



THE TEODORÍN SITUATION (PART I): PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION IN EQUATORIAL GUINEA

El caso Teodorín (Parte I): Sucesión presidencial en Guinea Ecuatorial

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Abstract

The essay is divided and published into two parts: each separately assessing the main recent trends in the national and international politics of Equatorial Guinea — roughly between the Covid-19 crisis and May 2023. Part I profiles the current vice president, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangué, widely known by his moniker Teodorín. His dynastic succession seems practically set in stone and quite imminent, given that his father, the president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, is an octogenarian and has recently shown many signs of an already effectively retired. Part I focuses on Teodorín's populist policy style, the demotion and persecution of contenders, and the punishment of anti-government figures both within and outside the country, which have served to display and consolidate his domestic ascension to power. The combined introduction in part I, and the conclusion in part II outlines the recent shifts across the domestic political, international geopolitical, and economic domains, that have marked and steered Teodorín's active and seemingly inevitable rise to the presidency of Equatorial Guinea.



Resumen

El ensayo se ha dividido y publicado en dos partes: cada una evalúa por separado las principales novedades en la política nacional e internacional de Guinea Ecuatorial —aproximadamente entre la crisis del covid-19 y mayo de 2023—. La Parte I presenta al actual vicepresidente, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangué, conocido por el sobrenombre de Teodorín. Su sucesión dinástica parece prácticamente inamovible y bastante inminente, dado que su padre, el presidente Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, es octogenario y, últimamente, muestra signos de su jubilación efectiva. La Parte I se centra en el estilo de política populista de Teodorín, la degradación y persecución de contendientes y el castigo de figuras antigubernamentales tanto dentro como fuera del país, que han servido para mostrar y consolidar su ascenso interno al poder. La introducción combinada en la parte I y la conclusión de la parte II describen los cambios recientes en la política nacional, la geopolítica internacional y la economía que han marcado y dirigido el ascenso activo y aparentemente inevitable de Teodorín a la presidencia de Guinea Ecuatorial.

Equatorial Guinea; Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangué; electoral autocracies; presidential succession. *Guinea Ecuatorial; Teodoro Nguema Obiang; autocracias electorales; sucesión presidencial.*



Key words

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1. Introduction

Reliable data on Equatorial Guinea is sparse, and the political analysis of current developments is highly fragmented. All ongoing observations are provided by three distinct groups with multi-lingual and rarely interlinked publication channels. These three clusters consist of: first, the political exiles in Spain, who independently publish a stream of local news on social media or blogs, shared by scattered and persecuted anti-government activists, occasionally amplified and usually simplified by a variety of established international NGOs and newspapers; second, French and British energy journalists and intelligence consultants who generate mountains of lucrative gossip by sleuthing through company earnings reports, and by reaching out to party and diplomatic insiders; and third, the U.S. Department of State and the associated multilateral financing organizations who meticulously study all the correspondence and documents produced by the government, in order to furnish encouraging or discouraging guidelines for the ruling *Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial* (PDGE) as a form of political pressure. Among the regular stream of reports about the country produced by the U.S. State Department (2022, 2023), it is worth noting that its “Investment” report is especially thorough and prepared by the U.S. Embassy in Malabo, in contrast to the brief “Human Rights” report, compiled by its staff at the Office of Country Reports at the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. To accurately portray the political, geopolitical, and economic trends in Equatorial Guinea during the past few years, it is necessary to skip past the respective ideological and interest-laden pitfalls of these sets of sources.

There is a shared sense among the scholars and activists dedicated to Equatorial Guinea that the country has been suddenly reappearing on various political and media radars. This two-part article argues that the current resurgence of interest on various fronts is related to the imminent dynastic succession, practically set in stone, of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo’s first-born son, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, to the presidency of this republic — or electoral autocracy. Both the opposition and the government tend to refer to the president as “Obiang”, and to his son as “Nguema Obiang”. However, to avoid confusion, I will use his moniker, Teodorín, which translates to “Little Theodore” or “Teddy”, as he refers to himself on his active social media accounts. This resurgence of interest in Spain has been sparked by a high-profile case at the High Court (*Audiencia Nacional*) which is investigating the abduction of political exiles who also held Spanish citizenship. The Spanish judge has implicated Carmelo Ovono Obiang, chief of foreign security and another son of president Obiang, in the international crime. This ongoing case escalated into a European Parliament resolution on 16 February 2023 concerning “Violence against opposition activists in Equatorial Guinea, notably the case of Julio Obama Mefuman” — a Spanish citizen and legionary in the Spanish armed forces accused of participating in a 2017 coup attempt to assassinate Obiang at his hometown palace during Christmas 2017, who was then kidnapped in South Sudan in 2019 and declared dead in prison in Equatorial Guinea in January 2023.

In addition, Equatorial Guinea is currently among Africa’s top three liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporters — after Nigeria and Angola and excluding the long-standing gas giants connected by pipelines in North Africa. Until 2020, Spain and Portugal were the main European destinations for its oil and gas exports, however, for the first time in 2022, the new LNG terminals in Germany also received tankers shipped from the country. Approximately 10% of oil and 4% of natural gas imports to the European Union originate from the Gulf of Guinea, but the region’s share in the European gas market is expected to grow significantly in the medium term.

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Equatorial Guinea also holds the presidency of OPEC and the “Gas OPEC”, the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), for 2023. This position was initially held by the long-standing hydrocarbon minister (2012-February 2023), Gabriel Mbagha Obiang Lima, often referred to as Gabriel MOL, who is Obiang’s son from his second wife. He no longer holds either of these roles. Recent developments have dispelled the commonly held dramatic conception of a King Lear-like rivalry between paternal half-siblings Teodorín and Gabriel MOL for the presidency, each backed by their own maternal kinsmen. His ten-year mandate steering the sale of hydrocarbons coincided with a collapse of oil and gas output and thus of the major source of government revenue — all caused by factors beyond his control in the depths of oil wells, and in the prices set by long-term contracts and futures markets. Furthermore, Bata, the country’s largest city, has emerged as an unusual stage for a revival of gunboat diplomacy between the U.S. and China in Africa, related to visits by the U.S. navy’s Sixth Fleet ships in the summer of 2021 and 2022 and the as-yet-unsubstantiated rumors, beginning in December 2021, about a Chinese plan to construct its first Atlantic naval base in the coastal city’s port. There are thus a variety of reasons to try to understand the specifics of these recent, country-defining situations. Figureheads are morphing, the economy is still in freefall, and empires are regrouping — all above the shifting sands of multiple “narratives”.

The oil boom that took over the economy led to a twenty-fold increase in GDP between the years 2000 and 2013. However, by 2017, GDP contracted by around 60% because of falling oil prices and depleting oil fields. From there, it plummeted by another 50% during the Covid-19 crisis, due to reduced demand from China, the primary destination of its exports. A year ago, the IMF (2022) forecasted an end to the nearly decade-long recession, thanks to gas windfalls. However, the estimates were generated before a massive incident at ExxonMobil’s Zafiro oil field in September 2022 halted operations temporarily — a small explosion left a large water-filled hole on the side of the rusty tanker repurposed as an oil production storage and offloading unit. Reuters (2022) reported that Exxon is decommissioning Zafiro and exiting the country before its license expires in 2026. Zafiro, Exxon’s avowed West African “jewel”, whose discovery and rapid exploitation single-handedly kick-started the oil boom in the mid-1990s with peak production in 2005 reaching 375,000 barrels per day (bpd), is in a dire state. By December 2022, Argus, the business intelligence data provider, estimated that total oil production in the country dropped to just 60,000 bpd, with Zafiro only able to produce 15,000 bpd after the evacuation of non-essential staff (Itayim, 2023). Such levels have not been seen since 1997 when oil output quickly skyrocketed above 50,000 bpd. After the Zafiro accident, the IMF revised GDP downwards for 2022, making Equatorial Guinea the only country on the African continent with negative growth. Despite the ongoing and catastrophic contraction, there have been almost no inroads toward economic diversification and political reform. Instead, as Ana Lúcia Sá and Edalina Rodrigues Sanches (2021, p. 99) recently noted — for the period up to around 2019 — the country has proved to be “remarkably resilient”, through an “astute” combination of the domestic and international leveraging of “its resources and geostrategic position”.

