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THE POLITICS OF AUTOCRATIC SURVIVAL IN EQUATORIAL GUINEA:
CO-OPTATION, RESTRICTIVE INSTITUTIONAL RULES, REPRESSION, AND
INTERNATIONAL PROJECTION

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ABSTRACT

Equatorial Guinea is not only one of the world's most authoritarian regimes but also a striking case of regime and leader survival. This small, oil-rich state and personalist regime defies conventional wisdom because it is both far more resilient and faces far fewer threats from within the regime and from opposition political parties than other resource-rich states. But how does the regime manage to survive? This study argues that four key mechanisms interact to explain Equatorial Guinea's record of authoritarian survival. Firstly, co-optation (via patronage, party, and cabinet appointments) which President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and the regime party – *Partido democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial* (PDGE) – have used to build internal cohesion and fragment opposition. Secondly, the crafting of restrictive institutional rules (party and electoral laws) that, combined with informal rules, aim to protect the regime's interests and make participation in political opposition more costly. Thirdly, the use of (selective and diffuse) repression to shield the regime and shrink the living space of challengers. Finally, the regime's international linkages and projection to gain credibility and offset pressure for change. We argue that autocrats' survival depends on their ability to play a strategic two-level game: domestic and international.

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EQUATORIAL GUINEA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S most authoritarian regimes.¹ Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (henceforward Obiang) has been president since 1979 and his re-election in 2016 made him the longest serving leader in Africa. Obiang is also the founder and leader of the regime party, *Partido democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial* (PDGE), which has been in power since the reintroduction of multipartyism in 1991. As in other personalist dictatorships, there is a range of seemingly democratic institutions (parties, legislatures and elections) that are controlled by the leader.²

The discovery of oil in the 1990s turned Equatorial Guinea into one of Africa's leading oil producers; however, the lion's share of the wealth generated goes into the hands of the president's family and a small clique of protégés.³ This small-scale distribution of oil revenues helps countervail antagonist forces within the regime, reward collaborators and buy international recognition, but it coexists with high levels of inequality.⁴ However, Equatorial Guinea stands out from other resource-rich and highly unequal countries as an *extreme case* of both regime and autocrat leader survival. So how does the regime manage to survive?

Our explanatory model of autocratic survival in Equatorial Guinea – understood as the regime's ability to avert the risks of transformation in its fundamental leadership rules⁵ – relies on studying both domestic and international mechanisms. While most

¹ Ranked 161/167 countries by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (<<https://infographics.economist.com/2019/DemocracyIndex/>>, 13 September 2020); scored 6/100 by the Freedom House (<<https://freedomhouse.org/country/equatorial-guinea/freedom-world/2020>>, 13 September 2020).

² Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, *How dictatorships work* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2018), pp. 79–80.

³ Alicia Campos, 'Oil, sovereignty and self-determination: Equatorial Guinea and Western Sahara', *Review of African Political Economy* 35, 3 (2008), pp. 435-447; Hannah C. Appel, 'Walls and white elephants: Oil extraction, responsibility, and infrastructural violence in Equatorial Guinea', *Ethnography* 13, 4 (2012), pp. 439-465; Matthias Basedau and Wolfram Lacher, 'A paradox of plenty? Rent distribution and political stability in oil states' (Working Paper 32, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2006).

⁴ Daniel Bekele, 'Equatorial Guinea: Why poverty plagues a high-income nation', *allAfrica*, 26 January 2017, <<https://allafrica.com/stories/201701260593.html>> (21 November 2020).

⁵ Joseph Wright, Erica Frantz and Barbara Geddes, 'Oil and autocratic regime survival', *British Journal of Political Science* 45, 2 (2015), pp. 287-306.

studies tend to focus on one of these, we argue that autocrats' survival depends on the success of their endeavour to counteract both domestic and international pressures for change. We consider three domestic mechanisms (co-optation, restrictive institutional rules, and repression) and one international mechanism (international projection). Co-optation allows the regime to purchase the support of a small clique and to incorporate members from opposition parties and minority ethnic groups into the party and governing apparatus. Restrictive institutional rules are devices the autocrat uses to induce regime survival. By skilfully crafting and blending formal (electoral and party laws) and informal (personalism, clientelism and patronage) political institutions,⁶ the autocrat keeps rivals at bay. Repression is often perceived as the backbone of authoritarian regimes and involves the use of coercion to punish dissidence. International projection takes us into the external arena and explores the regime's agency and initiatives to gain credibility and foreclose the possibility of change. Overall, our explanatory model argues that autocrats must play a strategic two-level game – domestic and international – if they are to survive.

The focus on an *extreme* yet understudied case like Equatorial Guinea is crucial to understand how autocrats, notably personalist autocrats, endure against all odds. This article uses this *extremeness* to build on existing arguments and generate new hypotheses on authoritarian survival. On the one hand, it confirms the theoretical assumption that personalist dictatorships with post-seizure institutions last longer.⁷ On the other hand, it sheds new light on the anatomy of personalist regimes. More precisely, the findings reveal that the regime uses party structures and cabinet co-optation to incorporate members of the opposition; and that it assigns relevant portfolios to family members so as to control decision-making, the means of coercion and resource allocation. The institutional analysis

⁶ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, 'Informal institutions and comparative Politics: A research agenda', *Perspectives on Politics* 2, 4 (2004), pp. 725-740.

⁷ Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'Pathways to democratization in personalist dictatorships', *Democratization* 24, 1 (2017), pp. 20-40.

demonstrates how restrictive formal rules and informality are used to maintain political control, thus contributing to a flourishing discussion on how formal and informal institutions interact and help ensure autocratic survival.⁸ Finally, we show that personalist regimes can attract cooperation partners and succeed on the international stage, particularly if they are resource-rich. Though less skilful than his counterparts in Rwanda or Ethiopia, Obiang has strived to gain international credibility and to cooperate with both autocratic and democratic regimes. Despite the major recession experienced in recent years, oil remains the country's major asset in the international arena.⁹ It contributes to most of the country's exports and gross domestic product, while other sectors (forestry, timber) account for only a small proportion of economic activity.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We start by revising the literature on the mechanisms of autocratic survival to justify our explanatory model and our labelling of Equatorial Guinea as an *extreme case*. We then summarize the country's political history before detailing how each mechanism influences authoritarian survival. The concluding section discusses the main findings and implications of this study.

Mechanisms of autocratic survival: why is Equatorial Guinea an extreme case?

In recent years, much scholarly attention has been devoted to trying to understand the sources and mechanisms of authoritarian resilience and survival worldwide. Repression, from violent intimidation to constraining freedom of speech, is considered the backbone

⁸ Helmke and Levitsky, 'Informal institutions and comparative Politics'.

⁹ African Development Bank Group, 'Equatorial Guinea economic outlook', <<https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/central-africa/equatorial-guinea/equatorial-guinea-economic-outlook>> (4 November 2020).

of authoritarian regimes.¹⁰ But repression never works in isolation; to endure, autocrats rely on institutional engineering and co-optation as well as international linkages.

Nominally democratic institutions such as multiparty elections, partisan legislatures and strong parties, are often cited as relevant to increase the life span of autocracies.¹¹ Multiparty elections are held to signal the strength of the party/ruler, and are often manipulated to minimize the risks of electoral defeat.¹² Partisan legislatures allow autocrats to incorporate opposition forces, gather information about constituencies' demands, allocate particularistic policies,¹³ and provide opportunities and rents to opposition elites that become regime collaborators.¹⁴ Parties are instrumental for political control and incorporating political opponents into the authoritarian party structures.¹⁵ Furthermore, authoritarian ruling parties advance regime survival by performing key tasks such as creating support bases, signalling the ambitions of the leader,¹⁶ helping build elite cohesion, and deterring defection through power-sharing arrangements.¹⁷

The way countries and international institutions interact with authoritarian ruling elites can also influence the stability of these regimes. International donors and institutions may exert pressure for democratisation through aid conditionality, human

¹⁰ Johannes Gerschewski, 'The three pillars of stability: Legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes', *Democratization* 20, 1 (2013), pp. 13–38; David Art, 'What do we know about authoritarianism after ten years?', *Comparative Politics* 44, 3 (2012), pp. 351-373.

¹¹ Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats', *Comparative Political Studies* 40, 11 (2007), pp. 1279–1301.

