INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the Fortieth Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain

Hofstra University, Hempstead (New York)

Thursday April 2—Saturday April 4, 2009

Enrique Okenve

University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica

"Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik": Three Decades of Social Paralysis and Political Immobility in Equatorial Guinea

"*Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik*" can be literally translated as "you're bad-mouthing, you're talking politics," but, as anybody who has ever tried to translate certain expressions into a different language realizes, literal translations are often meaningless or confusing. One is then forced to either look for a less literal translation, or to provide a background explanation. The latter is what this paper seeks to do. *Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik* is a Fang expression often used in Equatorial Guinea, and it is the inspiration behind this paper. Dealing with a dictatorial regime, one is required to rely on the subjective – subtle signs that one might pick up through daily interaction – to interpret society's actions and ideas.

In observing the political conditions in Equatorial Guinea, one soon realizes that we are dealing – yet again – with a patrimonial state run through a system of clientelist relations. Surely this is no novelty in the African continent, but Equatorial Guinea represents an extreme case. The level of appropriation of national resources by Obiang Nguema and his family has allowed him to develop an almost pure patrimonial type system. In this respect, the revenues from the country's oil resources have also allowed the Equatorial-Guinean dictator to enhance his clientelist political network in an unprecedented fashion. Whether

some hoped the oil revenues would bring about much needed economic and political change to Equatorial Guinea, so far they have only served to solidify the dictator's tight control over the country.

But Obiang Nguema did not always enjoy the vast economic resources that he controls today. Between 1979 and the mid 1990s, Equatorial Guinea relied on timber exports and international donors as main source of income, and yet Obiang Nguema's rule was not seriously threatened during those years. The question that then needs to be answered is why political stability, in the midst of notoriously bad socio-economic conditions, is such a stubborn feature in Equatorial Guinea. It is one of the premises of this paper that, though repression does exist in Equatorial Guinea, this is not an elaborate, repressive apparatus comparable to that of other dictatorial regimes. Repression is largely effective but not because of the level of sophistication or organization of the regime. I will rely on the subjective to argue that, by and large, Equatorial Guineans are dissatisfied with the social, political, and economic conditions in their country.

The main thesis of this work is that political stability in Equatorial Guinea is fundamentally a result of an existing political culture characterized, among other things, by an ethos of self-repression. This political culture has made it possible for a technically and ideologically feeble regime to remain in power for three decades. In a country with a population of only half a million people, where civil society is almost non-existent, and family obligations carry a significant weight, this political culture makes any type of political change very difficult. I will try to show how the Obiang Nguema regime has encouraged a system of societal self-repression, which has become the most effective tool for socio-political control in Equatorial Guinea, and the fundamental obstacle to political change.

The value of political loyalty

While Obiang Nguema has been the maximum authority in Equatorial Guinea for the last thirty years, it could well be argued that his close association with the country's political power goes back to the first post-independence administration more than forty years ago. This experience allowed him to learn a few valuable lessons about the need to secure enough loyalty while keeping tight control over the Equatorial-Guinean society. Obiang Nguema was aware that, in order to minimize internal threats, the securing of loyalty had to be one of the main priorities. Clearly, the main limitation to the consolidation of loyalty was the lack of state resources. Obiang Nguema was probably aware that legitimacy is an extremely perishable condition. It took the first post-independence ruler less than five years to lose it, and, given that Obiang Nguema was more aware than anybody else of his

own ambitions, he had to suspect that having overthrown the former dictator would not make him legitimate for too long. The securing of loyalty was, therefore, a priority if he wanted to avoid the same fate as his uncle. From this perspective, we must understand the patrimonialization of the state as a two-way process that allows the appropriation of state assets for one's own enrichment, while, simultaneously, providing the resources to reward the necessary loyalty to remain in power.

For the first fifteen years of Obiang Nguema's rule, limited state resources only allowed the generation of narrow bases of loyalty. Obiang Nguema, however, tried to expand his loyalty base compared to what Masie m'Nguema had done. The latter mostly relied on his Esangi relatives as his close collaborators and loyalty base. Throughout the 1980s, Obiang Nguema expanded his loyalty base first to the Mongomo district, from where he comes from, and later to the Wele-Nzas province where Mongomo is located. It was this trend that led to the development of the expression "clan de Mongomo" (Mongomo clan), which reflected the type of political relationship by which the people of Mongomo were loyal to Obiang Nguema – in a family-like fashion – in exchange for material rewards – usually through the allocation of important positions within the administration. As the state resources increased, especially since the oil boom, Obiang Nguema has been able to expand his loyalty base. The Partido Democratico de Guinea Ecuatorial or PDGE (Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea) has become the main instrument for the mobilization and rewarding of political loyalty. So much so, that today the vast majority of the population are formal members of the PDGE; that is, loyal to the figure of Obiang Nguema and, therefore, susceptible to be rewarded. If one tries to understand the role and influence of the PDGE, one should not concentrate on obvious examples such as government ministers or members of parliament; the reality of ordinary citizens is much more telling. It is well-known that, in order to work for any private company – national or international – one has to be affiliated to the PDGE. Patrimonialism, therefore, has allowed Obiang Nguema to expand his loyalty base to a national scale.

