

# AFRICA: 50 Years of Independence

Kenyans lined up to cast ballots on a new democratic constitution last month. Nearly two thirds voted to approve it.



## AFTER A HALF CENTURY FILLED WITH WAR AND POVERTY, IS AFRICA TURNING A CORNER?

It was a rare moment of hope and glory for Africa. Last May, the country of Cameroon threw a huge party. Joyous crowds thronged the streets of the capital, Yaoundé. Former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed the foreign dignitaries and African leaders present.

"Africa is a sleeping giant about to be awoken," Annan proclaimed.

Held a month before the start of the continent's first-ever World Cup, in South Africa, the celebration marked a historic anniversary. In 1960, Cameroon and 16 other African nations received their independence from France, Great



Britain, and Belgium (see *MapSearch*, pp. 14-15). In that year, a spirit of freedom swept the continent as the era of European colonialism all but ended.

But 50 years later, Africa's people are among the poorest on Earth. They account for nearly three quarters of AIDS-related deaths worldwide. The continent's endless wars have produced such horrors as child soldiers who have been snatched from their families and forced into combat, and mass slaughter in Rwanda and the villages of Darfur (see sidebar, p. 13).

In country after country, African strongmen have seized power. Many leaders, including Cameroon's President Paul Biya, have maintained power for decades through corrupt elections.

Bernard Muna, a civil-rights lawyer in Cameroon, likened his country's "freedom" to a staged play. "Cameroon has all the props of a true democracy, but the substance of democracy is not there," he told a reporter in Yaoundé.

While few Africans want to return to colonialism, many wonder exactly what 50 years of independence has brought them.

### Words to Know

- **colonialism** (n): a policy by which a nation controls others far away
- **commodity** (n): product for sale
- **dignitary** (n): a person of high rank or importance
- **game** (n): wild animals hunted for food or sport
- **Peace Corps** (n): a U.S. agency started in 1961 to assist development in poor countries



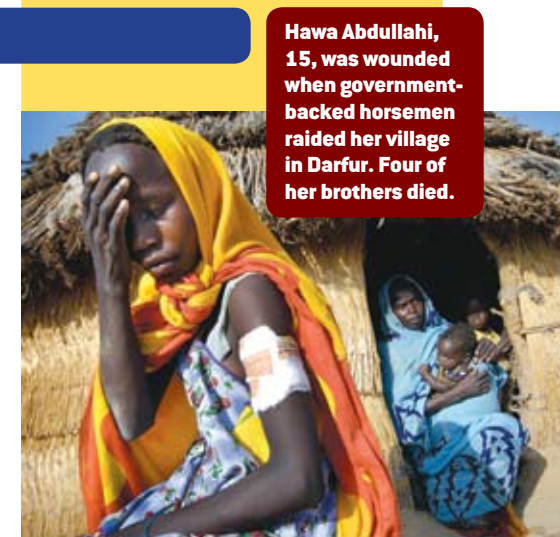


Many parts of Africa have never had landlines, but now cell phones are sweeping the continent.



Left: Child soldiers have been involved in many of Africa's wars. This boy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of thousands of children, some as young as 9, who have been forced to fight.

Above: President Obama marked the 50th anniversary of independence for 17 African nations by hosting a "Forum With Young African Leaders" at the White House in August.



Hawa Abdullahi, 15, was wounded when government-backed horsemen raided her village in Darfur. Four of her brothers died.

## The Great Scramble

The roots of European colonialism are found in the 15th century, when Portuguese traders arrived in West Africa looking for gold. In time, the continent's rich store of diamonds, ivory, rubber, and other resources spurred a "scramble for Africa" among European powers.

Africa's other prized commodity was human beings. By the mid-19th century, an estimated 10 million Africans had been sold into slavery. Most of the slaves were sent to work in the Americas, including the U.S.

In 1884, representatives of the European powers met in Berlin, the capital of the German empire. There they began to settle disputes among themselves for African territory.

This process, which lasted until late in the century, resulted in a new map of Africa: Some 10,000 distinct African peoples were carved up into 40 European colonies. Explorer Henry Morton Stanley said that the greed of the

representatives reminded him of men rushing "with gleaming knives for slaughtered game."

Half a century later, the colonial system came to an end. World

was that the new African nations kept the old European borders. These boundaries often divided tribes or forced groups hostile to each other into the same country.

**"Africa is a sleeping giant about to be awoken."**

War II (1939-1945) had left the European countries bankrupt. As Africans demanded their freedom, the old empires began to crumble. By 1975, almost all of the former colonies were independent.

