it's like abortion is illegal in Texas. It isn't - but you've got to move fast," she says.

SB8 is the latest piece of legislation in the state to further restrict access to termination. Together, changes in the law have led to the shuttering of many abortion services, leaving thousands of women asking: What can they do now?

Some are turning to services provided by non-profits like Blue Haven Ranch. The charity is part of a network of Christian, faith-based organisations aimed at discouraging women from seeking abortion by offering alternative services to support them through pregnancy and early motherhood.

"Whatever your religion, if you want to be pro-life, you have to be pro-mom. And you have to do something. I think belief is a call to action - always," says Aubrey.

At Blue Haven Ranch, mothers are expected to work when they are not on maternity leave, and to take educational courses that will help them secure better-paid employment so they can provide for their children once they leave.

Britney* found the project at a critical juncture in her life. She was pregnant, a mother of three who fled an abusive relationship. She was conflicted about having her fourth child, and worried her other children might be taken into care.

"I felt like physically and mentally, I could not provide for all of them safely," she says.

Britney's sister drove her to one of the few abortion clinics still operating in Texas.

"Very quickly, they were like, 'we can't help you'," Britney says - she was more than six weeks pregnant.

Leaving the clinic crying, she was handed a leaflet by an anti-abortion protester. She called the number on the leaflet and was put in touch with Aubrey.

"It sounded pretty helpful, and talked about not feeling alone. I felt like this was my last option," she recalls.

Now Britney works two jobs from home, her three children live with her in an apartment funded by Blue Haven Ranch, and she is getting ready to give birth.

"The plan is to keep working, save and get my own home one day. I'm just blessed that I found Aubrey," she says.

The Schlackmans say that women who join Blue Haven Ranch do not have to be Christian. But they are obliged to attend bible-study sessions.

Aubrey does not see this as coercive, and it was not an issue for Britney, either.

But the set-up does leave open the question - is it ethical for pregnant women in crisis to be on the receiving end of religious evangelising?

Critics point to the dozens of "crisis pregnancy centres" that have opened across Texas. Unlike the service the Schlackmans offer, they do not provide accommodation. They provide free pregnancy tests and scans, essentials for newborns, and sometimes support for women to further their education. Usually faith-based, they do not readily advertise their anti-abortion stance. And, they have been accused of giving pregnant women misleading information to discourage abortion.

"A lot of people think those are places they can get access to abortion," says Ms Arnold.

"They tell women they can get an ultrasound. Then boom - someone else comes in and they start talking about religion. They say, 'Please don't kill your baby… We'll give you some pampers'. And it's really traumatic for women because that's not what they went there for," she says.

But as they proliferate, such programmes will only become increasingly wrapped up in the abortion debate in Texas.

The state is supporting faith-based initiatives through its 'Alternatives to Abortion' programme, funded with a budget of $100 million. This channels money to some of the 'crisis pregnancy centres', and other non-profits.

Even outside the ideological debate, Ms Arnold says funding from state-backed programmes rarely trickles down to the communities she serves - the poor women of colour who have been most severely affected by the reduced access to abortion.

"To have an unwanted child - you're trying to force people to bring a life that they don't want to," she argues.

Britney was never completely sure she wanted to terminate her latest pregnancy, and found refuge in Blue Haven Ranch. But many women do know when abortion is right for them - and because of SB8, this has become much harder.

A University of Texas study reported around 1,400 Texans a month were travelling out-of-state for a termination after the implementation of SB8.

Mariah is also a mother of three, and lives in west Texas. She is a single parent, and works two jobs providing for her children.

In October, Mariah's carefully calibrated, busy life threatened to be capsized when she discovered she was pregnant.

"I couldn't stop shaking and crying," she says. "I knew this new law had just passed, and I'm like - how far along am I? Am I going to be able to get an abortion? Where do I start? I have to do this. I have to do it tomorrow…"

Mariah borrowed cash from friends, and drove for over three hours to the nearest clinic in Austin. While she had an ultrasound, Mariah held her breath. Then she breathed a sigh of relief - not yet six weeks pregnant, she was able to access the drugs for a medical abortion.

She does not regret it.

"Because I have three kids. I don't mean to sound heartless, but I don't have any emotions towards it. And I do think women should have that right [to abortion]."

Meanwhile, Aubrey and Bryan continue their plans to expand their offer at Blue Haven Ranch. The couple are leaving their comfortable Argyle bungalow with its chicken coop and vegetable patch for a home with more land further north in Dallas. This new property will be a small prototype of their project, so wealthy donors will see they are serious, they say.

Already, Blue Haven Ranch is getting noticed.