In so far as loyalty is mostly based on material rewards, it is prudent to argue that political loyalty in Equatorial Guinea is relatively fragile. There is little question that, the moment the country's resources diminish significantly or Obiang Nguema loses control over them, loyalty will rapidly shrink. The level of loyalty to Obiang Nguema also varies depending on individuals, families, and districts. This is a result of the type of clientelist network developed to negotiate loyalty and rewards. The structure of the network can be described as pyramidal or concentrical; thus the closer to the top or centre, the more loyalty one expresses and rewards are obtained. Although the increase in state assets has allowed the expansion of both the clientelist network and loyalty

base, the majority of the population has still limited access to well-connected individuals. Therefore, it is within this sector that one should expect to find lesser levels of loyalty. Obiang Nguema's regime has developed two fundamental mechanisms in order to counteract disloyalty among those at the bottom or periphery of the clientelist network. The first one is a system of "virtual representation," which consists in the granting of influential political positions to individuals who automatically become corporate or regional representatives. Members of parliament and especially ministers are supposed to look after the interests of the district – or section of the district – where they come from.

The second mechanism to counteract disloyalty is closely related to the first one, as the expectation that a district neighbour or family member could be granted a top political position leads many not to display their dissatisfaction. In fact, what often happens is that districts and families make every effort to express their loyalty to Obiang Nguema. Since the legalization of multiparty politics in 1992, electoral campaigns have become a grotesque spectacle in which the electorate makes promises to the leader of the PDGE, rather than the other way around. There is, therefore, a predisposition to express loyalty in anticipation of any rewards that may or not arrive. In addition, it is also clear that people understand the need for having top representatives as close as possible to them. For Obiang Nguema, having a high number of top government officials is also the best way to secure a broad loyalty base. In no other way it can be understood that this tiny country of a little over half a million people has a sixty-eight-member cabinet.

From state repression to societal self-repression

The last thirty years of Obiang Nguema's policies have created an extraordinary paradox: a weak and yet omnipresent state. The fragility of the state is clearly a result of the appropriation of public resources by Obiang Nguema. Its omnipresent nature is given by the type of clientelist network put in place, as well as the realization of the network's limitations. First, the state is not able to reward all instances of loyalty. Second, not all rewards are equally appreciated by all individuals. As a result, the system of rewards needs to be reinforced by violence or the threat of its use. The Equatorial-Guinean state had to develop a ubiquitous apparatus in an effort to repress any instance or temptation of disloyalty. Each member of the clientelist network becomes a potential link of the repressive apparatus, in either an effort to stress their loyalty to Obiang Nguema, or for fear of losing their privileges and being punished. Nonetheless, often it is only the members at the top of the pyramid who participate in the active repression of society.

The Equatorial-Guinean state is more repressive and effective than the colonial one. African sovereign states enjoy much broader international legitimacy than their predecessors, and this is often translated into *carte blanche* to commit all sorts of abuses. The army is not an institution for the defence of the Equatorial-Guinean people against external attacks, but its main purpose is to protect the position and privileges of Obiang Nguema. Not surprisingly, the December 2007 attack and robbery of two banks in Bata by alleged members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) was not repelled by the armed forces, whereas the latest attack of February 2009 on the presidential palace in Malabo was repelled. By and large, the population fears an army that is identified as the brutal side of the regime. Brutality, however, is not an exclusive attribute of the army. For the past thirty years the country has witnessed a proliferation of security bodies – military, paramilitary, and police. Any visitor to Equatorial Guinea is immediately struck by the amount of people in all types of uniforms on the streets of Malabo or Bata.

Nonetheless, the most effective use of brutality against the Equatorial-Guinean population is not exercised by people in uniform, but in civil clothes. I am referring to no other than the ominous *Seguridad* (Security). The elusive character of this repressive body makes it particularly hard to understand its exact nature and functions, but it would be fair to compare it to some sort of internal secret service. Its effectiveness does not rely on its sophisticated methods or resources, but on a much less impressive characteristic: its members do not wear uniform. Anybody is potentially a member of the secret services, willing to report suspicious activities or ideas, and capable of causing great harm. In a small country like Equatorial Guinea, this is a particular effective method to repress society, and, more significantly, to encourage self-repression. The activities of the *Seguridad* also exemplify a characteristic of the use of violence under the Obiang Nguema regime. Other dictatorships resort to violence to repress society on a much larger and systematic scale. This usually requires a well organized and trained organization, which is not the case in Equatorial Guinea. Instead, violence is arbitrary, which usually has similar dissuasive effects. The system is arbitrary; the rules constantly change; they are subject to individuals' own discretion; one can never be certain. It is this uncertainty that paralyses Equatorial Guineans.