¹² Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, *How to rig an election* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2018); Dawn Brancati, 'Democratic authoritarianism: origins and effects', *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014), pp. 313-326.

¹³ Gandhi and Przeworski, 'Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats'; Brancati, 'Democratic authoritarianism'; Helmke and Levitsky, 'Informal institutions and comparative politics'.

¹⁴ Ora John Reuter and Graeme B. Robertson, 'Legislatures, cooptation, and social protest in contemporary authoritarian regimes', *Journal of Politics* 77, 1 (2015), pp. 235-248.

¹⁵ Milan W. Svobik, *The politics of authoritarian rule* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2012).

¹⁶ Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an age of democratization* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007), pp. 44-81.

¹⁷ Svobik, *The politics of authoritarian rule*; Beatriz Magaloni, 'Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule', *Comparative Political Studies*, 41, 4/5 (2008), pp. 715-741.

rights prosecutions or even military intervention.¹⁸ However, autocrats often face no international sanctions for fraudulent elections or perpetrating human rights abuses.¹⁹ Some are able to obtain international support and partners for cooperation by establishing links with other authoritarian states such as China and Russia. This collaboration is mainly driven by geopolitical interests and ultimately aims to protect the regime domestically.²⁰ Autocracies also cooperate with democracies, and it has been shown that those with stronger political institutions – for example, single party and military regimes – are more likely to cooperate with democracies than personalist regimes. The latter are seen as less attractive for cooperation as their leaders ‘are unlikely to be held accountable for bad decisions’ and ‘policies can be changed on a whim.’²¹ Yet the case of Equatorial Guinea reveals that oil makes international projection strategies and cooperation easier to pursue.

Our explanatory model builds on this discussion and adds new insights. In the domestic arena, we examine co-optation, restrictive institutional rules, and repression. In the external arena, we focus on the regime’s international projection to gain credibility. In the analysis of co-optation, we uncover the centrality of the party and the cabinet apparatus. While the importance of party structures has been widely acknowledged, co-opted cabinets, though common in autocracies,²² are much less studied. However, they

¹⁸ Abel Escribà-Folch and Joseph Wright, *Foreign pressure and the politics of autocratic survival* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015); Tobias Hagmann and Filip Reyntjens, *Aid and authoritarianism in Africa: Development without democracy* (Zed Books, London, 2017); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, ‘Linkage versus leverage. Rethinking the international dimension of regime change’, *Comparative Politics* 38, 4 (2006), pp. 379-400.

¹⁹ Cheeseman and Klaas, *How to rig an election*, p. 58.

²⁰ Christian von Soest, ‘Democracy prevention: The international collaboration of authoritarian regimes’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 54, 4 (2015), pp. 623-638.

²¹ Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodríguez, ‘Autocracies and international cooperation’, *International Studies Quarterly* 58, 3 (2014), pp. 527-538 (p. 536).

²² *Africa Confidential*, ‘Kabila’s co-opted cabinet’, 3 February 2017 <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/11904/Kabila%27s_co-opted_cabinet> (15 December 2018); Ismail Akwei, ‘Gabon reshuffles cabinet, key opposition figures appointed’, *Africanews*, 22 August 2017 <<http://www.africanews.com/2017/08/22/gabon-reshuffles-cabinet-key-opposition-figures-appointed/>> (15 December 2018).

perform important functions such as controlling the decision-making process, creating an impression of dialogue and inclusiveness, and fragmenting opposition parties. Thus, like parties and parliaments, cabinets are useful devices for co-optation.²³ The inclusion of restrictive institutions as a mechanism is also innovative. We contend that political institutions are more than vehicles through which autocrats co-opt regime challengers. They set the rules of the game²⁴ and, as such, autocrats can purposely engineer institutions that will help keep their rivals away and rely on informality to protect their interests. But moving beyond domestic mechanisms, we analyse Obiang's enterprise on the international stage, highlighting how the country's geopolitical interest and oil wealth helped forge strategic alliances with democratic and authoritarian countries.

Equatorial Guinea's regime has been classified as 'electoral autocracy'²⁵ or 'hegemonic electoral authoritarian'²⁶, labels that underscore its highly personalist nature. Formal political institutions are in place but are easily bent and manipulated by the president, who also resorts to informality (clientelism, family ties, and small-scale rent distribution) to expand his power. The Constitution gives Obiang extensive formal powers; he is said to be in permanent contact with the Almighty,²⁷ and his pictures and personal achievements are displayed in posters across the main cities.

Equatorial Guinea is an *extreme case*²⁸ of autocratic survival, a label applied when cases attain an extreme value in the researchers' question of interest. To show this, we

²³ Leonardo R. Arriola, 'Patronage and political stability in Africa', *Comparative Political Studies* 42, 10 (2009), pp. 1339–1362.

²⁴ Josep M. Colomer, 'Disequilibrium institutions and pluralist democracy', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 13, 3 (2001), pp. 235–247.

²⁵ Staffan I. Lindberg, 'Opposition parties and democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, 1 (2006), pp. 123–138 (p. 126).

²⁶ Larry Jay Diamond, 'Thinking about hybrid regimes', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 2 (2002), pp. 21–35 (p. 31).

²⁷ *BBC News*, 'Equatorial Guinea's god', 26 July 2013 < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3098007.stm> > (13 May 2019).

²⁸ Jason Seawright and John Gerring, 'Case selection techniques in case study research: A menu of qualitative and quantitative options', *Political Research Quarterly* 61, 2 (2008), pp. 294–308.

draw on Freedom House data and identify a sample of authoritarian countries in Africa that have never experienced alternation in power at the legislative level. Table 1 presents 11 such countries and provides additional information worthy of note. First, Equatorial Guinea is one of the few countries that has never experienced a transfer of power at the presidency level. Second, the ruling party obtains the highest percentage of parliamentary seats. Third, it is one of the most authoritarian regimes and its scores have not improved over time despite the formal reintroduction of multipartyism. Fourth, some countries listed in Table 1 are among Africa's resource-rich countries but are ranked very low in terms of Human Development. However, while most of these countries have experienced strong social contestation or internal conflict, and initiated or participated in an international war, Equatorial Guinea has had no such experiences.

Table 1 Overview of selected authoritarian regimes

	<i>Multiparty legislative elections</i>	<i>Ruling party, year it was founded</i>	<i>Seats (average %)</i>	<i>Presidents(**)</i>	<i>Regime classification (Freedom House)</i>	<i>HDI rank 2019</i>
Angola	1992, 2008, 2012, 2017	<i>Movimento popular de libertação de Angola (MPLA), 1956</i>	73	José Eduardo dos Santos (1979-2012); João Lourenço (2017-)	NF: 1992-2019	149
Chad	1997, 2002, 2014	<i>Mouvement patriotique du salut (MPS), 1990</i>	62	Idriss Déby Itno (1990-)	NF: 1997-2002; PF: 2003-2013; NF: 2014-2019	187
Cameroon	1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2020	<i>Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais (RDPC), 1960</i>	73	Paul Biya (1982-)	NF: 1992-2019	150
Democratic Republic of Congo	2006, 2011, 2018	<i>Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie (PPRD), 2002*</i>	15	Joseph Kabila (2001-2018) Félix Tshisekedi (2018-)	NF: 2006-2019	179
Djibouti	1992, 1997, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2018	<i>Rassemblement populaire pour le progrès (RPP), 1979*</i>	93	Hassan Gouled Aptidon (1977-1999); Ismaïl Omar Guelleh (1999-)	NF: 1992-1998; PF: 1999-2009; NF: 2010-2019	171
Equatorial Guinea	1993, 1999, 2004, 2008, 2013, 2017	PDGE, 1987*	96	Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (1979-) Negasso Gidada (1995-2001); Girma Wolde-Giorgis (2001-2013); Mulatu Teshome (2013-2018); Sahle-Work Zewde (2018-)	NF: 1993-2019	144
Ethiopia	1994, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), 1989*	84	Omar Bongo (1967-2009); Ali Bongo (2009-)	NF: 1994; PF: 1995-2009; NF: 2010-2019	173
Gabon	1990, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2018	<i>Parti démocratique gabonais (PDG), 1968*</i>	70	Paul Kagame (2000-)	PF: 1990-2008; NF: 2009-2019	115
Rwanda	2003, 2008, 2013, 2018	<i>Front patriotique rwandais (FPR), 1987*</i>	55	Omar al-Bashir (1993-2019)	NF: 2003-2019	157
Sudan	2000, 2010, 2015	National Congress Party (NPC), 1998	82	Robert Mugabe (1987-2017); Emmerson Mnangagwa (2017-)	NF: 2000-2019	168
Zimbabwe	1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2018	Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), 1987	54	Robert Mugabe (1987-2017); Emmerson Mnangagwa (2017-)	PF: 1990-2000; NF: 2001-2014; PF: 2015-2016; NF: 2017; PF: 2018-2019	150

Notes: *Parties that established coalitions in some elections. For instance, in Congo the PPRD is the strongest party of the winning coalition. (**) Presidents in power at the onset of multipartyism and/or elected in subsequent elections. NF= Not Free, PF= Partly Free and F= Free.