A strange and surprising mix of long-term political continuity and long-term economic volatility characterizes the Nguemist political regime, which has steadily seized state power for over 50 years. It is important to appreciate the historical pattern of how this one-party or one-extended-family-state can appear all over the ideological and geopolitical map. Empirical findings suggest that Teodorín has been ably, rather than blindly or crudely, navigating through various forms of external power, in addition to creating his own original political techniques, to consolidate

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his rise and cement the inevitability of his becoming the next president. These conclusions arise from rigorously avoiding the ideological underpinnings of the three distinct clusters of contemporary coverage outlined in the first paragraph. The respective pitfalls of the three “observational-interventionist” genres, which constitute a kind of trinity of global “narratives” that produce the bulk of documentation around the country, are: first, the sympathetic belief in peaceful regime change, new beginnings, and good governance continuously derailed by irruptions of charismatic and physical power that set the tone and pace of new developments; second, the promotional and slightly delusional reasoning of hydrocarbon and open military prediction markets that complete narratives but rely on fragmented and unclassified information; and third, the positive management frameworks and diplomatic-technocratic views disconnected from historical and even local context.

The two-part essay is entirely empirical, and I owe the idea to Gustau Nerín who proposed the impossible challenge in 2012, by noting that the only way to understand politics in Equatorial Guinea is to map out kinship networks in an old-fashioned anthropological manner. The piece also serves as an ode to Max Liniger-Goumaz (1993, 2000), the esteemed specialist of the country who passed away in 2018, and whose lifelong profiling of the Nguemist regime makes it possible to assess current events with a historical sense. My methodology is based on a thorough historical examination, which straightforwardly simply involves perusing through all available documents at whatever collections and at whichever interval they are available — in reverse chronological order between two points in time, which is the way files are traditionally arranged in archives¹. This includes extensive scrolling through Teodorín’s various social media accounts.

The purpose of this two-part article is not merely to relate a series of little-known facts and give an idea about the goings-on, or to provide what Anton Smith, a one-time U.S. Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy (2009, 2009b, 2009c) in Malabo, in a series of unique memorandums, called, “a ground-level view of one of the world’s most-isolated and least-understood countries to interested readers”. Every data point in the argument serves to trace a connection that supports the triple-shift thesis of this paper, which can be summarized as: from Obiang to Teodorín, from oil to gas, and back to the U.S.A. However, one main concept-lesson can be derived from the paradoxical realities central to this analysis: if the “state situation” of Equatorial Guinea can be understood through a set of extended family and affinal relations with impulses of unification, subordination, and fracture — and Obiang’s death will indeed cause a massive fracture — then the diplomatic stances and economic positions that flow through the country need to be studied in the same way. I should even say they need to be “ethnographically” de-

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¹ For an account of the way discontinuous archival structure helps productive readings come through see Martino (2014, 2014b). I also integrate the most careful and informed readings of the country of the past years, which usually remain unpublished or semi-published or are only available in Spanish, for example those of Donato Ndong and Juan Aranzadi especially. I draw from the well-grounded visions of Ndong’s series of excellent interviews with the influential radio host Cesar Vidal in April and October 2022, and from Aranzadi’s unpublished book on post-colonial political culture in Equatorial Guinea, titled *Génesis y evolución del Estado cancerbero nguemista*. While they do not study Teodorín in any detail they provide a new analytical and historical attitude which is necessary to renew the understanding of the country (see Aranzadi & Martino, 2022). I also continuously rely on the immense knowledge of prolific exiles and independent researchers, such as Celestino Okenve and Mocache Massoko. Okenve is associated with the sprawling forum at guinea-ecuatorial.net and Massoko is the editor-in-chief of the productive online magazine *Diario Rombe*. I also want to acknowledge my reliance on the unique data and analyses at *Radio Macuto* regularly put out by its founder, Josimar Oyono Eseng. All draw, in turn, on their respective networks of friends, sources and informants. Most of these different sources are aggregated in a thematic, chronological and quite complete way by the incredibly helpful Spanish website ASODEGUE “Noticias de Guinea Ecuatorial” at <https://www.asodeguesundeta.org>

terminated: examining where they have been seen to be standing, and what their own internal accounts reveal about themselves. The main pitfall of my own type of “realistic” approach is the incessant relation of detail.

2. From Obiang Nguema to Nguema Obiang

The reappearance of rumors about president Obiang’s ill health are still unfounded. Nevertheless, Teodorín’s active presence on Twitter (@teonguema) and Instagram (@teddynguema) and his flashy new website, www.lavicepress.org, managed by over a dozen press officers, are attempting to showcase who is acting as the current center of state affairs, with constant interventions directing and overruling domestic and partly also foreign policy². The focus everywhere was the re-election of Obiang on November 20, 2022, for another seven-year term, which, if completed, would mark half a century of Obiang’s rule. Behind the ostensible absurdity that the National Electoral Commission initially reported 94,9% of the vote going to Obiang, and by the end of the month revised the figure to 99% when proclaiming him the “elected candidate” (405,910 of the 411,081 “valid votes”) and the resulting complete control of all parliamentary, senatorial and municipal council seats by the PDGE (2022), lies a more hidden yet significant story about the effective transfer of power that occurred. All eyes should now be fixed on Teodorín. The influential pan-African magazine, *Jeune Afrique* (2022), reported that the unexpected announcement in September 2022 to hold the presidential election a year early was due to a compromise brokered by Jerónimo Osa Osa Ecoro, the general secretary of the PDGE — and kingmaker. He channeled the impatient aspirations of Teodorín to accelerate the “transition” and he obtained “assurances from his father that the latter will step down”, though not until “a year or two” after the election. This would give the almost 55-year-old prodigal son more time to improve his “credibility” before taking up the reins — and indeed, Teodorín has actively embarked on a spree of domestic noblesse oblige and dramatic international statesmanship.

The sitting president has primarily appeared in scripted ceremonial events and has noticeably been absent from significant diplomatic engagements and the public eye, sometimes for months. Rumors suggest that Obiang has already “lost” the capacity to assert his authority. The meetings Obiang did attend included private sit-downs with Olusegun Obasanjo, who traveled to Malabo in August 2022 outside of his role as A.U. High Representative, and with Joe Biden at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022 (PDGE, 2022b). According to the prominent exiled politician, Severo Moto, Obiang was asked to step down and hand over power, as he had promised in the previous 2016 elections when he announced it would be his “final term”. Under the constitution or *Ley Fundamental de Guinea Ecuatorial*, revised in 2012, either stepping down or dying in office would constitutionally result in an automatic ascension of the vice president. In addition to his nomination to the vice presidency before the last election in 2016, Teodorín had been bumped up to second vice president in charge of defense and state security in 2012 — a move that initially seemed to simply shield him from prosecution for corruption in a French court. The police at the Ministry of National Security, and the military

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2 There was a previous now defunct website at “teodoro-nguema.com” titled, “A man, a leader, a vision for Equatorial Guinea”. <https://archive.is/20140613205007/http://teodoro-nguema.com/?q=en/node/58>; The YouTube channel of La Vice Press, @lavicepressguineaequatorial, is a great source for footage, while the Economist magazine (2017) made a video montage profile a few years ago, clocking millions of views.

at the Ministry of National Defense still report directly to the vice president, and this concentration of power has spilled over into all domains.