"We got a surprise donation of $14,000 one Tuesday - it just showed up in the bank account of the non-profit. And so I knew something was coming because God doesn't drop that kind of money for it to just sit there," Aubrey says.

The following Friday, she got a call from a pregnant mother fleeing an abusive marriage, and was able to offer her support and an apartment.

Currently there are six women on Blue Haven's waiting list, but the Schlackmans will not take on a new pregnant mother and her children unless they have money in the bank to provide for them for at least six months. And since SB8 became law, there has been an uptick in interest in Blue Haven Ranch.

"We have increased applications. We probably get an average of one to three applications every couple of weeks," says Aubrey.

As Bryan puts it: "The Heartbeat Act got us on the map."

-BBC

"A lot of them were first-time moms," Bryan says. "And then we discovered there were lots of situations where a mother with existing children who got unexpectedly pregnant did not have many places to go."



2022 Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 RS First Drive: Mission Control, Ready for Laughs

■ Mac Morrison

Gran Turismo 7, the new installment of the revered racing video game franchise, launched on PlayStation on March 4. It features more than 400 cars, but the new 2022 718 Cayman GT4 RS we drove just a few days prior isn't among the 20 Porsches available to players. Why is this notable? If there's any new car coming to market shortly that carries the create-your-own-fantasy-version-of-your-favorite-car "tuner" ethos that's been a Gran Turismo staple since the game first appeared in 1997, the 2022 Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 RS is it.

Of course, every Porsche sports car developed by the company's GT division fits that bill. But whereas the GT3 has existed for years and represents perpetual 911-performance evolution, the first-ever Cayman GT4 RS signifies the same spirit in a different animal. It arrives boasting plenty of upgrades compared to lesser Caymans, but its 911 GT3 heart is the big story.

Despite years-old theories that said Porsche would never dare swap something like the GT3's engine into its mid-engine coupe to avoid upstaging the big-ticket 911, the boys and girls of Flacht finally pulled the trigger. And this engine isn't something like the GT3's 4.0-liter naturally aspirated flat-six; it is the GT3's boxer. It spins to the same ungodly 9,000-rpm limit, makes the same 331 lb-ft of torque, and produces 493 hp. The latter figure is 9 hp less than the GT3's 502 hp, but the negligible delta is down to variances in the Cayman's exhaust and cooling systems due to the different platform architecture between the rear-engine 911 and mid-engine 718. Engine aside, other notable chunks of hardware come from the most previous GT3 models: The seven-speed PDK dual-clutch gearbox, gear ratios, and final drive are lifted from the 991.2 GT3 RS PDK, the limited slip-differential comes from the 991.2 GT3 manual, and the PDK control unit and software are courtesy of the 991.2 GT3 RS. Compared to the standard 718 Cayman GT4, the RS has bigger brakes, 49 fewer pounds, wider front and rear tracks, and more rear camber. Its more aggressive aero elements contribute up to 220 pounds of downforce at 124 mph. Add the optional carbon-fiber-heavy Weissach pack along with magnesium wheels (and saving a further 22 pounds), plus sticky Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2R tires, and the result is a thing to envy.

Our first drive experience occurred at the Streets of Willow Springs racetrack, and we knew this car was special by the end of our first lap. For starters, with standard carbon-fiber-shell seats swiped from the 918 Spyder hypercar, the driving position and comfort is excellent. In base configuration, the GT4 RS weighs 39 pounds more than the GT3 (the latter's underlying platform is newer and lighter), but the two cars deliver similar forward surge. We lost time on the straights to the Porsche instructor leading us in a 911 Turbo S, but the Cayman held a clear advantage everywhere else.

The chassis balance is sublime, with a strong front end aided on corner turn-in by a mechanically locking rear differential and standard torque vectoring that helps to turn the car as soon as you breath on the steering wheel. The actual steering feel communicates with Visine clarity when you push the front tires past their high limit, and it makes it easy to gather everything up and recover.

The GT4 RS rotates easily into corners, and this is the factory-built Cayman that causes you to think the most about your throttle application on corner exit, lest its power break-loose the rear tires in an easily controlled yet time-losing dose of oversteer. It all feels so satisfying, so grin-inducing, and—most importantly—so organic, several of our laps were defined by internal conflict: Drive the correct way for your quickest times, or let the tail fly for fun? "How about both?" was the solution we landed on. Both approaches satisfy equally, depending on your disposition.

