

## ARTICLE



# Equatorial Guinea: An Eternal Present

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 **Abstract**

The author analyses the current situation in Equatorial Guinea, the recent effects of the oil exploitation and President Teodoro Obiang Nguema's preparation of his son, Teodorin, as his successor, which might be seriously challenged.

 **Keywords**

oil exploitation, dictatorship, corruption

When my father and I travelled throughout Equatorial Guinea ten years ago to rekindle his idyllic memories as a colonial medical doctor and confront them with the reality of a then emerging oil power, we could hardly have expected what this country would become. Back in the country, to my astonishment, the miracle was dazzling. Giant concrete towers, gazing like alien idols at the imperturbable ocean, springing up from among the remaining beautiful rationalist-style houses built by the Spanish settlers more than a half a century ago. Thousands of immigrant workers, from neighbouring countries and overseas, feverishly moving between construction sites. Beyond, the still majestic rain forest shining forth, pierced with immaculate roads, including an unimaginable highway. Somewhere, a hydroelectric dam supplies the general power network with sustainable energy. Glossy shopping centres, brand new cars, luxurious hotels, crowded planes: a new promising world which came in a rush for the Guinean people. The traditional postcard of poverty and abandonment is disappearing thanks to what is a surprising government policy for African standards: investing the income from its natural resources in improving the living conditions of its people.

Nonetheless, such a dramatic current transformation was never in the mind of the dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema when endless sources of oil were found; we were simply witness to his indifference. The change came from the United States. The strategic relevance of the country for the US multinationals, together with the continuous looting by the Obiang family without any compensation for the local population, could only lead to dangerous instability. Not long after our departure, a Senate committee<sup>1</sup> brought to light, in 2004, that he had funds which were close to 60% of the Equatoguinean GDP coffered in the notorious Riggs bank, experts in international money laundering. Soon after, a mercenary incursion, supported by the exiled opposition, attempted to oust him. Yet with the help of his president friends, Mugabe from Zimbabwe and Dos Santos from Angola, the dictator was able to stifle the coup.

To avoid increased notoriety, the Obiangs saw themselves forced to invest in the country a proportion of their profits from international tenders, with lucrative opaque commissions set aside for the family. It was definitively a less profitable form of corruption but it was doubtless a more presentable one in the face of international public

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<sup>1</sup> The head of this committee was Senator Carl Levin.



opinion, and also more in accordance with current practice in the developed world. Teodoro Obiang accepted this and so unleashed the modernising fury in Equatorial Guinea. There arrived new multinationals for public works, this time related to other friends of the dictator, such as France, Mubarak's Egypt and the King of Morocco. The American plan was to create an African oil emirate, similar to those established by the British Empire in the Persian Gulf, to continue exploiting their oil. The people (the population of Equatorial Guinea is estimated to be around 700,000) would have considerable economic privileges but almost nonexistent individual rights, and were effectively ruled by an authoritarian dynasty easily manipulated by the West.

However, in April 2012 something unexpected happened. With the accusation of embezzlement of public assets, a French judge ordered the arrest of the heir designated by Teodoro to succeed him, his son Teodorin. His numerous properties in France were seized. This was a very serious setback from his traditional ally, whom he had always favoured with important monopolies in telecommunications, banking and petrol distribution. France has been even in charge of training the security forces. The reasons for this move are unclear, but in Paris they also seem to have a long-term plan for Guinea, which does not include Teodorin, an unpredictable spoilt child whose latest whim was the million-dollar purchase of some Michael Jackson memorabilia. The atmosphere is highly tense as President Obiang is very sick, with prostate cancer. It is said in Malabo that doctors give him, at most, two more years. Obiang's stubbornness in defending his eldest son, and the need to count on popular support in case of external questioning, may also have accelerated the public investment fever and a certain interest in those most deprived. New contracts contain clauses compelling multinationals to employ Equatoguineans and to develop social projects.

The situation looks like a Shakespearian tragedy. Teodoro Obiang himself acceded to power with a military coup, deposing his bloodthirsty uncle, president Macias, whom he had executed after a trial without any fair trial guarantees. He has more than twenty sons from different women, but, according to the Fang tribal tradition, the only ones who really matter are those from his first wife, the ambitious Constanca, a real Lady Macbeth. The countless Obiang family assets come from corruption and extortion of international investors. Any serious business in Equatorial Guinea must have the support of, and the resulting percentage of pickings for an Obiang clan member. The international order to arrest Teodorin had all the impact of a bomb, bringing sudden uncertainty about the survival of the whole family after the President's death.

