



## Middle East and Africa

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## **South Africa: A chastened president fights back**

Jacob Zuma is facing a barrage of criticism. But he won't give up without a battle

IN HIS new year's address to the nation, President Jacob Zuma hailed 2010 as "the most important year in our country since 1994". Even at the time, it seemed like hyperbole to compare the year of South Africa's first post-apartheid elections to hosting the football World Cup. But little did Mr Zuma know how tough, at least for him, the first few months of 2010 would be. Less than a year into his presidency, he is facing calls from within his own party to step down after just one term. Some in his ruling African National Congress (ANC) say he should go by the end of the year.

Yet 2009 had ended on a high note. According to an Ipsos poll in November, 77% of South Africans said Mr Zuma was doing a good job, up from 50% seven months before, and 70% felt the government was doing well, despite a lack of progress in reducing crime, tackling corruption or creating jobs, nearly 1m of which were lost last year. But fully 71% said they would still vote for the ANC, up from an impressive 66% in the general election a year ago. ...

## Sudan's elections: They're off

How the government is stacking the odds in its favour

CAMPAIGNING is under way for the country's first real multi-party elections since 1986, due to be held on April 11th. Voters, opposition politicians and foreign governments, all seemingly united in their dislike of President Omar al-Bashir, had hoped that these polls would bring about a "democratic transformation" of the country. But there is every sign the Sudanese will have to wait quite a bit longer for genuinely fair elections.

The coming polls are the result of a peace deal signed in 2005 to end a 50-year on-and-off war between the Muslim northern half of the country and the Christian and animist south. According to the UN, they are also "some of the most complicated elections ever". Voters will choose a national president, a national assembly, state governors, state assemblies, the president of the semi-autonomous south, and the southern assembly. In addition there are several different types of voting systems, including first-past-the-post, a straight majority one for choosing the president, proportional representation and a women's list. In all, voters in the north must cast eight different votes and those in the south must cast 12.

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## Alcohol in Morocco: Glug if you're not local

A row over whether alcohol should be tolerated for some or banned for all

TOURISTS may be forgiven for thinking that drinking alcohol in Morocco is legal. You can happily buy the stuff in supermarkets, bars and smarter restaurants, but Muslims, who make up the vast majority of Moroccans, are strictly forbidden to drink it. Islamists dislike this compromise—and were delighted when the mayor of Fez, the religious capital, recently suggested it could become Morocco's first entirely dry city.

It is not the first time that the Islamists have opposed the country's tolerant attitude. In December Ahmad Raissouni, a hardline cleric, issued a fatwa calling on Moroccans to boycott supermarkets that sell alcohol. Two years earlier Islamist politicians had been outraged by the holding of a wine festival in Meknes, a conservative city at the heart of Morocco's wine-producing region. Columnists in the populist press grumbled that Morocco was losing its Islamic identity. ...

## Iran's beleaguered film-makers: Sucking out the air

Some of Iran's most celebrated film-makers are being hounded abroad

FILM-makers in Iran have always had to get by with just a few breaths of artistic air yet made memorable movies in the process. The country's cultural tsars disliked the taboo-busting productions of Jafar Panahi but reluctantly allowed them onto the screen. Films such as "The Circle", about the wretchedness of women, and "Offside", a story of girls who dress as boys in order to get into the male-only environment of a football match, at least showed that Iranian censorship had failed to kill creativity. But now the accommodation has ended. Earlier this month Mr Panahi was arrested, along with several other people, while shooting what a loyalist website called "an anti-regime film".

Mr Panahi's strained relations with the authorities broke down after last June's disputed election. As a judge at the Montreal film festival, he infuriated the government by wearing a green scarf to show his support for the opposition and was briefly detained back home for attending a ceremony for victims of official brutality. ...

## **Food aid for Africa: When feeding the hungry is political**

A United Nations agency under attack

THE World Food Programme (WFP), created by the United Nations in 1962 to save lives, has since grown into the behemoth of the aid business, envied and disliked in almost equal measure by many of its smaller peers. It says it feeds 90m people a year in 73 countries. Yet some query whether it always fulfils the high ideals of its humanitarian mandate.