Peter Schwab remembers the "excitement of independence." Now a political-science professor in New York, he was a young Peace Corps worker in Liberia in the early 1960s. "At that time, there were great expectations about what would happen in Africa," Schwab tells *JS*.

But colonialism had left deep scars, he adds. Part of the problem

Worse, says Schwab, the Europeans had kept control in their colonies by giving one tribe power over others. This created so much resentment that "huge ethnic rivalry exploded" all over Africa in the decades after independence. In 1994, for example, the Hutus of Rwanda killed more than 800,000 of the country's Tutsis, who had originally been favored by the Belgian colonizers.

Many of the continent's new leaders imitated their colonial rulers. Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo)

plundered his country's riches just as Belgium's King Léopold II had done a century before.

## Tough Love

What's next for Africa? Kofi Annan had some tough words for the African leaders in Yaoundé. "Hundreds of millions of Africans continue to live in poverty and insecurity, without access to adequate food, health, education, and other services," he said. In some countries, he added, there is too much corruption and inequality.

Yet Annan, like many Africans, is optimistic about the future. Billions of dollars in foreign investment are helping Africans build roads, railways, and new power grids. African culture has a profound influence on the world's music and art.

Democracy has taken root in such countries as Botswana and Senegal, both nations of 1960. And last month, Kenyans flocked to the

polls, trying to put years of conflict behind them by voting for a new constitution.

The day before the vote, U.S. President Barack Obama met with young African leaders in the White House. "Africa has missed huge opportunities" since independence, he said.

But the President, whose father was from Kenya, also insisted that a new generation of leaders could make a difference. "It will be up to you, young people full of talent and imagination," he said, "to build the Africa for the next 50 years." —Bryan Brown

## Think About It

1. How did colonialism shape the borders of African nations?
2. What would you say to young African leaders to encourage them to improve upon the work of their elders?

## What Happened to Darfur?

Month after month, news of bloodshed in Darfur shocked the world. Beginning in 2003, millions of helpless people in that arid region of western Sudan were caught in the middle of a civil war.

As rebels fought the Arab-dominated government for greater rights, innocent people got caught in the middle. Government-backed militiamen stormed into villages on horses and camels, torching houses, stealing cattle, and killing villagers. Some 3 million people were forced into refugee camps. An estimated 300,000 died.

Many Americans, horrified by news accounts, were eager to help. Everyone from actor George Clooney to middle-school kids worked to raise awareness and money. Amid international pressure, the Sudanese government opened negotiations with rebels, while African forces and UN troops arrived to help restore calm.

But, experts say, this calm could soon end. Peace talks have broken down, new fighting has erupted, and many refugees are still stuck in the camps. "If we go home," said one, "maybe there will be tribal war."

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MapSearch

# Africa

At the end of the 19th century, European powers controlled 90 percent of Africa. Today, most of the continent's national borders are the result of deal-making among European nations. Great Britain, for example, negotiated with France to keep a sliver of territory along the Gambia River—today the slender nation of Gambia.

After World War II, independence came quickly. In 1950, only four African nations were independent. By the end of 1964, there were 36. Today, Africa is home to 53 countries, but few are real democracies. Study the map, then answer the questions.

Questions

1. How many European countries had colonies in Africa in 1960? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which country controlled most of western Africa? \_\_\_\_\_
3. When did Sudan become independent, and from whom? \_\_\_\_\_
4. The nation of Gambia follows what natural feature? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Belgium controlled territory that is now which three countries? \_\_\_\_\_
6. The people of which two island nations speak Portuguese? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Which African countries were independent in 1950? \_\_\_\_\_
8. A mineral used in cell phones fuels war in which country? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Which country was settled by freed slaves from the U.S.? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Which countries were ruled by white minorities until the late 20th century? \_\_\_\_\_

## From Colonial Rule to Independence

Former colonial rulers and dates of independence



Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour (left) embodies the global reach of African music. His country is one of the continent's few strong, multiparty democracies.

Settled by freed American slaves, Liberia has strong ties to the U.S. In 2006, after a long civil war, Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became Africa's first elected female leader.