Other clan members with a better reputation, like his US-educated stepbrother Gabriel, could apply as alternative candidates with international support. They need to get rid of the undesirable elements so that nothing changes for the family business. A new, bloody, clan readjustment might be already secretly under preparation, with or without the involvement of the French.

Teodoro Obiang's dictatorship record in human rights is no better than his uncle's. Elections are held periodically to comply with the formally democratic constitution, but their results are systematically manipulated. Last May, official results gave 99% of the vote to the President's party, the PDGE<sup>2</sup>. Most opposition leaders live exiled in Spain. There is just one legal opposition party, the CPDS<sup>3</sup>. Under the advice of the Spanish socialist party, CPDS participates in the electoral farce, allegedly trusting in a future democratic transition that never comes. Nevertheless, there could also be more obscure reasons that explain the strange interest of Spanish socialist leaders in colluding with Obiang's dictatorship. For some local intellectuals, financing of their party, or of themselves, should not be discarded. Whatever the case, the harassment and repression of any critic is still part of government policy and the consequences are serious: arbitrary detentions, disappearances, torture, murder... I remember very well Dr. Elías Mao, my father's classmate at university in Barcelona, and one of the very few black professionals who had survived the killings triggered after decolonization. Some months after our trip, he was murdered with impunity in an alleged traffic accident. Dr. Mao had been accused of informing the International Red Cross of the situation of political prisoners in Equatoguinean prisons. The latest known victim is Clara Nsegue Ayi, known as "Lola", a human rights defender from Mongomo, the home town of the Obiang family. She had recently dared to claim reparation for families of victims of the regime. Fear of reprisals maintains an environment of self-repression and mutual surveillance that works perfectly. No one talks openly. Obiang trusts that the spoils from the oil feast arriving in many Guinean homes will make them forget their right to decide who should rule the country. The key is to create, as soon as possible, a "good dictatorship".

Within this philanthropic plan, education is at the bottom of the list. Education produces conscious citizens who might claim their rights, a dangerous thing for the family in power. The state of public education continues to be at the level of the poorest African nations. The education provided by Catholic Spanish institutions, which serves around 30% of students, has been without funds for a year now since Spanish aid was cut off due to the economic crisis in the former colonial metropolis. Most of the population

2 Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea

3 Convergence for a Social Democracy



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lives in dire poverty in rural areas within the continental zone. Villages comprise small wooden houses, with cultivation of subsistence agriculture and hunting still being the main source of protein for the people. There is no free public healthcare and life expectancy is 47 years because of malaria and other endemic diseases in Equatorial Africa. In bigger towns, the old colonial hospitals have been repaired but medical services and medicines must be paid for. Public health doctors are still professionals sent by the Cuban government, another proof of the flexibility of Teodoro Obiang in managing the country's affairs.

In the words of an old exiled opponent, Severo Moto, talking about Equatorial Guinea is talking about an "eternal present", which started in October 1968 with inde-

pendence from Spain and the arrival in power of the first of the Mongomo saga, Macias Nguema. That continued with the appearance of the figure of the current president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, in 1979. And it might well be perpetuated in the future by the crowning of ineffable Teodorin or another Obiang member. Ultimately, the United States and France, the main actors in the African chess game, with their pressure and schemes, both desire that such an eternal present should never end. It is an eternal present that remains extremely positive for the economic interests of their nations and businesses. Sadly, empowering the Equatoguinean people is not included in anybody's plans. It is a future that this amazing country still has to wait for. ■

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Eduardo Soto-Trillo is a Spanish writer and international jurist who has considerable professional experience working for international organizations in conflict and post-conflict societies in Africa, Latin America and Central Europe. His main publications are: *Voces sin Voz*, Intermedio, Bogotá, 2002, on the Colombian FARC guerrillas; *Los olvidados*, Foca, 2004, on the postcolonial evolution of Equatorial Guinea; and *Viaje al abandono*, Aguilar, 2011, on the conflict in Western Sahara.



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