Porsche offered us laps in both the standard GT4 RS and one fitted with the Weissach kit plus the optional magnesium wheels that are a must-have to save weight. (The Weissach pack alone consists essentially of cosmetic upgrades, but Porsche won't let you buy the lighter wheels without it.) Each car featured optional carbon-ceramic brakes, which shed an additional 38 pounds of total unsprung weight divided across the chassis' four corners. We need more time in each car in quick succession to be sure, but our butt-dyno indicated the Weissach-and-magnesium-wheel car felt slightly more reactive to braking and steering inputs, which makes sense. Then again, the steering in both cars was fantastically precise, we can't say it's empirically worth it. Money no object? Go for it and don't look back: The extra carbon trim looks killer, and who doesn't enjoy being able to tell people your car has magnesium wheels? (All GT4 RS' come with center-lock rims, a Cayman lineup first.)

We'll update this story in the coming weeks when we once again get our hands on a GT4 RS for our official testing. If you're looking for context in the meantime, consider: Compared to the latest 992-series 911 GT3 we recently named MotorTrend's 2022 Performance Vehicle of the Year, the overall driving experience feels similar. As expected, however, the GT4 RS' ultimate capability is certainly a bit less than the GT3's.

The 718's front end is strong on turn-in, but it doesn't bite as hard as the 911 thanks to smaller contact patches and a less sophisticated suspension. Whereas the new GT3 benefits from a racing-derived double control-arm front suspension and a revised multilink rear setup, the 2022 718 Cayman GT4 RS retains the 718 lineup's front and rear strut approach. The GT4 RS does, however, have solid ball joints all around, which along with adjustable toe, camber, and anti-roll bars put it on another planet from standard Caymans while retaining the mid-engine vehicle architecture's fun and non-intimidating handling characteristics. Stiffer springs and dampers represent an RS-specific tune as well.

The maximum aerodynamic downforce figure—a massively important factor for modern track cars when it comes to lap time—of 220 pounds at 124 mph is also less than the GT3's, further accounting for the difference in performance. Porsche says the Cayman GT4 RS with its adjustable wing and front diffusers set to their maximum attack angles (the configuration we drove it in) produces an overall downforce level equal to the 911 GT3 set to its "low" aero configuration. A company spokesperson said the track-focused Cayman's performance lies somewhere between the old 991.2-series 911 GT3 and the 992 GT3. Indeed, the 718 Cayman GT4 RS lapped the Nürburgring Nordschleife in 7 minutes, 4.51 seconds, beating the 991.2 GT3's lap of 7:12.70 by 8.19 seconds. On the flipside, it trailed the 992 GT3's time of 6:55.34 by a similar 9.17 seconds. Those gaps will, of course, be much narrower on more conventional circuits that aren't nearly as long as the 12.8-mile Nordschleife. And for the record, the GT4 RS' time smashed the standard Cayman GT4's lap by 23.6 seconds.

Here's one place the GT4 might hold a clear advantage over the GT3 in terms of the driving experience: The 4.0 is only mere inches behind you, now absent a noise-killing carpet cover atop its airbox. With its external air-intake scoops mounted where the quarter windows live on normal Caymans, the soundtrack produced by the combination of the over-your-shoulder intake ducts and the engine's riptastic voice as it approaches 9,000 on the tach is a wild experience.

We at first thought it was about the same as we heard while driving the GT3—until we remembered to remove our helmet and take another run up and down Streets of Willow's front straight. "Yikes almighty!" is an understatement, at least from within the cockpit. Worth noting, though: Thanks to the mid-mounted flat-six's longer exhaust compared to the GT3, and perhaps also at least slightly thanks to the fuel-particulate filters installed on the European-spec cars we drove, the Cayman GT4 RS pales in comparison to the GT3 in terms of sound levels heard outside of the car. Where watching the GT3 turn laps reminds you of standing trackside at a sports car race, watching the GT4 circulate isn't nearly as dramatic. Whether you deem this a plus or a minus for the Cayman is up to you, but for people who plan to buy one mostly for street-strutting duty, their neighbors will likely consider it a positive.

-Motor Trend







Tiger Woods at Augusta National for Masters is 'stuff of sporting legend



■ **Ian Carter**

Just by turning up to practice. Just by generating hope that he will tee it up at the Masters this Thursday, Tiger Woods has sent a massive bolt of energy through the game of golf.

Not that it was languishing in some kind of moribund torpor, in need of a wake up jolt. Anything but.

Rarely have we gone into the first men's major of the year with more exciting young talent at the top of the sport, but this astonishing 46-year-old has always been a game changer.

Woods' presence at Augusta this week, his attempt to come back from a potentially life-threatening car crash which nearly cost him his right leg, is the stuff of sporting legend.

It stokes interest in an already eagerly anticipated major because, as it stands, Woods is among the field of 91. He is set play competitively for the first time since the November 2020 Masters, when he was defending champion.