Source: Authors' elaboration using data from: Freedom House, IPU Parline, and Human Development Index.

The *extreme case* study methodology allows us to optimize variation in autocratic survival but also to use *extremeness* to advance existing arguments and to generate new hypotheses on how autocrats maximize their survival. With a view to thoroughly documenting and contextualising the functioning of the four mechanisms discussed, we triangulate several types of data including digital ethnography, views collected during a visit by one of the authors, online newspapers, parties' webpages, election and human rights reports, electoral laws, and *Africa Research Bulletin* background pieces. The country's main political developments are described briefly in the next section before turning to the empirical findings.

Same old politics in the new multiparty context

Since independence, politics in Equatorial Guinea has been led exclusively by members of the Esangui, a clan belonging to the largest ethnic group, the Fang, from Mongomo District in Río Muni, the part of the country in the African mainland. The first president, Francisco Macías Nguema Biyogo, was elected in 1968 only to install a brutally repressive personalist authoritarian regime. Macías' rule was characterized by economic paralysis and terror comparable only with that of Idi Amin, leaving a massive toll of deaths and exile.²⁹ Neighbouring countries remained silent as did countries with economic interests in Equatorial Guinea like the former colonizer, Spain.³⁰

²⁹ Gustau Nerín, 'Francisco Macías: Nuevo estado, nuevo ritual', *Éndoxa: Series Filosóficas* 37 (2016), pp. 149-168; Samuel Decalo, 'African personal dictatorships', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 23, 2 (1985), pp. 209-237; Simon Baynham, 'Equatorial Guinea: The terror and the coup', *The World Today* 36, 2 (1980), pp. 65-71; Donato Ndongo, *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Editorial Cambio 16, Madrid, 1977).

³⁰ Max Liniger-Goumaz, *Small is not always beautiful. The story of Equatorial Guinea* (C. Hurst & Co., London, 1988), pp. 117-118; Baynham, 'Equatorial Guinea'.

Macías was ousted in 1979 through a coup led by Obiang, his relative and then head of national security, who assumed power on behalf of a military junta. The junta was supported by different countries and organizations, and although there was hope of political change, disrespect for fundamental rights and liberties continued. The economy remained weak in the early 1980s, but economic assistance from international organizations and agreements with different countries was facilitated by the prospect of finding oil. In 1984 Equatorial Guinea became a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and the French Total company was granted exclusive rights to retail oil in the country.³¹

These were still the years of no-party rule (1979-1986) in which ‘both East and West lavish(ed) smiles on the regime.’³² After the initial period of military rule and seven years in power, Obiang formed the PDGE and subsequently installed a single party regime that would span the next five years (1986-1991).³³ Under growing international pressure, Obiang conceded to the principle of political pluralism in August 1989. The PDGE headed the transition process, marked by the approval of a new Constitution and the signing of national agreements. The political parties’ activities were regulated under the 1991 Constitution,³⁴ the 1992 electoral law,³⁵ and later by the 1995 party finance law.³⁶ A transitional administration was formed, and a general amnesty promulgated for all political exiles. Nevertheless, restrictive electoral rules and party laws sought to

³¹ Liniger-Goumaz, *Small is not always beautiful*, pp. 65-69, 99-101, 118.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³³ This was after the creation of PDGE at Obiang’s initiative in 1986 with the motto ‘One man! One country! One party!’. The webpage of PDGE has no historic overview of the party and information on the foundation can be found in the section about the leader (<<https://www.pdge-guineaequatorial.com/un-hombre/>>, 31 August 2020).

³⁴ Gobierno de Guinea Ecuatorial, *Ley Fundamental de Guinea Ecuatorial* (1991), article 9.

³⁵ Gobierno de Guinea Ecuatorial, ‘Ley 3/1992, de fecha 6 de enero, sobre los partidos políticos de Guinea Ecuatorial’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 1992.

³⁶ Gobierno de Guinea Ecuatorial, ‘Ley 8/1995, de fecha 9 de enero, sobre financiación a los partidos políticos’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 1995.

exclude virtually all exiled political opponents from participating in national political life.³⁷

Since the formal reintroduction of multipartyism, regular parliamentary and presidential elections have taken place, with results confirming the supremacy of Obiang and his PDGE in the political system. As in other authoritarian regimes, elections are largely cosmetic and often motivated by the need to signal the regime's legitimacy externally.³⁸ The proliferation of political parties since the founding elections in 1993 was meant to create the illusion of political pluralism, but most of these parties are organizationally thin, extremely fragmented or satellites of the ruling party,³⁹ while others have been banned and operate illegally.⁴⁰ In elections, most parties, such as *Convergencia social democrática y popular* (CSDP) and *Unión democrática social* (UDS), run in alliance with the governing party. The *Convergencia para la democracia social* (CPDS) and the *Ciudadanos por la innovación de Guinea Ecuatorial* (CI) are the only parties that run independently and manage to elect one or two candidates in the polls.

The formal reintroduction of multipartyism coincided with the discovery of oil reserves and Equatorial Guinea becoming one of Africa's biggest oil producers. As elsewhere,⁴¹ the discovery of natural resources helped reconfigure authoritarianism by increasing the regime's capacity to co-opt and build strategic international alliances.⁴² Oil

³⁷ Amancio Nsé and Plácido Micó, 'La oposición guineana entre dos "diálogos nacionales" (1993-2014)', *Éndoxa: Series Filosóficas* 37 (2016), pp. 413–462.

³⁸ Susanne Michalik, *Multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes: Explaining their introduction and effects* (Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2015), p. 23.

³⁹ Geoffrey Wood, 'Business and politics in a criminal state: The case of Equatorial Guinea', *African Affairs* 103, 413 (2004), pp. 547–567; Nsé and Micó, 'La oposición guineana entre dos "diálogos nacionales" (1993-2014)'.

⁴⁰ The *Partido de progreso* (PP) and the *Movimiento nacional de liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial* (MONALIGE), to name just a few. Wood, 'Business and politics in a criminal state'.

⁴¹ Wright, Frantz and Geddes, 'Oil and autocratic regime survival', p. 289.

⁴² Alicia Campos-Serrano, 'Extraction offshore, politics inshore, and the role of the state in Equatorial Guinea', *Africa* 83, 2 (2013), pp. 314-339; Alex Vines, *Well oiled: Oil and human rights in Equatorial Guinea* (Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 2009).

rents also contributed to ‘a new closure of the political arena’⁴³ with Obiang’s family remaining in control of the state with the support of transnational companies and foreign governments.⁴⁴ This complex and dynamic web of an elite-rent generation helped strengthen the regime’s inner circle and reward loyalty.⁴⁵ However, how this personalist regime has successfully managed to tackle both domestic and international pressures for change warrants further research. The following sections delve into the mechanisms that have contributed to regime survival.

Mechanisms of autocratic survival in Equatorial Guinea

Co-optation

Co-optation through patronage, distribution of natural resources revenues and appointment to political positions is one of the most effective mechanisms to increase the life span of an autocracy. In Equatorial Guinea, oil rents have allowed the regime to purchase support and demobilize opponents; much of the patronage system is underpinned by these revenues. Non-oil activities have contributed less to country’s economic vitality and to some extent they also benefit from oil revenues, which have allowed the implementation of structural reforms in the forestry sector.⁴⁶ Despite a major economic decline since 2014, the oil sector has remained fundamental to attracting

⁴³ Campos-Serrano, ‘Extraction offshore, politics inshore, and the role of the state in Equatorial Guinea’, p. 333.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Vines, *Well oiled*; Wood, ‘Business and politics in a criminal state’.