Teodorín's imminent succession should probably involve a new election at some point. However, even in a more regulated election, he is highly likely to win outright due to his evident possession of a newfound populist touch that resonates in a country devastated by a steady ten-year recession. Many exiles have noted the reminiscence of "Macias" in Teodorín, precisely because of this parallel of spontaneous and "captivating" speech. Francisco Macias won the 1968 election that granted the country independence from Franco-led Spain in a U.N. mandated and supervised constitutional referendum in 1968 — by a clean landslide due to his popular anti-colonial rhetoric and non-elitist charisma (Álvarez Chillida and Pardo Sanz, 2022). This was the only free and fair election in the country's history. Obiang, who has a distinct unemotive and monotonous style of speech, has also picked up on this quality that he and all his other sons, or potential successors, lack. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* (2016), Obiang described Teodorín as a "political aficionado" who counts on the support of the "majority of young people" and stated that it would "be unfair if his talent was not rewarded". While Equatorial Guinea has held elections every seven years since 1989, they mainly serve as a spectacle of "re-enthronement", as many critics point out. Even Obiang recently confided to the French ambassador, Christian Bader, that "an election is not an election, it's a *fête*" (Hugeux, 2021).

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3. The tragedy and the farce

Teodorín's defining strength stems from his unique ability to speak freely and extrapolate the PDGE's enduring and effective rhetoric of "foreign interference" within the country. Teodorín was appointed as the election campaign manager for the PDGE's 2022 election "*fête*". He regularly spoke with and interacted with the party base and civil servants in a spontaneous and lively way, responding to cheers rarely documented abroad. He even makes light of his international notoriety for what he calls "luxury living", which helps root his charismatic appeal and is not seen as a source of shame or illegitimacy. He is effectively in charge of government messaging and propaganda through his highly active Twitter account — sometimes posting up to a dozen tweets a day — which exhibits distinct populist, even Trumpian flavors. Indeed, Donald Trump's Twitter account seems to be the first and almost only political figure he follows — aside from a long list of international musicians, celebrities, news agencies, and private jet companies. There is a new dissensus amongst exiles regarding Teodorín, who until recently mainly fed and reflected the international media's image of him as an airheaded playboy. However, they now express sentiments such as "what's going on with Teodorín, everyone wants to get into his jacuzzi" or, alternatively, hope that "they will surely get rid of him once Obiang dies".

Obiang is an unquestionable and even supernatural figure of power, distant, and quasi-royal. Despite having also practically served as the Comptroller of the country as well in the past, as he "proudly" mentioned to a U.S. official, he "personally maintain control of the checkbook", "even for routine expenses" (U.S. Embassy, 2009, 2009b). These qualities and capacities are not directly transposed to his first-born son. Instead, even though Teodorín is better known as a bon vivant who has spent at least \$200 million in luxury assets abroad — a significant portion of which has been confiscated by Western legal authorities over the past decade — he is now emerging as a gauche entrepreneurial strongman. His education ended in the 1980s with a high school degree from a prestigious French boarding school and lacks discernible military training

or rank. In 1991, he received a modest sponsorship to study English in Malibu, funded by the first American oil and gas company to establish itself in the country successfully. Once the oil and gas proceeds started gushing in the late 1990s, Teodorín returned to Malibu to, amongst others, start a failed rap music label, date the actress from the hit film “Booty Call”, and have his diamond-studded Michael Jackson memorabilia and \$30 million mansion confiscated by a Californian court when Obama’s Assistant Attorney General expanded the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative (Silverstein, 2011)³.

Teodorín’s strength obviously also emerges from his significant funds, which are an order of magnitude higher than what other officials can access. However, he has consistently been seen as a usurper in quite a few circles of the regime, and firmly out of place in international diplomacy. While after the Malibu scandal the USAID contractor stationed at the U.S. embassy insisted on the “devolution of spending authority from the President” (U.S. Senate, 2008), there is evidence suggesting that Teodorín has had close contact, at least in name, with the notorious network of international bank accounts and shell-companies of the ruling family already since the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, an Equatorial Guinean diplomat visiting their embassy in Washington inspected the accounts and jotted down a “current account with more than 100 million U.S. dollars in the name of Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue”, stemming “from Equatorial Guinea’s oil royalties”. This information was recorded in a diary of Joaquín Alogo (n. d.), published in 2000 by his widow after he was executed and his body was left in a ditch following a meeting with fellow cocaine traffickers in Medellín, Colombia. Between 1997 and 2011, Teodorín seems to have been primarily living in Paris before leaving the country after his prosecution for corruption, which began in 2008, along with the confiscation of his luxury vehicles and assets. Part II of this essay — published in this same journal issue — will delve into the developments of this significant case in greater detail.

The most striking demonstration of Teodorín’s newly acquired paramountcy was his commandeering of an anti-corruption commission set up in May 2022, known as the CNPCC (*Comisión Nacional de Prevención y Lucha Contra la Corrupción*), established by a presidential decree in 2020 to fulfill the requirements of a 2018 IMF loan. The anti-corruption law excludes private companies, the president, and the vice president as “figures of interest”. Over the past year, Teodorín has transformed this commission into a personal “drain the swamp” instrument to target a network of PDGE officials, including his half-brother Ruslan Obiang Nsue, who allegedly sold an airplane from the national airline Ceiba in the Canary Islands and received the proceeds directly into his bank account, as leaked images show. Teodorín (2022) tweeted: “There is no room for corruption. The people must know who is behind the sale of the ATR 72-500 aircraft”.

The commission’s sessions, televised by the national broadcaster TVGE, began in 2023 and contained all the elements of a show-trial. Teodorín can be seen vehemently quizzing Ruslan Obiang regarding the disappearance and sale of the Ceiba airplane. As Ruslan stands up to defend himself, he implicates other high-level officials and extended family members. From his single seat at the head of a gilded table, Teodorín calls upon seven company directors only to hector them on the need to “make reforms”. When the current Ceiba director attempts to ex-

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3 The proceeds for this forfeiture were returned to Equatorial Guinea primarily in the form of 600,000 Covid-19 vaccines in 2021, while some assets such as a Gulfstream jet and Michael Jackson’s famous white glove were kept after a 2014 settlement. His Malibu mansion famously had Mel Gibson and Britney Spears for neighbours and was the reported site of many “drug binges”, “escort service girls”, “and even a tiger”.

plain the new auditing procedures, Teodorín accuses him of “taking all the money”; and claims: “you have changed nothing”. Chuckling, he remarks: “when I first met you, you looked shabby”; “because of how you look now, I can tell [smiles], you have been handling and manipulating lots of money”; “sit down”. His chief of police then reads out an evidentiary trail of embezzlement, and Teodorín calls upon a witness, the director’s humble office secretary, who testifies about being summoned at all hours of the day to facilitate payments from the company’s checkbook for various expenses (La voz de los sin voz, 2023).

