

# DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE INSTITUUT VAN INTERNASIONALE AANGELEENTHEDE THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## EQUATORIAL GUINEA

The following review of past and present developments in this small West African state is inspired by recent South African interest manifested in the area.

### General Background and History

Even the moderately well informed Africa-watcher surveying this small republic at first glance is reminded of the estate agent's well-worn phrase employed when selling a somewhat run-down property: 'it has potential'. However, in view of recent events in the north of Angola and some tentative entrepreneurial moves in the vicinity, closer examination may prove rewarding. Discovered by the Portuguese in the course of their explorations of the African littoral and later occupied spasmodically by British and Dutch slave-traders, the principal islands of Fernando Poo and Annobon were formally ceded by Portugal to Spain during the 18th Century, the mainland coast of Rio Muni being specifically French-occupied until the Treaty of Paris in 1900, when the whole was recognised as under Spanish authority.

Spanish rule was largely characterised by benevolent neglect - to some extent accounted for by Spain's own poverty. The island of Fernando Poo thrived relatively as a result of successful entrepreneurship by the 'fernandino' and European elements who controlled the plantations. In general though, little or no attempt was made to uplift the mass of the population, as a result of the rigid application of the historic Spanish 'Patronato de Indigenas', which reduced every indigenous inhabitant to the legal status of a minor. In 1938 this was modified to allow for an 'emancipado' category similar to that of the Portuguese colonies, which meant an 'educated' black could become eligible for full citizenship - with limited impact. Effectively, therefore, black nationalist opposition could only be organised in exile from the Cameroons and Gabon, with the various political shades encompassed in three major movements reflecting marxist, moderate left and conservative leanings.

In 1959, responding to growing nationalist pressure, Spain reconstituted the territory as a full province, represented in the Cortés. In 1963, partial autonomy was granted, and the Governor-General was replaced by a High Commissioner with a legislature, cabinet and president to administer the territory. Finally, in March 1968 Spain acknowledged that it was prepared to grant independence, and a constitution was devised, subject to a referendum held under UN observation. In October of the same year, independence was

granted and Macias Nguema became the first President (having defeated his rival, Atanasio Ndongo, who was killed the following year after an unsuccessful coup attempt).

The next ten years were characterised first by anti-white riots, which led to the departure of most of them - and thereafter by increasingly despotic and bloody rule by Macias Nguema, which saw the decline of such modest government infrastructure that had existed previously, into almost complete ruin. The ranks of the Ibo contract workers on Fernando Poo were decimated, first by the patriotic call of the Biafran War and later, in 1976, when Nigeria recalled all her nationals still on the island, numbering several thousand. Religious and political persecution flourished and by the time of Macias' deposition in 1979, approximately 100 000 (one-third) of the total population was estimated to be in exile. In 1978, the Roman Catholic Church, which claimed 80% of the population as adherents, was banned and all missionaries expelled. The inevitable reaction to this regime of apparently undiluted oppression and terror was a palace revolution, when Colonel Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (head of the National Guard and nephew of Macias), led a successful uprising - culminating in the trial and execution of the erstwhile President.

Not unnaturally, the Equato-Guinean economy had almost totally collapsed, and from a position of being one of the most prosperous smaller African territories in terms of per capita income, Equatorial Guinea had become almost entirely dependent on Spanish financial assistance: for instance, trade figures for 1982 (three years after Macias' overthrow) show exports of \$17 million, against imports of \$41.5 million. It was apparent, therefore, that the major and most urgent task of the new regime was to restore domestic and international confidence.

#### Physical Features and Resources

The Republic is made up of two principal components: the mainland province of Rio Muni of some 26 000 square kilometres and the island of Fernando Poo of some 2 000 square kilometres. Additionally, there are a few offshore islands adjacent to Rio Muni as well as the small island of Annobon (17 square kilometres) nearly 600 kilometres south - of no economic or political significance. The resident population was estimated at 304 000 in 1983, almost entirely of Bantu ethnic origin, with 80% belonging to the Fang (predominant in neighbouring Gabon), some 15% Bubi (on the island of Fernando Poo) and an upper/administrative class of Fernandinos (a creole group) with some Europeans, numbering a few thousand in all.

The island of Bioko (formerly Fernando Poo) is of volcanic origin, varying in height up to some 3 000 metres, bisected by a valley dividing the two volcanic formations. The coastline is fairly rugged, except in the north, where lies also the site of the capital and an excellent natural harbour - Malabo (formerly Santa Isabel) - with a population of some 35 000. There are two excellent beaches and the terrain is scenically attractive, but there has been little or no tourist trade development, with only 5 hotels on the whole island (1984).

Medical and hospital facilities exist at a rudimentary level. Water supplies are suspect, and the humidity of the climate, with 254cm (100 inches) of rain and an average temperature of 25°C, makes anti-malarial precautions essential.