Although I mentioned above that postcolonial repression was more effective than colonial repression, one should not think that this is exclusively the result of the greater use of violence by the postcolonial dictators. Obiang Nguema is African, more importantly, he is a Fang man like the vast majority of the Equatorial-Guinean population; thus he has a much greater

understanding of the society he rules over than any colonial administrator ever dreamt of. The significance of this can be better understood by looking at the role of the *delegados de gobierno* (government delegates) and *presidentes de consejo* (village council presidents). In the rural areas, where the majority of the Equatorial-Guinean population lives, they are both the basic units of social control. The *presidente de consejo* must make sure that his fellow villagers are not involved in any "subversive" activity, but, if they are, he is likely to report them to the *delegado de gobierno*. The latter controls the state's repressive apparatus that will administer the necessary punishment. Such behaviour must be understood as a form of political, and even physical, survival. Should they fail to act promptly against any instance of subversion, they both are very likely to be punished.

Both the *presidente de consejo* and *delegado de gobierno* possess an intuitive knowledge of those elements of the local political cultures that might pose some resistance to the state, thus they are well equipped to keep them in check. In order to assist in this task, absolutely everything in Equatorial Guinea has been politicized. Any complaint or criticism, as mild or indirect as it may be, is automatically considered as an attack against the government and, more specifically, Obiang Nguema. This is the situation that explains the expression *wa kobo abe, wa kobo politk*. If one complains about power shortages, price of food, state of the roads, rubbish on the streets, one is talking politics and that is not acceptable – unless it is done to praise the ruler.

The politicization of the country has run parallel to the process of determining what is acceptable and what is not. Political mobilization is only acceptable in so far as it serves to praise the PDGE and its leader Obiang Nguema. Any other form of political mobilization is unacceptable and likely to be censored by the state and society at large. While multiparty politics has been legal in Equatorial Guinea since 1992, the truth is the activities of these political organizations are widely restricted, even during the course of electoral campaigns. In 2002, I had the opportunity to witness how members of a political party trying to campaign in a village of the Mikomseng district were physically prevented from campaigning by the villagers. Another commonly used expression that can help us understand the spirit of such behaviour is *no queremos problemas* (we do not want any trouble). When people, including many *presidentes de consejo*, react in such manner, they are not necessarily expressing their agreement or support for the Obiang Nguema regime, but, rather, they seek to distance themselves from activities that might be interpreted as subversive. Dealing with an arbitrary system, there is little hope that one can know exactly what might be punished or not; therefore society reacts by blindly rejecting any kind of political action – active or passive.

The creation of a monolithic society by the Obiang Nguema regime has been widely consolidated through the unconscious cooperation of the broad Equatorial-Guinean society. It is the lack of a "modern" political consciousness – complementary of the modern-like state – that makes it difficult for Equatorial Guineans to challenge the might of the Obiang Nguema regime. The short-lived nationalist movement never consolidated into a mature and effective form of political mobilization. The Equatorial-Guinean society never had time to internalize these ideas either. By the time multiparty politics was legalized, the regime had found mechanisms to cope and minimize the influence of political pluralism. Outside the regime, there is no political culture that favours the creation of civic, cultural, or political organizations. Social discontent, therefore, cannot be expressed in an organized and collective manner that can seriously challenge the state. The disarticulation of the Equatorial-Guinean society is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that social relations inside the country have a very limited, local character. People do not move freely inside Equatorial Guinea. The presence of numerous check points across the country's roads are a constant reminder that, while one can go almost everywhere, he or she must have a reason to go – work, family, etc. As a result, Equatorial Guineans know very little about people outside their immediate setting – let alone about their political ideas. Under these circumstances, those individuals more inclined to express or intellectualize their disagreement with the political order find themselves lost and isolated in society, with little hope of coming together.

Through the political and economic control of society, Obiang Nguema has succeeded in creating a political culture that, to a very large degree, has been internalized by the Equatorial Guinean. This has become especially obvious in the past ten years. The opportunities for economic improvement are greater than ever, but so are the restraints to enjoy the benefits of the economic boom. Given the limitations of the Equatorial-Guinean society, one is forced to comply with the system in order to have access to the new wealth. One could be tempted to argue that the pressure is even greater because of the realization that the economic boom will not last forever. Both political and economic pressures result in an almost moral definition of what is politically acceptable and unacceptable in Equatorial Guinea. This is how we can understand that the term "*opositor*" (oppositionist) has such negative connotations in this country. People are classified into two categories: "good and bad citizens"; that is, supporters and enemies of the established political order. An *opositor* is not only somebody likely to bring political and economic misfortune upon himself. More importantly, the *opositor* is likely to extend his political and economic misfortune to the rest of the family. This is the fundamental element to understand societal self-repression in Equatorial Guinea. The family, despite the numerous

changes of the last hundred years, still carries a very important weight. The series of mutual obligations that tie family members together are almost unavoidable, given that the person is defined as such in relation to the broader family group. To be an *opositor* does not only mean a rejection of the figure of Obiang Nguema, but, most importantly, it amounts to betray one's own family.