We thought that epic victory of three years ago was the absolute pinnacle - a 43-year-old veteran tapping into the secret sauce one more time and finding a way to beat the world's best with a fused back.

Now we must add to the mix the multiple metal rods and pins that hold together his right leg. It was shattered in a devastating single vehicle accident when he sped out of control in the outskirts of Los Angeles in February last year.

We thought that was the end of Woods' astonishing career. He needed to learn to walk again; swinging a club, hitting shots, walking a course, competing - they were distant prospects. Specks on a cloudy horizon.

"He likes to prove people wrong," Rory McIlroy astutely observed last week. And if Woods competes at Augusta this week, he will, have undoubtedly done it again.

Among the views he will have defied will be his own. It was clear in February that Woods was pretty sure the severe undulations of Augusta would come too early in his recovery.

July's 150th Open Championship at St Andrews, where he won two of his three Claret Jugs, looked a far more realistic bet for a competitive comeback.

But now, as he assess his "game-time decision" on whether to compete at the 86th Masters, he may notch up one of the greatest victories of his extraordinary career by simply taking part.

It will be an achievement to sit alongside any of his 15 major triumphs and record-equalling 82 PGA Tour wins. This would be another massive success stemming from a level of cussed determination that has always set Woods apart.

And just turning up has never been enough for him. Woods has always been about 'the W' - winning.

This, though, would be a week where his appearance would be defined by hitting his first tee shot rather than sinking a final putt.

The upper echelons of the leaderboard are unlikely to feature his name this time but that will not matter.

It is surely asking too much for him to challenge, even with his ultra competitive psyche. This will not be the year for a sixth Green Jacket, there is too much young talent, including a brand new world number one, for that to happen.

Scottie Scheffler, a 25-year-old from Ridgewood, New Jersey, tops the rankings after his recent Match Play success - his third win of the year - even though he has yet to post a top-three finish at a major.

This is only his third Masters, having come 19th and 18th in the two most recent tournaments. And while the 25th man to officially top golf's charts since their 1986 inception is undoubtedly in excellent form, portents for a first Green Jacket are not overly encouraging.

Curiously, unless your name is Woods, world number one status seems to count for little on the spring time fairways of the Augusta National.

Dustin Johnson was the last top dog to triumph, but that was in the Covid rescheduled tournament of November 2020. Before that Woods was the last number one to win, when he successfully defended 20 years ago to pick up his third title.

You then have to go back a further decade to Fred Couples and the year prior to his triumph for Ian Woosnam's success.

The Welshman has finally become a non-playing past champion this year and has often spoken about the extra confidence he brought to Augusta in 1991 having just ascended to the top of the rankings.

Maybe Scheffler will receive a similar boost, but the top of men's golf at the moment is tightly packed with talent. Every week there are a handful of names who can go to number one if results fall for them.

The scenario surrounding this Masters is no different and the likes of Jon Rahm, Collin Morikawa, Viktor Hovland, Patrick Cantlay and Cameron Smith are all justifiably dreaming of donning the most coveted garment in golf.

Rahm and Morikawa - the two most recent major winners at the US Open and Open last summer - have been quiet of late but certainly possess games to prosper at Augusta.

Hovland's ball striking and putting are made for this course but the Norwegian cannot afford to rely on a less than dependable chipping game if he is to land his first major.

Smith can putt the lights out, as he proved at the recent Players Championship while Cantlay will quietly want to atone for the scruffy finish that cost him when Woods won in 2019.

My hunch is that this could be a big week for world number seven Justin Thomas, who has four top 10s this year and every attribute for a lengthened course that features significant changes to the 11th and 15th holes.

Dustin Johnson, just behind Thomas in the rankings, is also hitting ominous form while Brooks Koepka's major pedigree and Daniel Berger's newly found accuracy off the tee are invaluable qualities.

Defending champion Hideki Matsuyama has been hampered by a neck problem and withdrew prior to the Players and then during last week's Texas Open and Bryson DeChambeau has also struggled on his return from injury.

Frankly, though, his comeback is relative small beer. We know which return is going to dominate all our thoughts in the coming week.

For once, someone just turning up will be enough to make it a very special Masters.

-BBC



Has Harry Kane been given a dilemma by Antonio Conte's side?



■ **Shamoon Hafez**

There were times this season when things looked bleak for Tottenham.

A prolonged and almost embarrassing managerial search in the summer saw Nuno Espirito Santo eventually appointed, but the former Wolves boss lasted just fourth months.

Star man Harry Kane wanted out too, with champions Manchester City keen to sign him, but the England skipper ended up staying.