⁴⁵ Jędrzej George Frynas, ‘The oil boom in Equatorial Guinea’, *African Affairs* 103, 413 (2004), pp. 527-546.

⁴⁶ International Monetary Fund, ‘Equatorial Guinea: Selected issues and statistical appendix’ (IMF Country Report No. 03/386, International Monetary Fund, Washington D.C., 2003), pp. 5-6.

diverse investors⁴⁷, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁸ The Obiang family has revenues from forest resources, banking, healthcare, real state, cement and other businesses⁴⁹, as well as strong political influence⁵⁰. Over time family members have held important portfolios linked to security and the main extracting activities (see table 2), which assures the regime's effective control over decision-making, coercion and resource allocation.

The most glaring example of this is Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue's, also known as Teodorín or *El Patrón*, the eldest son of the president and the powerful first lady, Constanca Mangue. He has been in the government since 1998 when he was appointed Minister of Forestry and Environment, a decision that displeased many in elite and business circles.⁵¹ Over the years Teodorín became notorious for his lavish lifestyle and for being involved in several legal actions, the most recent being for 'ill-gotten gains' in France.⁵² After the 2011 constitutional revision which established that the vice president succeeds the president, Teodorín was appointed second vice president even though there was no such portfolio in the Constitution.⁵³ In 2016, he was finally appointed vice president, responsible for defence and security. Gabriel Obiang Lima, also Obiang's

⁴⁷ Paul Jacobs, 'Equatorial Guinea and Russia officially break ground on their geological mapping project in Rio Muni', *African Mining Market*, 5 October 2020 <<https://africanminingmarket.com/equatorial-guinea-and-russia-officially-break-ground-on-their-geological-mapping-project-in-rio-muni/8223/>> (2 November 2020).

⁴⁸ *Oil Review Africa*, 'Equatorial Guinea continues its proactive engagement with oil industry', 12 August 2020, <<https://www.oilreviewafrica.com/exploration/industry/equatorial-guinea-continues-its-proactive-engagement-with-oil-industry>> (29 August 2020).

⁴⁹ The Obiang family is pivotal in different business sectors and necessary partners for foreign investors. José María Irujo, 'The high price of doing business in Equatorial Guinea', *El País*, 3 April 2013 <https://elpais.com/elpais/2013/04/03/inenglish/1365000844_044894.html> (15 May 2018); Neil Munshi, 'Four decades of growth, but Equatorial Guinea's people still mired in poverty', *Financial Times*, 31 December 2019 <<https://www.ft.com/content/f4d0e2d0-1cc9-11ea-97df-cc63de1d73f4>> (8 January 2020).

⁵⁰ Wood, 'Business and politics in a criminal state'.

⁵¹ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *Oil and politics in the Gulf of Guinea* (Hurst and Co Publishers, London, 2017), p. 226.

⁵² Ken Silverstein, 'Teodorin's world', *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2011 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/teodorins-world/>> (2 November 2020); *Le Monde*, "'Biens mal acquis": trois ans avec sursis et 30 millions d'euros d'amende en appel pour Teodorin Obiang', 10 February 2020 <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/02/10/biens-mal-acquis-trois-ans-avec-sursis-et-30-millions-d-euros-d-amende-en-appel-pour-teodorin-obiang_6029086_3212.html> (2 November 2020).

⁵³ Gobierno de Guinea Ecuatorial, *Ley Fundamental de Guinea Ecuatorial* (2012), article 33 (3).

son, has been minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons since 2003 and was previously secretary of state of this department. Defence and security portfolios have also been in the hands of Obiang’s close relatives.

Table 2 Number of ministers in the president’s family

	1994	1996	1998	1999	2001	2003	2004	2006	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2018	2020
<i>N</i>	1	2	4	2	4	3	2	5	5	7	6	4	4	3	3
Total	14	19	22	21	22	25	23	28	25	28	27	26	26	28	29

Sources: Author’s own elaboration based on *Africa Research Bulletin*, *The Statesman’s Yearbooks*, *Africa South of the Sahara*, presidential decrees available at <https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/> and Asodegue (until 2012: <http://www.asodegue.org/>; after 2012: <http://www.asodeguesegundaetapa.org/>).

Note: The analysis includes ministers of state and ministers – other cabinet positions were not considered due to a systematic lack of data. All cabinets were considered, including reshuffles due to presidential elections (1996, 2003, 2010), resignation (1998, 2001, 2006, 2012, 2020) and appointment of Obiang as Chairperson of the African Union (2011).

In addition to family members, several regime collaborators have been awarded cabinet positions. Figure 1 shows the re-election rates over time using 1994 as a reference category (thus not shown). The marked increase in the number of ministers elected twice or more is clearly visible, which suggests those loyal to the regime are systematically rewarded. There have been more newcomers since 2012 after the constitutional revision, showing the expansion of regime supporters. Nevertheless, newcomers are considerably outnumbered by senior ministers, who include regime strongmen such as Jerónimo Osa Osa Ecoro and Clemente Engonga Nguema Onguene.

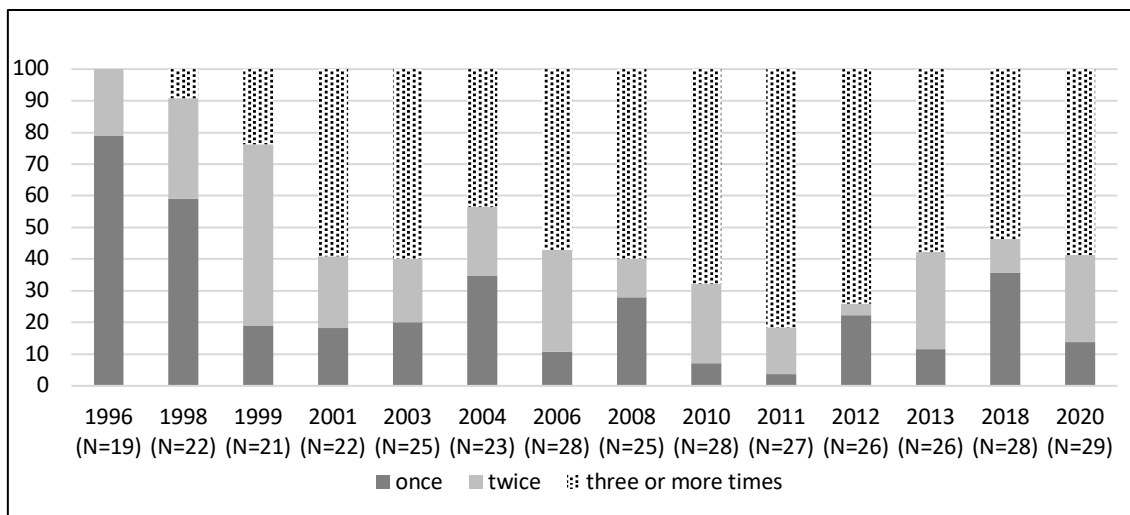


Figure 1 Equatorial Guinea cabinets: Number of times a minister has served (% appointed once, twice, three or more times)

Source: Authors' own elaboration. See footnote to table 2.

Co-optation is paired with more punitive measures, such as the expulsion of relevant party figures,⁵⁴ that allow the regime to rid itself of potential internal opposition and strengthen elite cohesion. But what about the threats emanating from opposition parties and activists?

Although several political parties compete in elections in Equatorial Guinea, this just serves to increase the regime's co-optation capacity.⁵⁵ As already stated, most opposition parties are regime allies that run in elections under the PDGE umbrella (named 'democratic' opposition by the regime), and only a small number can be considered *de facto* opposition (called the 'radicals'). Regime allies are often rewarded with cabinet positions. As can be observed in figure 2, opposition political parties were represented in several cabinets with positions as ministers or ministers of state. A paradigmatic year is

⁵⁴ Guinea Ecuatorial: Página Web Institucional de Guinea Ecuatorial, 'Resolución por la que se expulsa del PDGE a los participantes en el magnicidio del 24 de diciembre', 4 October 2018, <<https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=12324>> (7 October 2018).

⁵⁵ Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Cooperation, cooptation, and rebellion under dictatorships', *Economics & Politics* 18, 1 (2006), pp. 1-26.

2003, following the 2002 presidential elections, when Obiang called a national unity government with eight political parties from the ‘democratic’ opposition.