The constellation of figures seated in the front row of his palatial table included Tito Garriga — the husband of Obiang’s daughter and a major general of the air force and the regime — as well as Marcelino Owono Edu, who quickly denied any association after being implicated as well. Owono Edu previously served as the minister of hydrocarbons until 2012, then as finance minister, and has been a direct mentor to the high-level followers of Gabriel MOL. Owono Edu has been a “target” for some time and even publicly defended himself on the PDGE (2020) party webpage following popular accusations linking him to the 2017 Christmas coup. Despite being appointed as a presidential adviser on “budget and financial control” in March 2023 (Equatorial Guinea, 2023), he has been obviously unable to halt the ongoing related “investigation” targeting all the key leaders of the large Teodorín-skeptical faction. A surprising number of veterans have been placed under house arrest, apparently for forging Obiang’s signature for various projects and salary supplements amounting to \$20 million. Among those implicated is included most prominently the minister of finance until February 2023, Valentin Ela Maye, son of Florencio Maye Ela, Obiang’s first vice president after the 1979 coup against Macias — whose daughter Virginia Maye is married to Gabriel MOL.

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4. Teodorín’s other populist policies

Teodorín regularly launches into tirades against “invading” francophone African immigrants, accusing them of “draining” the country’s wealth. Amnesty International and the neighboring African press have highlighted cases of prolonged detentions. In the lead-up to the elections, hundreds of undocumented immigrants were deported across the border to Cameroon, where they were received by the Red Cross. This vital commercial border is often closed during elections or crises and plans to “build a wall” were discussed and prepared by officials in 2019, abandoned, and later revived in 2022 (La Vice Press, 2023). The at least 50-strong mercenary forces of the 2017 coup attempt were mainly from Chad and northern Cameroon. Most of them were tied up by the Cameroonian police before they could cross the border and have since been sentenced to over 30 years by a Cameroonian military tribunal for conspiracy, possession of illegal arms, and munitions. However, during the mass-trial in Bata of over a hundred suspected “coup plotters” in March 2018, several Francophone immigrants were also sentenced and claimed that they were following a promised job in Mongomo, unaware of any “plot” (Mendez, 2019).

Other recent policies bearing Teodorín’s name, designed to alleviate the severe economic crisis, include reducing 3G data tariffs for mobile phones by half and imposing price caps on 40 essential goods. However, despite this 50% reduction in prices for items such as rice and eggs, their prices remain higher than pre-Covid levels. Practically all food is imported, primarily from Cameroon. In the case of more upscale retailers controlled by various Spanish and Lebanese wholesalers, an ongoing scandal has emerged involving the relabeling and selling of expired goods. Teodorín showed up at supermarket chains and, in speeches, publicly accused foreign

business of poisoning the population and repatriating profits and added to their list of wrongdoings their lack of provision of consumer credits. In early 2023, he also made a notable display of distributing cargoes of food supplies received from Serbia, which he secured after meeting the Serbian president in Belgrade in June 2022.

The launching of Teodorín's *Operación Limpieza* (Operation Clean-up) was of significant import in May 2022. Over 800 police officers were deployed to impose night-time curfews on adolescents in response to a series of domestic burglaries and gruesome murders committed by street gangs such as 8 *Machetes* and *Los Malos*. Up to 500 youths were arrested, and over a hundred were imprisoned without trial or explanation to their families. In June, a leaked death certificate of an arrested 21-year-old Bruno Mangue Eyang listed "anorexia and dehydration" as the cause of death (Somos+, 2022). Teodorín then tweeted (2022a) that over a hundred of these "youths" individuals would be sent to a Ugandan "useful trade" military training camp. It appears that he has quickly recognized the populist utility of cracking down on gangs from Nayib Bukele, the equally Twitter-active president of El Salvador and self-declared "world's coolest dictator". Both leaders also share a similar fashion sense, altering between tailored Italian suits and a "start-up founder" aesthetic of jeans and t-shirts — though Teodorín never goes without his thick-framed tinted glasses. Just as Bukele has counted on the crucial support from the Archbishop of San Salvador due to his "legal" actions against abortion and gang violence, Teodorín has mobilized similar allies and sentiments in the country — probably one of the most officially Catholic countries in the world, with around 90% of the population identifying as Catholic. Teodorín even met Pope Francis after the large munitions explosions at the Nkoantoma military barracks in Bata in March 2021, which killed over a hundred people and devastated the city. Teodorín visited hospitals, handed out essential goods on the "front-line", and assigned the task of city reconstruction to the Archbishop of Malabo, Juan Nsue Edjang Mayé. He handed him \$3,6 million in front of the cameras for this purpose. Nevertheless, Teodorín is famously unmarried and not very pious as he is better known as a regular patron of exclusive local discotheques and a connoisseur of the "high life", both in Malabo, and abroad.

Extinguishes any hopes the opposition may have to compete directly against the more divisive Teodorín in a future election

5. The opposition party

The violent incidents leading up to and the subsequent reshuffling of ministers after the November 2022 elections suggest that the "fête" primarily served as a display of further power concentration that dampens and even extinguishes any hopes the opposition may have to compete directly against the more divisive Teodorín in a future election. In April 2022, the PDGE announced a "democratic coalition" of 14 parties for the scheduled local elections. This coalition consisted of parties with very few members, sometimes just one, and most of these were either recently formed or with leaders already working in government or at SOEs (state-owned enterprises). The only legalized true opposition party with a longer history is the CPDS (*Convergencia Para la Democracia Social*), which received less than 10,000 votes. The only other legalized opposition party, the PCSD, received less than 3,000 votes, with their main noteworthy feature and campaign activity being their acronym similarity to the CPDS. The PDGE introduced a new electoral quota requiring at least 35% of all candidates to be women, and in early 2023, it was announced that the new prime minister would be a woman for the first time. Manuela Roka Botey, who, while previously at the ministry of education, had not made any newsworthy appearances or statements in the past years, and her appointment seemed to be designed to

guarantee that no shadows are cast on Teodorín — who took to Twitter (2023) to highlight his country's “commitment to gender equality”.

The leader of the CPDS, Andres Esono Ondo, stated that his party was effectively prohibited from campaigning. He retracted their only attempt at electoral canvassing, a call for party members to meet publicly in Malabo, after the PDGE's general secretary labeled such gatherings a “threat to public order”, receiving further threats from the interior ministry commission responsible for banning parties, the *Comisión de Vigilancia y Seguimiento de los Acuerdos del Pacto Nacional Vinculante* (CPDS, 2022). The CPDS is excluded from broadcasting through TVGE, and the only other more popular private channel is Asonga TV, founded and owned by Teodorín. When Esono proposed a televised debate between the candidates, Teodorín (2022c) responded in a tweet to “amuse himself by debating with a goat”. In early November 2022, Esono launched the CPDS electoral program to a small audience that mainly included the ambassadors of Spain, France, and the U.S. sitting in the front row. The CPDS (2022b) manifesto is an elaborate and lengthy academic document that begins with a theory of the state and institutions in general, and then provides a blueprint of the entire legal and administrative structure of a new state during and after the “transition” out of the dictatorship. Andres Esono was the founder of the local socialist party (PSGE), which had competed as an opposition party in previous elections, but whose other leaders have since been integrated into the ruling party “coalition” — the socialist party co-founder was the public health minister. The remaining exiled and local opposition is united in desperately lobbying for the regime to disappear, modeled in the language and expectations of the peaceful Spanish “transition” to a liberal democracy after the death of Franco.