There were suggestions he had downed tools at the north London club, seemingly disinterested and taking until mid-October to score his first Premier League goal of the campaign.

But after a rocky start under current manager Antonio Conte, the signs are looking much brighter for Tottenham - and Kane is now facing a dilemma about his future.

'My team is improving in many aspects'

On 30 October, Tottenham were eighth in the table, two points adrift of a Champions League spot following a humiliating 3-0 home defeat by Manchester United.

It cost Espirito Santo his job, sacked just two days later.

Former Chelsea boss Conte was appointed as his replacement and the situation got worse as recently as 23 February, slipping seven points behind the top four following a poor 1-0 defeat by Burnley.

After that game, Conte suggested if he was the problem at the club he was "ready to go", but the comment has acted as a galvanising effect for the side.

Spurs have since gone on a run of five wins and a loss in their last six games, including Sunday's 5-1 thrashing of Newcastle, to propel them into a Champions League spot.

On Friday, Conte said his side would need a "miracle" to play in Europe's elite club competition and, after beating the Magpies, he told BBC Sport: "This league is very difficult to try to be in the race for the Champions League. We want to stay there until the end.

"We have to try to continue to play this way with intensity and accuracy. My team is improving in many aspects."

Spurs are above Arsenal on goal difference, but their north London rivals have two games in hand and the two sides meet in a crucial clash before the end of the season.

Conte added: "We know we have eight final games. Arsenal has a good advantage. We have to try to stay in the race and give our best, to make our fans happy.

"If we give everything, then we'll see what we can reach."

'Kane is like the new Diego Maradona now'

Had Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy entered into negotiations with City in the summer, Kane could well have been challenging for the title rather than a top-four spot.

But Levy refused an exit and the England captain eventually said he was "100% focused on helping the team achieve success".

Kane had a slow start to the season, scoring his first league goal on 17 October at Newcastle, and he then went on a run of just two goals in his next 11 club games.

Although he didn't score against Newcastle on Sunday, Kane provided the cross for Matt Doherty's goal and was named man of the match as Spurs stormed to success.

"They have got their mojo back," said former Premier League footballer Clinton Morrison on BBC Radio 5 Live.

"A lot of people doubted Harry Kane when he didn't get his move, but I didn't because he is one of the best strikers in Europe, in the world."

Former Tottenham winger David Ginola told Sky Sports: "Spurs are looking very confident. They are relying on their assets and the finishing up front is amazing.

"The new playmaker at Spurs is Harry Kane. He is like the new Diego Maradona now - long passes, short passes, he has it all."

Kane's return to form has seen him score eight goals and provide five assists in the league in 2022 - his 13 goal involvements more than any other top-flight player.

Conte said: "He played an amazing game. He made passes and assists, he has to continue this way.

"We are talking about a talented player. Many times players with great talent do not want to work hard. Not that they want to work less, but sometimes they can be lazy.

"He was an example from the first day I arrived here. We're talking about a world-class striker. He's enjoying playing in this way."

Ex-Tottenham striker Jermain Defoe added on Sky Sports: "He's a complete footballer. A few months ago I was not worried about Harry because I knew things would change.

"When you have someone like Harry Kane chasing down records, every game he wants to score."

'Does he stay or go?'

During the international break, Kane moved joint-second on England's list of highest goalscorers - just four short of equalling Wayne Rooney's record of 53.

His 178 Premier League goals puts him fifth on that all-time list as he looks to close in on Alan Shearer's record of 260.

However, Kane's individual accolades are not matched by his trophy cabinet as the 28-year-old is yet to lift any silverware.

The closest he came was losing in the 2019 Champions League final and twice a runner-up in the EFL Cup final, as well as at the European Championship with England last summer.

"We don't know what Harry and the football club have agreed," said Graeme Souness on Sky Sports. "Harry will have a real dilemma. They have a proper coach and they will be a real strength.

"He has won nothing yet. It's OK having records but you want to show your grandkid your medals. The dilemma is does he stay or go.

"If I was Conte my first thing would be 'for me to stay, Harry Kane has to stay'.

"Not the signings he will be getting - it has to be all about Kane. It puts Levy and the board under huge pressure. They have to keep the manager and the player.

"If Erling Haaland is going to Man City, who else could afford Kane?"

Frenchman Ginola, who won the League Cup in 1999 during a three-year spell at Spurs, added: "If Spurs rely so much on Harry Kane, they need to sign him for a few more years. It is a crucial question for Spurs because they can't replace him.

"Kane has the choice to go anywhere. I think about my age, what do I want to be remembered for? He wants to win trophies.

"For a player of his calibre, just to be in the top four, it's not enough."

-BBC