Cabinet appointments are strategic for the expansion of the leader's patronage coalition and this also makes cabinet size a key institutional factor.⁵⁶ The number of portfolios has steadily increased in an *had hoc* fashion over time, benefiting regime collaborators and some opposition members such as Jeremias Ondó Ngomo (*Unión popular*, UP).⁵⁷ Members of opposition parties are often appointed as ministers of state or vice-ministers and have been assigned portfolios in the areas of health, transport, justice and economic issues. Celestino Bonifacio Bakale Obiang, former CPDS deputy secretary general and presidential candidate in 2002, is the only example of co-optation of ‘radical’ opposition members. He was appointed minister delegate of economy in 2011 and minister in 2012. After being banned from his party, he joined the PDGE.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Arriola, ‘Patronage and political stability in Africa’, p. 1353.

⁵⁷ One of the consequences of this recruitment was that the UP party split into an ‘official’ and an outlawed faction. See *Africa Research Bulletin*, ‘Opposition cooperation’, 39, 6 (2002), p. 14895.

⁵⁸ *Africa Research Bulletin*, ‘New government’, 49, 5 (2012), pp. 19263-19264. On the withdrawal, see Wood, ‘Business and politics in a criminal state’, p. 549.

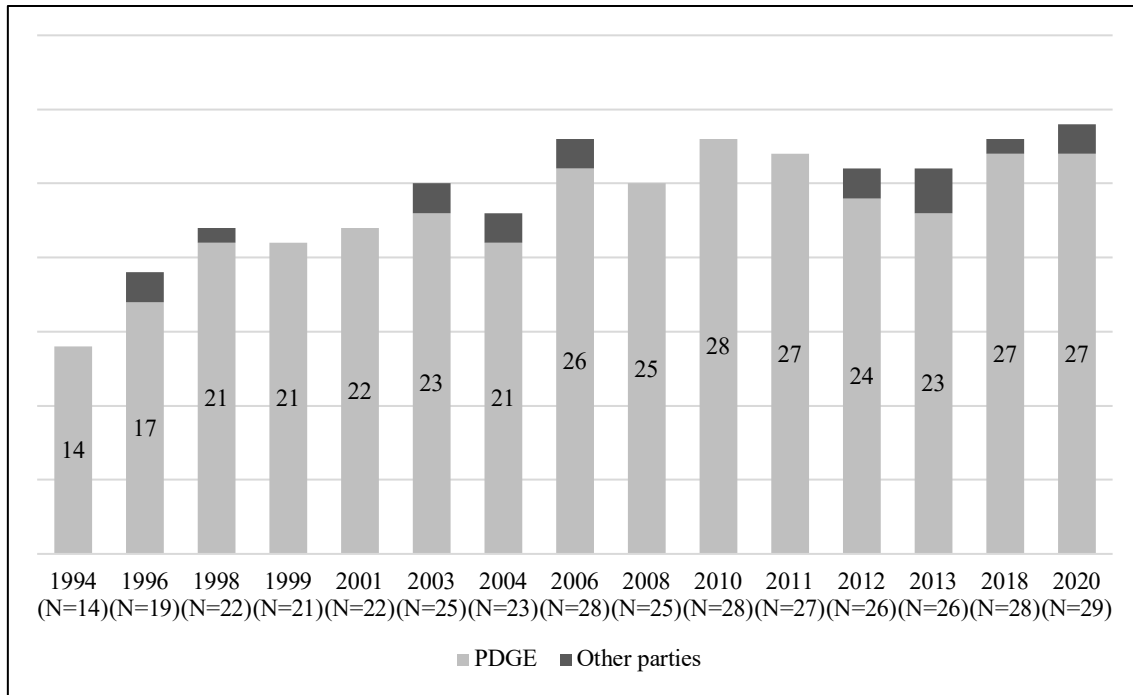


Figure 2 Equatorial Guinea cabinets: Total number of portfolios held by PDGE vs other parties

Source: Authors' own elaboration. See footnote to table 2.

We now explore a final aspect of co-optation, namely the incorporation of members of different ethnic groups. Ethnicity is an informal base of power⁵⁹ relevant in defining political identities and the patron-client relationships in Equatorial Guinea.⁶⁰ Obiang is at the core of clientelist networks that involve members of one ethnic group (Fang) and region of origin (the city of Mongomo in Wele-Nzas province).⁶¹ Fang is the dominant ethnicity in the cabinet, including among opposition ministers. Although Bubi, the second most represented ethnic group, has held few portfolios – ranging from one in 1994 to five in 2012 – it is an unwritten and informal rule that the prime minister should be a Bubi to

⁵⁹ Geddes, Wright and Frantz, *How dictatorships work*, p. 61.

⁶⁰ Enrique Nzang Okenve, 'Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik: Three decades of social paralysis and political immobility in Equatorial Guinea', *Afro-Hispanic Review* 28, 2 (2009), pp. 143-162.

⁶¹ Bruce J. Berman, 'Ethnicity, patronage and the African state: The politics of uncivil nationalism', *African Affairs* 97, 388 (1998), pp. 305-341.

accommodate this ethnic group in the state apparatus. Finally, the very few members of other ethnic groups (Ndowé, Bisió, Fernandino and Annobon) all belong to PDGE.

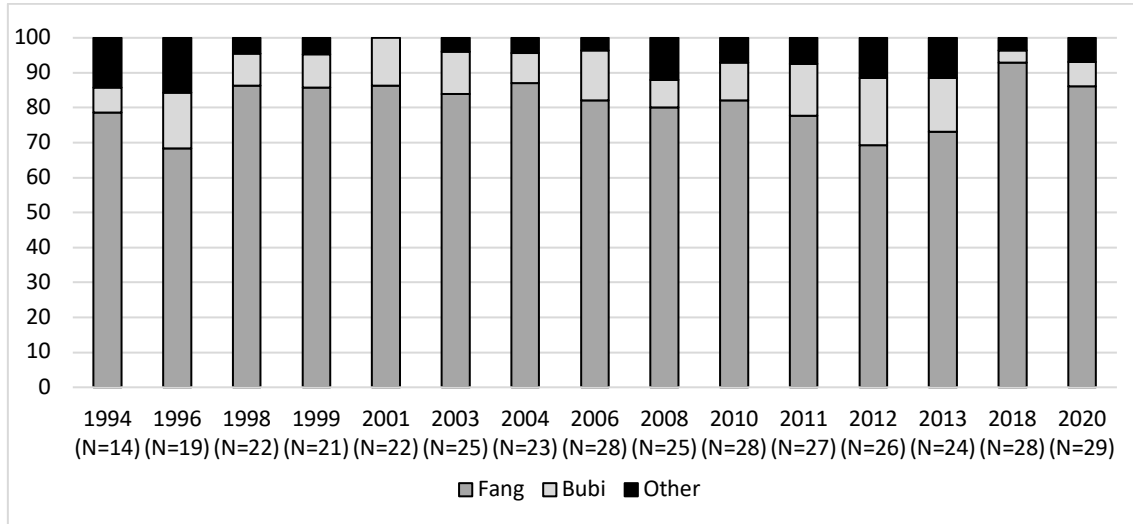


Figure 3 Composition of Equatorial Guinea cabinets: Percentage of ministers by ethnic origin, 1994-2020

Source: Authors' own elaboration. See footnote to table 2.

The empirical analysis of co-optation has provided important insights on how the regime minimizes domestic threats and strengthens itself. First, members of the Obiang family hold key government portfolios, thus guaranteeing that the most important resources and decisions stay within the family. Second, opposition politicians are systematically incorporated into the cabinet, which fragments their parties and weakens their constituencies. Third, all members of minority ethnic groups in cabinet belong to PDGE. Finally, diverse sources of revenues have allowed the regime to persevere with a strategy of small-scale rent distribution, despite the recession due to declining oil revenues since 2014.