The WFP has had to get used to fierce criticism, particularly of its operations in Africa. The main complaint is that food aid creates a dependency culture among the poor. The WFP employs large numbers of press officers in its headquarters in Rome and elsewhere to jump to its defence. Even so, a recent scandal over its work in Somalia has pricked it. An internal UN report accuses the WFP of abjectly failing to get food to starving Somalis. The report says that systematic collusion between local WFP staffers, Islamist militants and food transporters has led to the diversion of up to half of the food it ships to Somalia, with some of it going to jihadists. The WFP has hotly denied the allegations of corruption, but it has ceased working with three transport contractors who are alleged to have been involved in arms trading. ...

## **The struggle inside Iran: The opposition marks time**

The rulers sound cocky as an inchoate opposition ponders its next move

IF THERE were an Oscar for chutzpah, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be a shoo-in. Ever since last June's disputed election spawned a serious opposition movement, Iran's polarising president has exuded self-confidence, not hesitating to proclaim a new world order even as Tehran, the capital, descended into mayhem. Now, with the opposition in the doldrums and the West seemingly unable to check Iran's progress towards nuclear self-sufficiency, its leaders are beamingly proclaiming the crisis to be over. The Islamic Republic is again shining its anti-Western, anti-Israeli light across the world.

Last month's arrest of Abdolmalek Rigi, whose Jundullah guerrillas have carried out bombings and assassinations in the country's south-east in the name of his fellow Baluchis, a Sunni minority ethnic group that straddles the border with Pakistan, occasioned much self-congratulation on high. Shorn of his distinctive beard, Mr Rigi was paraded before Iran's television cameras and "confessed" to receiving aid from the American arch-enemy. Mr Ahmadinejad taunted the Americans for their heavy-handed approach to tackling terrorism. "If you want to arrest terrorists," he said, "learn from Iran." ...

## Israel's disputatious Avigdor Lieberman: Can the coalition hold together?

A religious issue is threatening the government's cohesion

AFTER a year in office, Israel's right-wing-cum-religious coalition is feeling an ominous tremor of internal discord. The issue, the bane of so many past coalition governments, is state and synagogue. A bill easing conversion to Judaism, championed by the foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, and his ex-Soviet immigrant party, Yisrael Beitenu, has run into furious resistance from the ultra-Orthodox party, the United Torah Judaism (UTJ), a coalition partner.

“When I die, I’ll go straight to heaven just for having pushed through this bill,” says David Rotem, chairman of parliament’s law committee and a member of Yisrael Beitenu (meaning “Israel is our home”). “I don’t know where opponents of the bill will go.” Ultra-Orthodox members, apparently confident of their place in heaven, protested. A member of the Labour party, another coalition partner, said that if the ultra-Orthodox were in heaven he would rather not go there.

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## **Iraq's election: The wrangling has only just begun**

A government reflecting the people's will should slowly and messily emerge

DOZENS of explosions woke up voters in Baghdad on March 7th, heralding the day of the general election. Every few minutes another thunderous bang reminded them to stay at home, away from polling stations. Officials said the city had been hit by a barrage of mortars. Voter turnout was lower than before, in Baghdad little more than 50%. It was hardly a shining model of democracy.

The American army played down the violence. Most of the bangs, said its spokesman, had been caused by water bottles stuffed with explosives. Insurgents had put them in bins around the city and set them off by mobile phones to terrify voters. Two big bombs had killed at least 38 people but nobody was badly hurt by the bottle-bombs, said General Ray Odierno, the American commander. The bangs were an act of desperation by a fading insurgency. The turnout overall was said to be 62%. Despite the fear, many Iraqis were plainly determined to assert their democratic right to choose their leaders. Barack Obama called the election a "milestone in Iraqi history". ...

## The IMF in Africa: Going green

The IMF says it wants to help Africa handle climate change

THE global recession was slow to hit Africa. Its banks and stock exchanges were isolated enough from the wider capital markets to suffer few shocks. Foreign investment remained steady. Oil-rich countries such as Angola continued to boom. But dampened demand for African exports last year, together with the shrinking of many venture-capital funds, has now hit the continent hard after a long period of unusually perky growth. Countries south of the Sahara together grew by less than 2% in 2009. In many places income has fallen and unemployment started to rise.

So the bullishness of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the IMF's head, who has been touring Africa, struck some as strange. He went out of his way to praise Africa's central banks. He even said Africa's economies were more dynamic than most of Asia's. The main point, he said, was that Africa was recovering from the global crisis faster than expected. ...