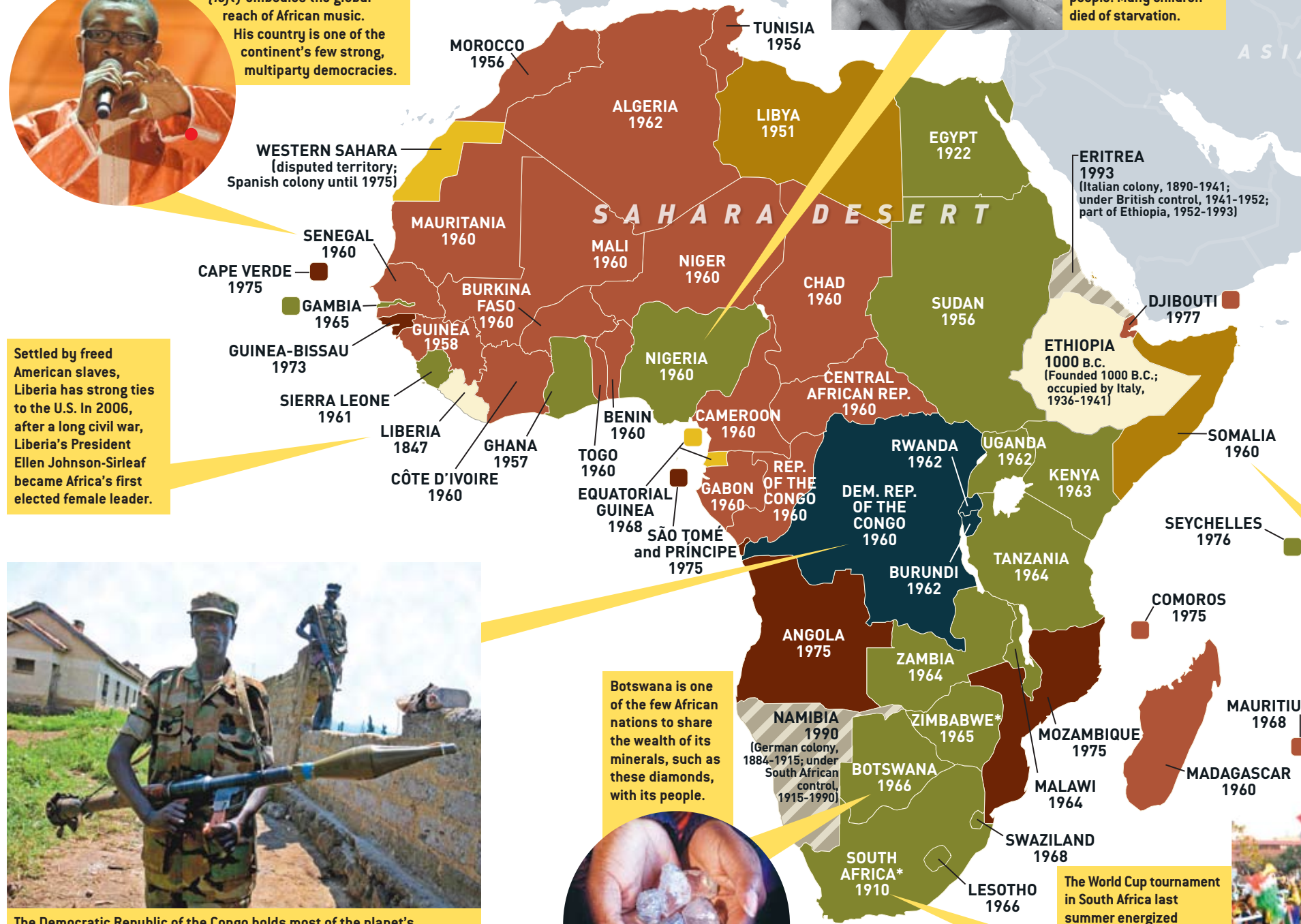
The Democratic Republic of the Congo holds most of the planet's coltan, a mineral used to manufacture cell phones and video games. Fighting over coltan has helped fuel conflicts that have cost an estimated 7 million lives since 1998.



Botswana is one of the few African nations to share the wealth of its minerals, such as these diamonds, with its people.



Nigeria's British-drawn borders forced together tribes that clashed after independence. In the late 1960s, a civil war with the Biafra region killed nearly 1 million people. Many children died of starvation.



Somalia has been in chaos since 1991, when the central government collapsed. Somali pirates terrorize ships on the Indian Ocean, while a brutal Islamic group, Al Shabab, is fighting to take control of the country. The U.S. provides money and weapons to try to help defeat Al Shabab, which has ties to the Al Qaeda terrorist group.

The World Cup tournament in South Africa last summer energized the entire continent. After decades of white-dominated apartheid (racial separateness), the country is now a multiracial democracy.



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