Esono launched the CPDS electoral program to a small audience that mainly include the ambassadors of Spain, France, and the U.S.

Despite obvious instances of fraud, the CPDS's poor electoral results, which were even lower than in previous elections, can largely be attributed to the weighty and widespread social pressures that compel people to conform and accept the PDGE as the primary or only source of direct and indirect income. The CPDS also had to defend itself against verbal attacks from some exile groups, who again resorted to their preferred insult: the “grateful stomachs” whose participation in “farcical” elections helped “legitimize” the government to international observers (Nsue, 2022; Miko Abogo, 2022, see also Nse & Micó, 2016). In February 2022, a union of the most important exiled parties and leaders sent a direct letter to Obiang expressing their desire to participate in the elections, but only under the following condition: amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles, the legalization of all political parties, and the establishment of a biometric electoral census⁴. This union, emerging from the letter, came to be known as COLIPGE (*Coalición para la Liberación de los Pueblos de Guinea Ecuatorial*). Another meeting held in March 2022 at the headquarters of a socialist trade union (*Unión General de Trabajadores*) in Madrid saw a further expansion of this opposition coalition, incorporating local rights groups founded or based in the country, such as *GENuestra* and *Somos+*. They formalized a *Pacto de*

4 Signed by Celestino Okenve Ndo, Partido Union Popular (UP); Severo Matías Moto Nsa, Partido del Progreso de Guinea Ecuatorial (PPGE); Justo Bolekia Boleká, Movimiento para la Autodeterminación de la Isla de Bioko (MAIB); Agustín Meseguer Nzambi, Movimiento de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial-III Republica (MLGE III3); Jesús Mitogo Oyono Andeme, Ciudadanos por la Innovación (CI) [and member of the Nacionalistas por el Interés de Guinea Ecuatorial [NIPGE]; Manuel Osa Mba, ex-Ayudante de Campo del Presidente de Guinea Ecuatorial [based in the U.S.]; Trifonia Adela Mba, Fuerza Nueva Alianza; Juliana Dolores Obono Nguema, Barrenderas de Guinea Ecuatorial; Aquilino Nguema Ona Nchama, Unión para la Democracia y el Desarrollo Social (UDDS); Loreta Bindang Nguema, Foro Solidario por Guinea Ecuatorial (FSGE). (2022, February 18) “Carta al presidente Obiang exigiendo el cumplimiento de condiciones para poder participar en unas futuras elecciones generales”: https://www.guinea-ecuatorial.net/documentos/carta_al_presidente.pdf. In June 2022 other signatories were added to including the Partido de la Libertad Nacional (PLN) based in Houston.

Concordia — aimed at stopping infighting amongst exile groups — and a *Pacto Político*, a pact that sought to coordinate a government in exile, demand a peaceful transition, renounce all political violence, and renew the call for a boycott of any elections until the legalization of all parties (Abaha, 2022). The prominent exiled politician Severo Moto, leader of the PP (*Partido del Progreso*), reiterated his patience in awaiting the regime's implosion.

6. The last elections

The cycle of repression, fear, and intimidation intensified over the summer of 2022, leading up to the announcement of the presidential election. The chain of deaths, alerts, arrests, and detentions without trial are often erroneously labeled “arbitrary” by international actors. Systematic police harassment and coercion, forces commanded by Teodorín, are entirely designed to add to the inviolable weight of his succession. The series of events began with the disappearance of Rubén Mayé Nsue Mangué in early August 2022, a former minister of justice and ambassador in Washington who turned pastor. He was arrested after a viral recording of him denouncing that the devil had taken over the country circulated via WhatsApp groups. This was followed by the undignified death of the imprisoned Salvador Alogo Nvono Mokuy, a member of the banned COLIPGE coalition, whose tortured corpse was deposited in the public square of his family village by the police on August 17, 2022. The following week, street vigils in Malabo with large banners condemning “state terrorism” commemorated his death. Two weeks after this gathering, a well-known rapper called Adjoguening disappeared after holding a one-man anti-government protest regarding the confiscation of his passport. Recordings of his screams from a torture room inside the notorious Black Beach prison circulated widely as an audio file in WhatsApp groups. A few days later, several notable podcasters were also arrested, known locally as *audistas* as they spread political commentary via WhatsApp audio files (such as Luis Nzo Ondó, who broadcasts under the name *David contra Goliath*). On September 16, 2022, the government emitted a nationwide “terrorist alert”. A TVGE (2022) reporter announced live on television that a cross-dressing terrorist wearing a blue dress and a suicide belt was planning to blow up the five-star Sofitel at Sipopo. The details of this threat were gathered through a bewildering interview with the hotel's front desk clerk, who received this “anonymous” threat by phone. TVGE further broadcast a self-implicating confession by an alleged member of COLIPGE regarding an additional plot to torch eight gasoline stations, supposedly conceived by a stranger in a bar who approached the COLIPGE member and said it was time to “take action” and force the “intervention of the UN blue helmets”. A government news outlet quoted another claim by the internal security minister about another foiled plot to attack foreign embassies and kill high officials “in cold blood” in their homes (Revista Real Guinea Ecuatorial, 2022).

On September 19, 2022, attorney general Anatolio Nzang Nguema summoned seven opposition figures, mainly local leaders of banned political parties, including Severo Moto's PP and Celestino Okenve's UP (*Unión Popular*), to appear at his court in relation to this bizarre terrorist alert. The summoned leader of the CI (*Ciudadanos por la Innovación*), Gabriel Nsé Obiang Obono, sent his lawyer but failed to appear personally. As a result, a judge issued an arrest warrant for him on September 29, 2022, and his home and party headquarters were assaulted with tear gas and smoke grenades to force an evacuation. Gabriel Nsé was hosting a meeting of hundreds of CI members at the time, and the police surrounded the compound, cutting off the water and electricity supply. After an almost week-long siege, local media and the Spanish newspaper *El País* (2022) reported

The series of events began with the disappearance of Rubén Mayé Nsue Mangué in early August 2022, a former minister of justice

that the storming of the compound resulted in the deaths of three to nine CI members and one police officer by tear-gas inhalation and/or small arms gunfire. Up to 170 supporters, including children and the elderly, were bussed off to the police headquarters, and 53 were transferred to Black Beach prison, where they remain, including Gabriel Nsé. In May 2023, their mass trial began. The CI was banned in 2018 by the attorney general after being accused of participating in the 2017 coup attempt. Gabriel Nsé, director general of Obiang's military council in the early 1990s before going into exile in 2001, returned from Spain, and his party contested the 2017 legislative elections. They won the only seat held by an opposition party in the parliament. His relatively large and loyal support base can be attributed to his military pedigree, which contrasts with the academic style of the CPDS, whose leaders are mostly highly educated professionals trained in Spanish universities but seen as ineffective in terms of popularity. Teodorín (2022d) repeated that the assault was necessary to arrest Nsé's plans to "spread terror in the country". A prominent activist, Anacleto Micha Ndong, founder and member of the local human rights associations *GENuestra* and *Somos+*, was and remains detained after attempting to provide bottles of water to the besieged opposition party. The founder of *Somos+*, Joaquín Eló Ayeto, known as "Paysa", who has been tortured and imprisoned in the past, was again arrested on December 11, 2022, for organizing a private "Human Rights Day" event.