## **Another massacre in Nigeria : An unending cycle**

A terrible tit-for-tat is causing untold misery”and seems unlikely to end

THE number-plates in Nigeria’s Plateau state declare it to be the “Home of Peace and Tourism”. In the past decade this slogan has sounded ever more fanciful, as the state’s capital, Jos, suffers bouts of the most brutal ethnic violence. The latest took place before dawn on March 7th, when gangs attacked villages south of the city, razed houses and hacked their occupants with machetes. The death toll is hard to know. Aid and human-rights groups say that between 200 and 500 people were killed. The police put the total at 109.

Locals say the gang members belonged to the mainly Muslim Fulani tribe, whereas the villagers were mostly from the Christian Berom group. The killings looked like revenge for a clash in Jos in January, when hundreds died, most of them Muslim, although there were Christian victims too. “This appears to be some kind of reprisal attack,” said Robin Waudu, a spokesman for the Red Cross. ...

## **The Israel-Palestine peace talks: More than just a charade?**

Few of the participants have much hope that the resumption of talks, to be held indirectly through American mediators, will soon lead to a two-state solution

IT WAS a wretched beginning to what had been hailed as the hopeful resumption of peace talks, albeit indirect ones, between the Israelis and Palestinians under the aegis of an American mediator. Barely had America's vice-president, Joe Biden, begun a visit to Israel to herald a new era of compromise and goodwill than it was announced that 1,600 houses would be built for Jewish settlers on the Israeli-annexed eastern rim of Jerusalem that Palestinians see as part of their future capital. Palestinians were united in fury. Peacemaking outsiders viewed the action as the illest of omens. Mr Biden sharply "condemned" it as "precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now."

A sheepish-looking Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, let his aides claim lamely that he had been unaware of the decision. The next day his minister of interior apologised, conceding that the timing was unfortunate, but said that the announcement was merely a "routine, technical" step. Unsurprisingly, all this only increased scepticism about the promised new round of talks. ...

## **Stalemate in Zimbabwe: An early election?**

The unity government is stuck. An early election might break the logjam

WITH a power-sharing government plainly going nowhere, Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, has announced that fresh elections could be held early next year, whether or not a new constitution is ready. At the age of 86, he says he is ready to stand again—if, he adds coyly, his ruling ZANU-PF party wants him to. Next month he will celebrate 30 years of untrammelled power.

Morgan Tsvangirai, Zimbabwe's prime minister and leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which was forced into a unity government despite winning a general election in the face of violence and fraud two years ago, wants South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma, to intervene. Talks to encourage Mr Mugabe to implement fully the power-sharing agreement he signed 18 months ago under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a 15-country regional grouping, have foundered. ...

## **Progress and repression in Rwanda: Divisionists beware**

President Paul Kagame has improved people's lives at the expense of freedom

THE government of Rwanda is doing a lot of things right. It is pretty open in its handling of aid money. Most foreign governments and charities are so impressed by its detailed plans and apparent lack of corruption that they are funnelling more of their aid directly through Rwanda's government. President Paul Kagame says he expects direct budget support to rise by a quarter this year, to \$519m.

The country has recovered valiantly from its year zero in 1994, when 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered. Its centralised state is leading the way in economic and technological reform in the region. It is improving the country's infrastructure, education and farming, and seeks to preserve its ecology. It pushes equality for women, who comprise half the government and parliament. ...

## **Egypt's new contender: A tantalising return**

The return of Mohamed ElBaradei from abroad is rattling Egypt's rulers

EGYPTIANS may breathe a sigh of relief. Seven of their political parties have formed a united front to defend the country against a foreign plot. Whether this conspiracy is Zionist or perhaps American remains unclear. But the parties agree that it aims to undermine Egypt's stability and that its spearhead is none other than Mohamed ElBaradei, winner of the Nobel peace prize and the recently retired head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog.

The revelation of such a plot surprises few in Egypt. Ever since November, when Mr ElBaradei declared that, if rules were made fair, he might just consider running for president in 2011, expectations have grown that allies of Egypt's current ruler, Hosni Mubarak, would find ways to attack this upstart rival. When Mr ElBaradei arrived in Cairo last month for a ten-day visit, such expectations soared. Not only did the thousand cheering fans who mobbed him at the airport outnumber the active membership of the seven government-sponsored opposition parties now aligned against him. The soft-spoken former diplomat became the talk of Egypt's chattering classes, as scores of prominent intellectuals declared their backing for him, and membership of a Facebook support group rocketed to 160,000. ...