Restrictive institutional rules

The early 1990s saw the introduction of a multiparty framework and laws regulating the functioning of political institutions, which have gradually undergone slight changes. The most recent constitution was approved after the 13 November 2011 referendum; it retains the presidential system but introduces a limit of no more than two 7-year terms and also the post of vice president.⁶² Another innovation is a bicameral parliament comprising a 100-member Chamber of Deputies (replacing the previous House of Peoples' Representatives of the same size) and a 70-member senate. According to law 7/2012,⁶³ 55 of the senators are to be directly elected, while the remaining 15 are appointed by the president, giving him additional means to expand his co-optation base.⁶⁴

The electoral process in Equatorial Guinea is marred by serious irregularities,⁶⁵ including restraints on opposition parties' campaign activities, censorship, electoral malpractices (e.g. ghost stations or ballot stuffing) and forms of intimidation and repression.⁶⁶ Regular elections are rarely held on schedule at the whim of Obiang. Furthermore, the electoral system employed in parliamentary elections – closed list proportional representation system – includes two devices that favour the incumbent party vis-à-vis its opponents. First, it sets an electoral threshold of 10% in each electoral circumscription (article 166, law 7/2012), which critically undermines smaller parties'

⁶² Gobierno de Guinea Ecuatorial, *Ley Fundamental de Guinea Ecuatorial* (2012), articles 33 and 36 .

⁶³ Which reviews and updates the previous versions: laws 3/1993, 7/1995, 3/1998 and 8/2003, all related to legislative and municipal elections and referenda and, in 2012, incorporating elections to the senate.

⁶⁴ Alexander Baturo and Robert Elgie, 'Why do authoritarian regimes adopt bicameralism? Co-optation, control, and masking controversial reforms', *Democratization* 25, 5 (2018), pp. 919-937.

⁶⁵ Artur Colom-Jaén and Alicia Campos-Serrano, 'Oil in Chad and Equatorial Guinea: Widening the focus of the resource curse', *European Journal of Development Research* 25, 4 (2013), pp. 584-599 ; Nsé and Micó, 'La oposición guineana entre dos "diálogos nacionales" (1993-2014)'.

⁶⁶ For a complete menu of electoral manipulation, see Michalik, *Multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes*, pp. 23-24. For selected examples of Equatorial Guinea, see *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Opposition claims fraud', 35, 8 (1998), p. 13219; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Prominent personalities', 41, 4 (2004), p. 15713; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Constitutional referendum', 48, 11 (2011), pp. 19048-19049; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Legislative polls', 54, 11 (2017) pp. 21643-21644.

chances to elect candidates and distorts the benefits of proportional representation systems which are known to facilitate the entry of new parties.⁶⁷ Secondly, a different ballot structure is used from that of all other countries applying this voting system. In fact, rather than including all parties that run in a given constituency on the same ballot paper, there are as many ballot papers as competing political parties; this means citizens have to choose the ballot paper of the party for which they want to vote. It should be noted that although PDGE ran in coalition with 14 other parties in the 2017 legislative elections, only its symbol appeared on the ballot. International electoral observers from the African Union and the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries have not commented on this.⁶⁸ Moreover, the electoral law provides that all ballot papers should be placed in front of the ballot box and that polling station technicians have a duty to guarantee secrecy (article 84, 1 and 3, law 7/2012). However, the presence of military personnel in each polling station (article 95, law 7/2012) reinforces the coercive atmosphere of the voting process and heavily conditions voting decisions.

Party activities are severely restricted and controlled by the regime. The opposition has long been forbidden to hold demonstrations of all kinds, and the government is slow to legalize new parties. The interior ministry⁶⁹ and the national election board, responsible for the registration, dissolution and banning of political parties, are controlled by the PDGE, which means that the regime and the authoritarian party defines much of what political parties can and cannot do.⁷⁰ In addition, opposition

⁶⁷ Michalik, *Multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes*, p. 26.

⁶⁸ *Asodegue*, 'Lo que dicen los "observadores internacionales" sobre las elecciones del día 12', 15 November 2017 <<http://www.asodeguesegundaetapa.org/lo-que-dicen-los-observadores-internacionales-sobre-las-elecciones-del-dia-12-agencia-lusa/>> (15 May 2019).

⁶⁹ Anika Moroff, 'Party bans in Africa: An empirical overview', *Democratization* 17, 4 (2010), pp. 618-641 (p. 626). *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Opposition colalitions banned', 34, 12 (1997) p. 12934; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Equatorial Guinea', 35, 2 (1998), p. 13004.

⁷⁰ Radio Macuto, 'Entrevista a Daniel Darío Martínez Ayécaba, presidente de Unión Popular (UP)', *Asodegue*, 10 July 2015 <<http://www.asodeguesegundaetapa.org/entrevista-a-daniel-dario-martinez-ayecaba-presidente-de-union-popular-up-radio-macuto/>> (3 June 2019); Ejecutiva Nacional de Unión

members often defect to the PDGE, enticed by position of powers in the regime. By limiting the role of opposition parties, the PDGE has hegemonic political control to establish how other institutions, such as elections, should work.

Even though Obiang is vested with strong constitutional power, as noted above, informality is key to understand his personal rule, as documented in the case study literature.⁷¹ Obiang is at the centre of a reward system that encompasses family members and elites from particular ethnic groups and regions, especially Fang from Wele-Nzas. The *Fanguisation* of the country is historically rooted and continues to be reproduced so that the Fang feel they have privileged access to the state.⁷² But, in addition to restrictive formal rules, the regime employs restrictive informal rules that favour only a small group of individuals while side-lining the majority. Like his counterparts in Angola or Gabon, Obiang has been able to use patronage politics – and in particular small-scale rent distribution – to consolidate his autocratic rule.

In sum, the analysis reveals that formal and informal institutions blend to reinforce authoritarianism and shield the regime from its rivals. Nominally democratic institutions are in place, but designed to uphold Obiang's arbitrary behaviour and, most importantly, to raise the costs of political participation. Institutions are key devices of the autocrat's survival not only because they allow systematic co-optation, but because they impose formal and informal constraints on political competition.

Popular, 'Comunicado institucional de UP', *Radio Macuto*, 30 May 2017 <<https://www.radiomacuto.cl/2017/05/30/comunicado-institucional-de-up/>> (3 June 2019).

⁷¹ Okenve, 'Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik'.

⁷² Yolanda Aixelà, 'Of colonists, migrants and national identity. The historic difficulties of the socio-political construction of Equatorial Guinea', *The Nordic Journal of African Studies* 22, 1/2 (2013), pp. 49-71.

Repression

Equatorial Guinea is a small territory in which a culture of fear is prevalent throughout. Human rights have been constantly and systematically violated and the hand of the dictatorship is felt through different institutions and in daily life. The regime and the state are institutionalized in the whole territory through administrative offices, delegations of PDGE or large infrastructures on the ground. There has been a constant military presence on the streets since independence⁷³ and military barriers are found all over the country to control the population's movements. Most military are Fang and, despite living in poor economic conditions, they enjoy the symbolic privilege of belonging to the president's ethnic group and the supposed advantages of their ethnic belonging.⁷⁴ Powerful and powerless Fang members often say 'Sabes con quién tratas?' ('Do you know who you are talking to?') to demonstrate their dominance vis-à-vis minority groups.

Repression comes in many forms ranging from the centralized and coercive state apparatus,⁷⁵ whose institutions are traditionally entrusted to members of the president's family, to the regime's controls of access to jobs in public and private sectors, which prevents dissidents from having wage-earning jobs.⁷⁶ The fact that every state employee must be a formal member of the PDGE is an illustration of the diffuse forms of intimidation. The common citizen cannot afford to be a regime opponent as it can have far-reaching effects on their own and their relatives' lives.⁷⁷

⁷³ Christian Davenport, 'State repression and political order', *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, 1 (2007), pp. 1-23.

⁷⁴ Aixelà, 'Of colonists, migrants and national identity'.

⁷⁵ Daniel N. Posner and Daniel J. Young, 'The institutionalization of political power in Africa', *Journal of Democracy* 18, 3 (2007), pp. 126-140.

⁷⁶ Alicia Campos Serrano and Plácido Micó Abogo, *Labour and trade union freedom in Equatorial Guinea* (Fundación Paz y Solidaridad Serafin Aliaga de Comisiones Obreras, Madrid, 2006).

⁷⁷ Okenve, 'Wa kobo abe, wa kobo politik', pp. 144-145.

The government's military expenditure has risen (see table 3), particularly between 1995 and 2007, due to the increase in oil incomes channelled to the military,⁷⁸ and also due to some attempted coups. In 1998, a coup supposedly staged by Martin Puye, leader of the illegal Bubi political party *Movimiento para la autodeterminación de la isla de Bioko* (MAIB), was followed by massive repression against the Bubi ethnic minority.⁷⁹ Yet there were unsuccessful coup plots in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2017.