The first and most prominent international response to the announcement of the election results on November 26, 2022, came from the former Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) foreign minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos, who congratulated President Obiang on winning a "free and democratic election". Moratinos is currently employed as a UN High Representative and added in his filmed oral message delivered in front of the Secretary-General of the UN that he, the "entire international community", as well as the "people of Equatorial Guinea are satisfied and happy" (El Diario, 2022). *El País* (2022), a week after the election, first reported on the many frauds in the electoral process, including cases of single-family members voting for all members, an electoral census that lowered the minimum voting age, the availability of only one ballot paper at polling stations, and footage of municipal authorities threatening staff with consequences for not voting the PDGE — based on reports compiled by the CPDS. Coincidentally, in late November, after Moratinos made his statement, Esono was traveling to Madrid to the PSOE party headquarters to attend the Congress of the Socialist International, which António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the UN, previously headed. The only public support Esono could successfully solicit from this quadrennial congress seems to have been a timid statement published on December 6, 2022, on the PSOE (2022) party website. This statement, explicitly not issued by the ruling PSOE government in Spain, was encouraged the PDGE to enter into a "dialogue" with the CPDS. The PDGE (2022c) immediately responded with a statement accusing the PSOE of a "neo-colonialist and supremacist stance" and pointing to the suppression and exile of its own "dissenting groups", such as those from the Catalan independence movement.

7. Coups, fast and slow

EU officials consider the country a "tough nut" (Corlin, 2023), and the political positions of Western European governments appear primarily through parties, courts, parliaments, and the branches of international NGOs or UN Agencies. A bombshell development unfolded in Spain in connection to the abduction of two Spanish citizens in South Sudan in 2019: Feliciano Efa Mangué, a former paratrooper, and Julio Obama Mefuman, a legionary in the Spanish armed

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forces — who were kidnapped along with two Guineans residents in Spain, Martín Obiang Ondo Mbasogo and Bienvenido Ndong Ono. All of them were leaders and members of the MLGE3R (*Movimiento para la Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial - III República*) and had been sentenced in absentia by the government for participating in the foiled Christmas 2017 coup. On January 3, 2023, *El País* (2023; Irujo, 2023) broke the story that on December 10, 2022, a judge from the Spanish High Court had issued a secret arrest warrant for Carmelo Ovono Obiang, Obiang's head of foreign security, for abducting the MLGE3R leaders. In a surprising twist, when police had surrounded the Madrid hotel where Carmelo Ovono Obiang was staying over the Christmas holiday in 2022 while visiting his family in Spain, the judge, Santiago Pedraz, quickly revoked his order and instead peacefully summoned him with a letter advising him to appoint himself a solicitor. The prosecutor in the case, Vicente González Mota, tried but failed to proceed with the arrest. Carmelo Obiang then fled to Malabo before the new year.

In April 2023, the Spanish state attorney once again requested the judge to issue an international arrest warrant after Carmelo Ovono Obiang failed to appear in court. This happened after Pedraz invited him to assist to a videoconference for questioning, along with other accused figures from Obiang's security cupula, including Nicolás Obama Nchama, the minister of national security, and Isaac Nguema Endo, the director of presidential security. According to judicial sources cited in *El País* (2023), the accused apparently lured their victims via a double agent who promised them an important meeting with leading African politicians in Ethiopia, via South Sudan. However, they were "clandestinely transferred in a private plane, tortured and forced to apologize to the leader of the Equatoguinean regime under pressure in front of Equatorial Guinea's public TV". One of the Spanish citizens, Obama Mefuman, died in custody at some point in the first half of January, which various Equatorial Guinean government sources seemed to claim was due to a pre-existing medical condition, apparently diabetes. After the story broke, Teodorín accused the Spanish government of humiliation and interference, which he framed in the metaphorical image of Spain amassing troops at the border with the intention to "invade our country". This reference was not related to the former presence of Spanish troops in Libreville until 2019, when the so-called *Destacamento Mamba* was involved in the peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (Masoliver, 2023). Instead, it evoked the 2017 coup attempt and a revelation of ongoing fears of real or imagined coup attempts where bands of foreign-sponsored mercenaries crossed the border.

It is worth noting that the Spanish judge, Santiago Pedraz, is somewhat of a celebrity socialite in Spain due to having dated an even wealthier and glamorous model, the young widow of a Marqués. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Pedraz was also the judge that issued the arrest warrant for the exiled Severo Moto in April 2008, accused of trying to ship arms contraband from the port of Valencia. This 2008 warrant issued by Pedraz is widely rumored to have been issued just a week after Moratinos, then the Spanish Foreign Minister, met with Obiang. It was one of the conditions Obiang is said to have imposed before the establishment of a mythical "foundation" aimed at "tightening" relations between Spain and Equatorial Guinea — or at least some of their politicians. When Moratinos was just a young head of the Africa section of the Spanish foreign ministry in 1993, Spanish development aid accounted for a third of Equatorial Guinean GDP (Montayà, 2020). Between 1993 and 2007, according to the IMF country reports, government revenue in the hands of Obiang increased from around \$2 million to \$3.9 billion (Yates, 2017, p. 351). In the current financially deflated Teodorín conjuncture, it seems that an old guard of Spanish politicians is seeking to grasp political developments in the coun-

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try — if only to set an outer limit to the new regime and its persistent attempts to reach into Europe to persecute their exiles⁵.

The MLGE3R is the most complex exiled group. They are the successors of the *Fuerza Democrática Republicana* (FDR), who since at least 2001 have been trying to stop the succession of the “crown prince”, which they consider a “monarchical forgery” (FDR, 2001). After years of lobbying different governments, in September 2022, the MLGE3R prepared and submitted a dossier of evidence to the Spanish High Court. The dossier included testimonies of the kidnapped victims and other protected witnesses, which the investigative branch of the Spanish police deemed as compelling evidence for the kidnapping and torture of Spanish citizens (Europa Press, 2023a). Based in Spain, the MLGE3R is primarily composed of exiled magistrates previously active in Equatorial Guinea’s legal system, as well as military figures from the Mongomo region, particularly from the area of Macias’ village of Nzangayong. It is also partially linked to the pan-Africanist movement in Spain. The group was founded in December 2018 by Martín Obiang Ondo Mbasogo, who is a kind of “second cousin” of Teodorín and who was kidnapped in November 2019 in South Sudan (Abaha, 2020). He had been living intermittently in Spain since the early 2010s, and after being named the principal organizer of the December 2017 coup attempt, he was sentenced in absentia. Nevertheless, until 2017, he was a magistrate in Malabo and was in charge of imprisoning Gabriel Nsé for slander against the PDGE. There is a long history of disputes amongst exiles, including Gabriel Nsé of the C.I., who is vocally against the FDR, other opposition figures, and the government.