## Jerusalem: A city that should be shared

Israel builds still more facts on Palestinian ground, while stalemate persists

EVEN as the Americans strive to jump-start fresh talks between Israelis and Palestinians, the Israeli government has been using the hiatus to intensify the refashioning of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians see as their future capital. This week the city's Israeli mayor, Nir Barkat, unveiled his latest plan to turn Palestinian districts into Jewish biblical heritage parks. Fearing that their half of the city is being cast in an increasingly Israeli mould, Palestinian stone-throwers clashed with Israeli forces on the Haram al-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary, which Muslims venerate for its al-Aqsa mosque, Islam's third-holiest shrine, and which Jews revere as the site of the biblical Temple. While George Mitchell, Barack Obama's envoy, is yet again bidding to open "proximity talks" between the two sides, the Palestinians have been literally losing ground.

Unlike previous Israeli prime ministers, who built on the open hilltops above Arab population centres in the West Bank and on the edge of Jerusalem, Binyamin Netanyahu and his officials are concentrating on Jewish settlements bang in the midst of them. Car-parks and conservation areas, rich with Israeli symbols, are sprouting across East Jerusalem. Settlers with state protection are opening religious schools there. Scarcely a week passes without an Israeli newspaper heralding new Jewish housing units being built in Arab districts. Israeli archaeologists are scraping away the eastern parts of the city's Arab surface in search of a Jewish past. Last month one of them declared she had "probably" found King Solomon's city walls. ...

## **Trouble in Algeria: The president and the police**

A mysterious murder exposes a rift within the country's ruling circle

LATE last month Chouaib Oultache walked into Algeria's police headquarters with a score to settle. What happened next is not entirely clear, but official reports say Mr Oultache pumped three bullets into the head of Ali Tounsi, the country's powerful police chief, before being shot and wounded himself.

A few years ago, Mr Tounsi had hired Mr Oultache, a retired air force colonel and a close friend, to head the police helicopter unit. By the official account, Mr Oultache went crazy after reading in the newspapers that he was being investigated for corruption. He may have suspected a betrayal by his old friend. ...

## **South Africa's economy: Steady as she goes**

A budget that gives little to the left

LEFT-WING trade-union allies of President Jacob Zuma have reacted with fury to the business-friendly budget, unveiled on February 17th, threatening to call a general strike in the second half of the year. The first of Mr Zuma's ten-month-old government, the budget spurned left-wing calls for tax increases, nationalisation of the mines and dropping inflation-targeting by the central bank. Instead, the finance minister, Pravin Gordhan, is pursuing broadly the same prudent macroeconomic policies that prevailed under Thabo Mbeki's presidency from 1999 to 2008.

Mr Zuma has been accused of weak leadership, particularly since his dreary state-of-the-nation speech earlier this month. But he has again shown this time via Mr Gordhan that he is not beholden to his noisy allies on the left who helped catapult him to power. ...

## **Niger's coup: It seems popular, so far**

The African Union tut-tuts but the people appear to welcome a coup

WHEN soldiers seized power last week in Niger, thousands took to the streets of Niamey, the dusty capital, to celebrate. The new rulers, who kidnapped President Mamadou Tandja on February 18th, say they simply want to oust a tyrant and hold elections. Many of the desert state's 15m people seem to believe them.

Mr Tandja, aged 71, had been growing ever more authoritarian as the end of his tenure approached last year. He changed the constitution to junk term limits and pushed elections back to 2012. He also dissolved parliament and tightened his grip on the press. Local human-rights campaigners say the army has indeed halted a worrying turn of events. The United Nations says Niger is the world's least developed country. ...

## Israeli spies in Lebanon: Not such a success

A round-up of Israeli spies

WITH a lot less exposure in the world's press than it got for its recent Dubai operation, Israel has quietly suffered a string of setbacks in Lebanon, a front-line state with which it has often been at war. Lebanon's security service says that since November 2008 it has broken up no fewer than 25 Israeli spy rings. The reported arrest this month of a colonel in Lebanese army intelligence, identified solely by the initials GS, brings the number of those charged to 70-plus; 40 of them are in Lebanese police custody.

For a force better known for its failure to manage traffic, let alone resolve Lebanon's sorry catalogue of political murders, the counter-intelligence sweep is an unprecedented coup. The arrests are said to have exposed a series of agents for Israel, ranging from a retired Lebanese army general who ran a housecleaning service to a garage owner who specialised in supplying Hizbullah, Lebanon's Shia party-cum-militia, with vehicles that he secretly fitted with tracking devices. ...



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