Table 3 Military expenditure (% of central government expenditure)

Year	1994	1995	2007	2008	2009	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
%	0.39	1.45	7.63	7.45	6.21	2.46	2.50	4.46	5.63	5.90

Source: World Bank

(<<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.ZS?view=chart&locations=GQ>>, 21 November 2020)

Note: data only available for years included in the table.

The attempted coups featured different domestic and foreign actors, from politicians and activists to international mercenaries, all with interests in the country's geostrategic position and resources. Since 2002, these coups have coincided with the publication of news of the president's deteriorating health and the need to find a successor.⁸⁰ The coup attempts are triggered by aspirations to a share of the oil revenues, as was the case of the famous Wonga Coup in 2004.⁸¹ The last attempt was on 24 December 2017 and supposedly involved foreign mercenaries and members of PDGE and the CI, which was subsequently banned and some of its members reportedly tortured and killed.⁸² The

⁷⁸ Wright, Frantz and Geddes, 'Oil and autocratic regime survival'.

⁷⁹ *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'The Bubi threatened', 35, 1 (1998), p. 12976; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Bubi leader dies', 35, 7 (1998), p. 13188.

⁸⁰ *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Coup plot claim', 39, 4 (2002), pp. 14823-14824. See also Wood, 'Business and politics in a criminal state', p. 551; Frynas, 'The oil boom in Equatorial Guinea', p. 545.

⁸¹ *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Equatorial Guinea', 41, 9 (2004), pp. 15919-15920.

⁸² *Africa Research Bulletin*, "'Coup" attempt', 55, 1 (2018), pp. 21724-21725. *Le Monde*, 'En Guinée équatoriale, des opposants affirment avoir été torturés par la police', 28 March 2018

attempted coups are the only forms of political instability in the country. There have been almost no protests or public demonstrations against the regime or the population's living conditions⁸³ despite the growing public dissatisfaction with the regime's performance during the economic recession.⁸⁴

More selective forms of coercion targeting political activists have also been reported over the years with episodes of abuse, discrimination, torture, impunity, arbitrary arrests, deaths in prison, and limitations on freedom of movement.⁸⁵ Key opponents, whether members of the opposition or close to both the party and the president, are often arrested. Feliciano Bama Nsu (PDGE) was arrested and tried in 2002, as was Plácido Micó Abogo, at the time CPDS general-secretary.⁸⁶ Leaders of civil society organizations, like Alfredo Okenve, and senior figures of the so-called 'radical' opposition, such as the CPDS secretary-general Andrés Esono Ondó, are preferred targets of repression and often kept in custody without concrete charges.⁸⁷

Our analysis has identified diffuse and specific forms of repression. It has also demonstrated the centrality of Obiang and his family in this mechanism since several members of their clan are in charge of institutions and portfolios through which coercive

https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/03/28/en-guinee-equatoriale-des-opposants-affirmement-avoir-ete-tortures-par-la-police_5277493_3212.html> (10 December 2018).

⁸³ One of the few exceptions was a taxi drivers' strike in 2017, *Asodegue*, 'Huelga sin precedentes de taxistas en Guinea Ecuatorial', 5 May 2017 <<http://www.asodeguesegundactapa.org/huelga-sin-precedentes-de-taxistas-en-guinea-ecuatorial-agencias-afp-y-lusa/>> (20 May 2019).

⁸⁴ El Hazaña Azul, 'Y la crisis se agudiza cada día', *Radio Macuto*, 16 January 2020 <<https://www.radiomacuto.cl/2020/01/16/y-la-crisis-se-agudiza-cada-dia/>> (17 January 2020).

⁸⁵ Vines, *Well oiled*. As examples, *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Ex-minister disappears', 34, 10 (1997), p. 12858; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Severo Moto's brother arrested', 42, 3 (2005), p. 16157. See also Alicia Campos Serrano and Plácido Micó Abogo, *Labour and trade union freedom in Equatorial Guinea* (Fundación Paz y Solidaridad Serafín Aliaga de Comisiones Obreras, Madrid, 2006), p. 27.

⁸⁶ *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Demobilisation programme', 39, 5 (2002), p. 14860; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 'Equatorial Guinea', 39, 6 (2002), p. 14907.

⁸⁷ As examples, on Alfredo Okenve, *Radio Macuto*, 'Activista de derechos humanos detenido em Guinea Ecuatorial', 17 March 2019 <<https://www.radiomacuto.cl/2019/03/17/activista-de-derechos-humanos-detenido-en-guinea-ecuatorial/>> (21 May 2019); on Andrés Esono, *Africa Times*, 'Chad return CPDS opposition leader to Equatorial Guinea', 28 April 2019 <<https://africatimes.com/2019/04/28/chad-returns-cpds-opposition-leader-to-equatorial-guinea/>> (21 May 2019).

instruments are activated. Repression is omnipresent and is meted out to neutralize or discourage opposition.

International projection

Equatorial Guinea has strong economic and geopolitical linkages⁸⁸ with a constellation of countries be they democratic or autocratic, from the East or the West. These ties have allowed the country to gain international recognition without having to change the regime's autocratic contours. Before the oil boom, the ruler maintained and strengthened relations with traditional allies, like the Holy See, Russia or Morocco,⁸⁹ and sought more international and regional support by expanding its foreign relations through diplomatic missions and enterprises; a strategy still used today.⁹⁰

The country's push to gain international credibility gained momentum in the early 1990s when it started the move to multipartyism. However, the discovery of oil meant the regime had enough resources to continue its autocratic trajectory domestically. In the international arena, pressures on the dictatorship dissipated in the face of donors' economic interests, and elections raised 'only minimal condemnation from international organizations and donors'.⁹¹ In fact, although small, Equatorial Guinea has been one of the largest oil producers in Africa since the exploitation of oil began, with production estimated at 375,577 barrels per day in 2005, declining to an estimated 244,000 barrels

⁸⁸ We draw on the concept of linkage as 'density of ties' with international actors (Levitsky and Way, 'Linkage versus leverage', p. 379).

⁸⁹ Backing Morocco in the occupation of Western Sahara has ensured the protection of the Moroccan security services until today. Liniger-Goumaz, *Small is not always beautiful*, p. 146.

⁹⁰ *Radio Macuto*, 'Las relaciones de la familia Obiang con la dictadura turca de Erdogan', 31 August 2020 <<https://www.radiomacuto.net/2020/08/31/las-relaciones-de-la-familia-obiang-con-la-dictadura-turca-de-erdogan-la-empresa-summa-es-la-mejor-embajadora-de-turquia-en-malabo/>> (31 August 2020).

⁹¹ Campos, 'Oil, sovereignty and self-determination', p. 436.

per day in 2016.⁹² Oil brought wealth to the ruling elite⁹³ and facilitated the creation of an ‘international patronage system led by American oil companies’⁹⁴ which engaged in several tactics to ensure the President’s support and improve the country’s reputation internationally, and particularly in the United States.⁹⁵ ExxonMobil, for instance, facilitated Obiang’s access to the Bush Administration, hired a lobby firm and a consultant to refashion the country’s image.⁹⁶ The Riggs Bank allowed different members of the Obiang family to open accounts without questioning the origins of the money.⁹⁷

Besides the United States, the most relevant external partner, Obiang has sought cooperation with different countries such as China and Russia. China has gained greater prominence in Equatorial Guinea’s economic life in the 21st century, signing agreements in the oil sector and developing activities in construction and other areas.⁹⁸ Though an old ally, Russia is also increasing its cooperation with the country in traditional sectors like oil, but also by promoting scholarships and military training and equipment under the supervision of the Vice-President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue.⁹⁹

First and foremost, oil has helped the country reach new heights in the international arena. In fact, unlike other autocratic regimes, no international punitive measures have been taken against Equatorial Guinea. The regime’s agency has been crucial, notably the hiring of international companies, such as PRNewswire, to brand the country’s image. Moreover, oil is still hailed as the country’s main asset regardless of the

⁹² Data available only until 2016. *Worldometer*, ‘Equatorial Guinea oil’ <<https://www.worldometers.info/oil/equatorial-guinea-oil/>> (3 November 2020).

⁹³ Brendan McSherry, ‘The political economy of oil in Equatorial Guinea’, *African Studies Quarterly* 8, 3 (2006), pp. 23-45. Colom-Jaén and Campos-Serrano, ‘Oil in Chad and Equatorial Guinea’.