Importantly, Martín Obiang Ondo Mbasogo is the son of Felipe Ondo Obiang, a former president of the parliament, who was allegedly promised the presidency or a leading role in a real democratic “transition” floated by Obiang in the mid-1990s. Frustrated at ending up in an entirely symbolic role, Felipe Ondo Obiang co-founded the FDR. Obiang calls Felipe Ondo Obiang his *verno*, or son-in-law, and along with the current FDR leader Guillermo Nguema Ela, they had both similarly been kidnapped by the Obiang government during their exile in Gabon in 1997. They were accused of organizing coup attempts in 1986 and again in 2002 and have been in and out of Black Beach prison for many years or under house arrest near Mongomo. It is important to highlight that the co-founder of the FDR in 1995 was the towering figure of Bonifacio Nguema Esono Nchama, who passed away in 2015 (PDGE 2020b; Diario Rombe, 2014). He had served as the foreign minister under Macias and as his last vice president in 1979 and was instrumental in organizing the successful August 1979 coup that carried Obiang to power as president of a new supreme military council. Spain is said to have favored and pushed for Bonifacio Nguema Esono Nchama to become the new post-Macias leader, while France, through Gabon, is said to have

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5 There is also a complex politicized dimension to the case, internal to Spain. The February 2023 European Parliament resolution was co-signed by the Spanish Conservative Party’s (*Partido Popular*, PP) former foreign minister, José Manuel García-Margallo, and the Member of Parliament who spoke most forcefully on the need to crack down on “African dictatorships” and their “European enablers” was Hermann Tertsch, from the Spanish far right-populist party Vox – whose general secretary, Ignacio Garriga, is half Equatorial Guinean on his mother’s side, but also his fathers since his paternal family were settlers in the late colonial period. Further, in April 2023 members of the MLGE3R met with the PP spokesperson to try to push for an international arrest warrant against Carmelo Ovono Obiang and bring the case to the attention of the Spanish Parliament. This led to a forum where all the main non-governing parties, led by the left party, Podemos, pushed a proposal to have the Spanish government “condemn human rights violations in Equatorial Guinea”. The PSOE representative in this discussion was the Senegalese-born Luc André Diouf, who suggested that Spanish foreign policy should be channelled via the EU, and confirmed his party subscribes to the “pillars of democracy” (*The Diplomat in Spain*, 2023). The overall aim seems to be to underline the unusual behaviour of Moratinos and the ongoing silence of the Spanish government on a seemingly sensitive postcolonial question.

backstpped Obiang, whom they saw as a more aligned and amenable potential leader (Ndongo, 2019, pp. 261-532). This older generation of opposition figures birthed in the upper echelons of the Macias regime and the younger generation, self-acknowledged “sons of the regime”, share a common mission to bring an “end” to the Obiang and Teodorín government, whom they consider illegitimate successors (Pordomingo Perez, 2019).

8. Contenders and brothers-in-law

The final and “last hope” of an alternative to Teodorín has been rooted in a dramatic idea of royal strife within the sprawling and divided Obiang family. The image of Gabriel MOL as a potential leader in waiting is based on a long-standing rumor that Obiang allegedly once privately said that Gabriel MOL was his favored successor-son, in accordance with the preferences expressed by various American oil executives in the country. Gabriel MOL has an evident corporate-friendly competence and holds an economics degree from an American liberal arts college. The “alternative” candidacy is widely presumed to have been supported by key Teodorín-averse figures, including Obiang’s younger brother, Armengol Ondo Nguema. Intrigue has even surrounded a creeping “palace coup” masterminded from the inside by “Armengol” — who appears to be a simple “enforcer”, as the former head of the presidential security detail who also independently accumulated wealth by running a private security contracting firm with American oil companies as its main clients. The “drama” narrative has gained popularity amongst exiles and has been heavily promoted by employees of French Foreign Ministry — supporting think tanks, such as Benjamin Augé of the *Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (IFRI) and founder and author at the “Africa Intelligence” newsletter.

In retrospect, it was quite clear: already in the 1990s, Teodorín was the head of the large youth association of the PDGE, the so-called Sons of Obiang (*Asociación Hijos de Obiang* or ASHO), out of which many of the younger generations of ministers and directors have emerged from. For decades, almost every year Teodorín has distributed millions of gifts and toys to low-income families, many personally, the day before Christmas. In contrast, Gabriel MOL promotes playing golf to a dozen young people at the golf course next to a luxury hotel and conference center in Sipopo, a kind of distant suburb of Malabo. Gabriel MOL is also decidedly un-geopolitical: during his talk at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022 (Enonchong, 2022) he echoed his talking points that were more forcefully delivered earlier that year in Houston at the world’s premier energy conference, CERAWEEK. Gabriel chanted the slogan “drill, drill, drill”, and dampened the mood with an impromptu statement that Africa does “not care” where financing comes from, “US, Russia, China, I don’t care”, he simply wanted to “monetize gas”. There are no other candidates in the family, such as Teodorín’s twin younger brothers, one is a pastor in Mozambique, and the other serves as Obiang’s personal assistant.

The portrayal of Gabriel MOL that emerged in the media and even amongst exiles in the 2010s as a politically stable economic genius must have surely irked his predecessors at the hydrocarbon ministry, who are now back in charge of the key economic ministries, as well as Teodorín himself. As Josimar Oyono Eseng at Radio Macuto (2021) has perceptively speculated, the image of Gabriel MOL as an amenable and friendly outward-facing leader seemed to be a concerted campaign that complemented the simultaneous international discrediting of Teodorín in the U.S., Swiss, and French courts, which produced the “fallacy” of a “favorable political opinion of MOL, aimed at perpetuating the current military dictatorship, through a government led by MOL”. The drop in oil and

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gas output he presided over seems to have convinced Obiang that a slick corporate-friendly style can also translate into being a charming but unproductive pleaser (Africa Intelligence, 2023).

The post-election cabinet reshuffle announced in early 2023 saw Antonio “Tony” Oburu spectacularly replace Gabriel MOL as the crucial minister of mines and hydrocarbons. Despite this change, Gabriel MOL kept the hydrocarbon minister tag in his profile for weeks after, and his international promoters and brokers, in disbelief, still referred to him as the acting OPEC President. Towards the end of 2022, news circulated that Gabriel MOL would assume the presidency of both OPEC and the “gas OPEC”, the GECF. The news was alluded to by Moratinos after he faced widespread criticism for congratulating Obiang on the elections. He told *El Diario* (2022b): “who doesn’t know that Equatorial Guinea will play a key role in the energy context?”. For the Middle East-based global energy cartels, it makes sense to have an African lead with the opportune slogans of “monetize gas” and “make energy poverty history” in the face of competing international demands to transition away from and divest from fossil fuels. They did not back or push to keep Gabriel MOL as he quickly disappeared from the sector, and Oburu is already preparing for the GECF ministerial meeting that will convene in Malabo in October 2023. In March 2023, Gabriel MOL (2023) tweeted out an image with the words “Amor Fati” emblazoned on a golden coin being engulfed by a fire, a Nietzschean refrain — “love of one’s fate” — that according to its clear Wikipedia entry that he likely checked before posting, expresses “an attitude in which one sees everything that happens in one’s life, including suffering and loss, as good or, at the very least, necessary”.

Gabriel MOL has since been rotated out into the largely still fictitious Ministry of Economic Planning and Diversification — under the supervision of Teodorín’s loyal former chief of staff, Santiago Casto Nvomo Bibanga, who now serves as the vice minister in that small, newly created ministry, separate from the Finance Ministry. Gabriel MOL has a meager three directors associated with national accounting under his authority, and his primary responsibility is to interface with and handle the IMF and World Bank, which have returned to the country after a long absence during much of the oil boom. Gabriel MOL remains keen on implementing his brand of “reforms” or, as he typically phrases it, “cutting red tape”. He has prioritized challenging new regulations introduced by the Bank of Central African States (BEAC). These regulations, which have not yet been implemented in the country, aim to compel foreign companies to manage their export proceeds through local bank accounts and pay their contractors in the CFA currency (Kilian, 2019). The BEAC is effectively the Central Bank of Equatorial Guinea, although its headquarters are in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and above that in Paris and the EU, as Equatorial Guinea uses the CFA franc as a currency, which is pegged to the euro. Boosting oil and gas exports is undoubtedly the priority of Teodorín’s new shadow government.