⁹⁴ Mario Esteban, ‘The Chinese amigo: Implications for the development of Equatorial Guinea’, *The China Quarterly* 199 (2009), pp. 667-685 (p. 672).

⁹⁵ Soares de Oliveira, *Oil and politics in the Gulf of Guinea*, pp. 227-229.

⁹⁶ Steve Coll, *Private empire: ExxonMobil and American power* (The Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2012), pp. 142-144; Soares de Oliveira, *Oil and politics in the Gulf of Guinea*, p. 229.

⁹⁷ Ken Silverstein, *The secret world of oil* (Verso, London; New York, NY, 2014), p. 73.

⁹⁸ Esteban, ‘The Chinese amigo’.

⁹⁹ Sputnik, ‘Guinea Ecuatorial invita a los inversores rusos y promete facilidades máximas’, *ElPaís.cr*, 27 January 2020 <<https://www.elpais.cr/2020/01/27/guinea-ecuatorial-invita-a-los-inversores-rusos-y-promete-facilidades-maximas/>> (13 September 2020).

recent recession.¹⁰⁰ Despite campaigns by human rights activists, the International Monetary Fund approved a US\$ 282.8 million loan to promote economic growth and stability, and governance and transparency in December 2019.¹⁰¹ The activists do not expect the regime to use the three-year Extended Fund Facility to boost accountability or transparency, as required. This is also true of the country's application to re-join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in 2019.¹⁰² The domestic *status quo*, lacking transparency and accountability, is expected to be maintained.

Obiang and the regime are successful actors in the international theatre, contrary to what one would expect of a personalist regime.¹⁰³ Due to its resources and geostrategic position in the Gulf of Guinea, countries such as United States or Germany see it as a key player in the fight against piracy¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, Obiang has headed international institutions, such as the African Union in 2011. Equatorial Guinea has organized recent regional summits such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) Malabo Meeting in June 2019, and gained membership of the United Nations Security Council between 2018-2019. An AfDB tweet from June 2019 is telling of the regime's ability to brand itself internationally:

¹⁰⁰ The official webpage of 'Equatorial Guinea year of energy 2019' (<https://yearofenergy2019.com/>) provides information on summits and partnerships. On the 'Year of investment 2020', see *World Oil*, 'Equatorial Guinea launches year of investment 2020 campaign', 26 November 2019, <<https://www.worldoil.com/news/2019/11/26/equatorial-guinea-launches-year-of-investment-2020-campaign>> (21 January 2020).

¹⁰¹ International Monetary Fund, 'Equatorial Guinea: Promoting inclusive growth, improving governance and transparency', 13 December 2019, <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/12/13/na121319-equatorial-guinea-promoting-inclusive-growth-and-improving-governance-and-transparency>> (21 January 2020).

¹⁰² The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 'Board decision on the candidature of Equatorial Guinea', 14 February 2020, <<https://eiti.org/board-decision/2020-10>> (31 August 2020).

¹⁰³ Escribà-Folch and Wright, *Foreign pressure and the politics of autocratic survival*, pp. 161-162.

¹⁰⁴ *Guinea Ecuatorial: Página Web Institucional de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 'Malabo y Washington emprenden una lucha conjunta contra la piratería en el Golfo de Guinea', 25 September 2019, <<https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=13979>> (31 August 2020); Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial, 'Berlín desea cooperar con Malabo en la lucha contra la piratería en el Golfo de Guinea', 17 January 2020, <<https://www.pdge-guineaequatorial.com/berlin-desea-cooperar-con-malabo-en-la-lucha-contra-la-pirateria-en-el-golfo-de-guinea/>> (31 August 2020).

We look at [#EquatorialGuinea](#) as a good example of the credibility-enhancing effects of collective action, which comes with regional integration. In this panel, we discuss what other African countries are doing [#LIVE](#) from [#AfDBAM2019](#)¹⁰⁵

The creation of the UNESCO – Equatorial Guinea International Prize for Research in Life Sciences in 2012 is also illustrative. Human rights organizations successfully campaigned against the prize being named after Obiang but were not able to suspend it altogether.¹⁰⁶ The country’s adherence to the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries was subject to similar scrutiny but it gained full membership in 2014 after negotiations on the abolition of the death penalty as a core admission condition; however, the death penalty is still in force¹⁰⁷.

Obiang’s regime has thrived on the international stage, facing little pressure for change. International partners are often complicit with human rights abuses and electoral flaws by remaining silent or allowing irregularities to continue. Equatorial Guinea is not a case of authoritarian promotion, but one in which the autocrat uses the country’s key assets – oil wealth and geostrategic location – to sustain its developmental strategy and ultimately shield the regime domestically.

Conclusion

Equatorial Guinea features a remarkably resilient authoritarian regime that has remained immune to major threats despite the reintroduction of multipartyism and the high levels

¹⁰⁵ @AfDB_Group, 13 June 2019, 17:04hrs, <https://twitter.com/AfDB_Group/status/1139201889596260353> (14 June 2019).

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Equatorial Guinea: UNESCO’s shameful award’, 16 July 2012, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/16/equatorial-guinea-unescos-shameful-award>> (30 May 2019).

¹⁰⁷ Mário Queiroz, ‘Oil lubricates Equatorial Guinea’s entry into Portuguese language community’, *Inter Press Service*, 25 July 2014, <<http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/07/oil-lubricates-equatorial-guineas-entry-into-portuguese-language-community/>> (30 May 2019).

of inequality. By focusing on an *extreme* and overlooked country like Equatorial Guinea, this study has sought to account for the complex set of instruments that contribute to autocratic survival.

Our explanatory model considers both domestic and international mechanisms of regime survival. On the domestic front, the diverse forms of co-optation – distribution of patronage benefits and, above all, positions in the party and cabinet – helped the regime generate party discipline, develop elite cohesion and reward loyalty. The ruling elite and their personal (and often family) connections are the main beneficiaries of this reward system. But co-optation went further, reaching leaders of key political parties from the opposition. Our analysis showed that the party and cabinet apparatus constitute key instruments for strengthening the regime and weakening the opposition.

Second, the regime shielded itself through the choice of institutional rules that give an overwhelming mandate of power to the autocrat and reinforce PDGE's position as the dominant party. In fact, the scheduling of elections is discretionary, electoral management bodies are not independent, the ballot structure and the military supervision of the polling stations undermine free choice, and it is easy to sanction and ban political parties. Parallel to this, informal rules – such as clientelism, favouritism, and personalism – are used to tilt the competition in favour of the ruling elite and party. The blend of formal and informal rules is thus key for autocratic survival.

Third, repression is used in both specific and diffuse ways to further close the political space. The regime's fiercest critics have faced political harassment, torture, detention, and some were forced into exile. Freedom of expression and association are severely restricted in an attempt to narrow the channels through which opposition can be voiced.

Finally, the regime has been able to establish cooperation with both autocrats and democrats, capitalising on its resources and geostrategic position. The stark autocratic nature of the regime is not matched by external condemnation or sanctions. On the contrary, many perceive the country to be a relevant actor. Though oil has been key in the country's international endeavour, it is important to note that it can also rely on other resources – forestry, private sector businesses, construction etc. –, to build support. This has been particularly true since the 2014 recession.

The present case study is pertinent for both theory-testing and theory-building. On the one hand, the study offers a test for the theoretical claims that ruling parties are vital for autocratic survival, that oil rich countries are better able to survive, and that personalist regimes with institutions last longer; by and large, this has proven to be the case in Equatorial Guinea. On the other hand, it sheds light on the alternative mechanisms the regime uses to extend its survival over time. Autocratic survival in Equatorial Guinea is explained not only by repression, oil revenues and patronage but also by the autocrat's ability to form co-opted cabinets, to craft restrictive institutional rules, and to build strategic international alliances. This set of findings contributes to the literature on autocratic survival in two ways.

First, it shows that institutions matter in personalist dictatorships. They clearly do not enjoy the same level of autonomy and independence from the leader as in other types of autocracies, but they are still useful to the autocrats' survival strategies. In other words, autocratic survival is enhanced when restrictive formal and informal rules are combined. Second, even less skilful personalist dictators can succeed in international projection strategies if they come from a resource-rich country, which in turn further insulates the regime from domestic pressures. This raises some interesting questions. How do the incumbent authoritarian leaders/parties control the boundaries of change by selecting

institutional rules that are beneficial to them? And how do personalist dictators behave in the international sphere and why are some more successful than others?