The actual Economic Ministry, or Treasury, the *Ministerio de Hacienda y Presupuestos*, is now in the hands of Fortunato Ofa Mbo Nchama, a crucial ally of Teodorín (Diario Rombe, 2023). A glimpse into his social media profiles reveals that he is a true believer in Teodorín — in between tweets about Catholicism and anti-communism, he retweets Teodorín’s populist messages and sends him warm personal reply-tweets. He is the only national government figure that Teodorín follows back. Fortunato Ofa Mbo Nchama had been the all-important economic minister during the oil boom take-off (1998-2003). He also served as the president’s chief of staff (2006-2008) when Obiang was undergoing cancer treatment and had to consider Teodorín’s succession seriously. Additionally, he was also the assistant secretary general of the PDGE when Teodorín was elevated to vice president. He received education in Spain and from the IMF at its Capacity

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Development Institute in Washington and, more recently, has had a career as a successful banker in Brazzaville while the Gabriel MOL faction was running the country's finances to the ground. In a revealing tangent, he was also named the provisional president of the national airline company, Ceiba Intercontinental, in November 2022, just before all the crucial paperwork leaked from the airline, implicating a series of ministers and officials who were averse to further promoting Teodorín.

The Finance Ministry also operates the primary state “fund” for investment — *Holding Guinea Ecuatorial* — which since May 2023 Teodorín has officially commandeered as well. Equatorial Guinea is a small country with a single-minded leadership and a single-sided economy. Mineral fuels and organic chemicals account for the overwhelming share of foreign exchange earnings — an extreme export dependency on raw materials, even for the region. Nevertheless, in the past year, significant developments have been announced regarding the reactivation of long-running projects regarding the expansion of national and regional energy infrastructure and “downstream oil” projects, such as refineries. These initiatives were delayed and even dismissed during Gabriel MOL's tenure at the hydrocarbon ministry, which focused exclusively on accelerating the granting and exploitation of oil and gas concessions. In August 2022, Teodorín presided over the ceremonial announcement of an industrial deal involving two Chinese companies developing two refineries to produce petrol, asphalt, and plastics. These refineries were planned to be located in Luba and Cogo, on the island and mainland respectively, though at an earlier point planned to be in Riaba and Mbini. This large financing and construction agreement represents 5% of the \$10 billion investment promotion program for Africa announced by Xi Jinping in 2021. The deal was brokered by Antonio Oburu Ondo, then director of the state oil company GEPetrol, and Teodorín's cousin-in-law.

Before his recent promotion to replace Gabriel MOL, the young Oburu had been in charge of GEPetrol since 2015, the year he married the daughter of Teodorín's mother's brother. His wife, Candida Okomo Nsue Mensa, is an R&B singer whose father is the First Lady's brother, Teodoro Biyogo Nsue Okomo — who, in turn, is Obiang's chief of staff and in charge of the ministers (*Jefe de Protocolo* and *Jefe de Gabinete*). Teodorín's mother, Constanca Mangue Nsue Okomo, is one of, if not the most, influential real estate tycoon and philanthropist in the country, attracting political loyalty. What seems to be a “gossipy” story about Oburu paying Biyogo Nsue Okomo a record bridewealth of 2 billion CFA or over 3 million euros in 2015 (Diario Rombe, 2015) is the most revealing sign of alliance. Oburu even replaced Constanca's brother, Candido Nsue Okomo, as the head of GEPetrol in 2015. In a sub-plot worthy of a complete study that I will only briefly sketch out here, Candido Nsue Okomo also had an international arrest warrant issued against him in 2021 while living in Dubai. He has been clearly linked to payments made around 2012 to a corrupt Spanish police inspector, which were widely believed to be intended to concoct a kompromat against Gabriel MOL that could be leaked to the Spanish press. However, the ongoing trial in Spain against the police inspector and his organized crime network involving the Spanish intelligence agency (CNI), the so-called “Caso Villarejo”, suggest that the kompromat against Gabriel MOL was merely a cover story for the invoices issued by inspector Villarejo, who received about €30 million from GEPetrol for this forged purpose. Instead, it appears that the GEPetrol funds were sent to Spain to be laundered into property purchases. Aside from the commissions received by Villarejo, the services he rendered to Equatorial Guinean officials seem to have been limited to facilitating the travel into Spain by “government VIPs” landing in Madrid's airport. The Guinean connection served only as an entry point to this massive ongoing investigation, as the

This large financing and construction agreement represents 5% of the \$10 billion investment promotion program for Africa announced by Xi Jinping in 2021

Spanish tax authorities began to scrutinize the financial movements of GEPetrol's legal consultant in Spain, Francisco Menéndez Rubio, to extract a series of confessions that allowed them to reach into Villarejo's own accounts (Público, 2021).

9. Conclusion to Part I

Teodorín's long-term residence abroad and his lack of control and allies in the key finance and hydrocarbon ministries during the decade-long economic crisis have allowed him to present his slow, then fast, ascendancy as a radical "nobleman" leading the charge against the "corrupt" establishment, thereby laying his claim to enthronement. He is "royal", in the sense of the famous Lacanian definition of "what is a king" — it is when others treat or defer to you as a "king" — and because of his ability to exist outside of the Constitution by decreeing orders into existence or simply taking them over and directing them. A brief conceptual detour into "kingship" is necessary because the consensus perception of the brazen undemocratic nature of the ruling family misses the surprising ways in which sovereign figures can more effectively present their inevitability by being perceived as coming from the "outside" (Sahlins, 2017). In contrast to the common idea that politics comes from and represents the "inside" of a society or its peculiar fears, beliefs, or social structures, or that political power in oil "rentier states" derives from simply taking hold of a sovereign border and taxing the difference between the resulting inside and outside, there is a stranger and additional dimension of "kingship". To be sure, there are non-stop attempts to fit and insert Teodorín, as dynastic inheritor, into the "internal" backbone of "national defence", to guard against "sedition", "treachery" and "foreign interference". In addition, opposition members and exiles are effectively treated as persecuted "outsider" non-citizens — their passports are confiscated, or their return prevented, their houses are raided, they are imprisoned without trial, killed without consequence, and kept in a state of fear.

However, I refer to the proper "external" dimension, which is mythical. The rulers are "undomestic" — for example, many exiles insist that Obiang was "really" born just across the border in Gabon. Their notorious exploits and reputation for amoral and even monstrous crimes, in many instances simply unbelievable, are also part of their "undomestic" nature. The many local rumors of political elites practicing ritual cannibalism, as well as the tendency to profile Obiang as a cartoonish torturer and focus on Teodorín's jet-setting extravagances, contribute to the elevation of their mythical "kingship". Furthermore, the capacity to display or simulate independence in decision-making around preparations for "war", in the form of the international politics of naval bases, is ultimately what sets kings-as-sovereigns apart. In the next section of this two-part article, I turn to the geopolitical reality or "fiction" surrounding the purported plans for a Chinese naval base Bata, with the view that the inordinate promotion of the idea of a "new Chinese base" by the U.S. foreign policy establishment represents an underpinning — from abroad — of Teodorín's imminent ascendancy to the presidency.

[...] to present his slow, then fast, ascendancy as a radical "nobleman" leading the charge against the "corrupt" establishment

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