Communications on the island are good by comparison with the mainland, with some 160 km of tarred road to facilitate cocoa and banana exports.

The island has two ports : Malabo and Luba - the latter largely engaged in the banana trade. There is a monthly shipping service to Europe operating from Barcelona (in Spain). Air transport is catered for by the international airport at Malabo, with connections to Lagos, Madrid, Gabon, Morocco and allegedly a monthly flight from Moscow. There is a daily service to Bata on the mainland.

Crop production on the island's fertile soils is almost entirely of a high quality. Cocoa is grown on extensive 'fincas' or plantations largely run by Fernandinos or Europeans, with bananas and a little coffee, a poor second and third in order of importance.

There was some development of offshore fishing resources immediately after independence, with an exclusive concession awarded to the USSR, since fallen away.

There appear to be no mineral resources on the island, although it is rumoured that traces of oil and gas were found by a Spanish-Equatoguinean firm in the offshore waters to the north, adjoining the Cameroon and Nigerian oil fields.

Mainland Rio Muni (now Mbini) can best be described as a quadrilaterally-shaped enclave, excised from the northern region of Gabon, being essentially the multi-estuarine region of the Rio Benito and its tributaries, at a height of some 600/700 metres with the exception of hilly areas in the south, of some 1000 metres height - and the coastal plain. The whole area is extensively clad in equatorial forest - the most valuable, though non-renewable, resource. Exploitation, because capital-intensive, is almost entirely in the hands of foreign concessionaires (French, Italian or Spanish). Some coffee is produced, as well as palm oil from the coastal oil palms. The climate, though still equatorial in type, is slightly less humid and also cooler than that of Bioko.

The two major towns in Rio Muni are Bata (the provincial capital) and Rio Benito (now Mbini), at the mouth of the river of the same name.

The road system is improving though still minimal - a tarred road links Bata and Mbini, and another is pushing toward Ebebiyin on the eastern border with Gabon. There is no railway, but there is an international airport (reportedly) at Bata, which is also a seaport.

Mineral reserves are reported to have been discovered - though no published figures are available - indicating the presence of iron ore, gold, manganese and uranium.

The island of Annobon, some 600 km to the south, is home to 2 000 or so fishermen and their families and can be ignored for the purpose of this survey.

### The Economy

Some reference has already been made to the nigh total collapse of Equatorial Guinea's economy under the capricious and despotic rule of Macias Nguema during the period 1968-79.

During the colonial period, continuing until the final achievement of complete independence in 1968, the mainstay of the Equatorial Guinea economy was cacao (cocoa), exported largely to Spain (at a preferential rate for Spain) followed in value by timber and lastly by coffee, although the latter was of inferior quality. The country was essentially self-sufficient in staple foodstuffs such as sweet potatoes and cassava, and fishing hardly existed except on a subsistence basis. Industry in the western sense of the word, was non-existent.

With the assumption of power by Macias Nguema in 1968, the position changed radically for the worse almost overnight. Anti-white riots were commonplace and by 1970 many of the white plantation owners had left. In the ensuing years most of the Nigerian contract labour departed, leaving Macias compelled to introduce forced labour from the mainland to keep the island plantations functioning at all. The resulting and predictable decline in the "cocoa" economy is illustrated dramatically by comparing the 1966/67 production of cocoa of 38 207 tons with the 1976 figure of 12 000 tons, and an even further drop to 5 000 tons by 1979. The disappearance of skilled personnel at all levels - from supervisory to the trained field worker - provides a classic illustration of the pitfalls awaiting any economy, even the most rudimentary, which makes arbitrary political decisions at the expense of market forces and social mobility.

Some idea of the damage done by the Macias regime during this period is revealed by the fact that even at the lower figures, the cocoa exports still represented 97,4% of Equatorial Guinea's total export earnings (1978). The Macias regime's ineptitude in dealing with its major source of export income on Fernando Poo was repeated on the mainland, arising from Macias Nguema's belief that the expatriate timber producers were responsible for inciting rebellion; again, some comparative figures emphasize the drastic decline: 1967 timber production is given as 337 438 metric tons; by 1970 this figure had dropped to 79 189 metric tons.

As already mentioned, coffee production was already declining before independence. The inferior quality produced was largely responsible in this instance, with export figures declining from 8 450 tons in 1968 to only 274 tons by 1981. No other crops of any significance are recorded. Some attempt was made to develop commercial sea fishing before independence, off Fernando Poo, but a sole concession was given to the USSR to exploit this resource and no figures are reported. The agreement fell away in 1979, but later agreements with Spain and Nigeria were concluded in 1980 and 1982 respectively.

Needless to say, the massive decline in the GNP, resulting from the economic collapse, compelled Equatorial Guinea to seek assistance wherever available, from individual countries - notably Spain initially and latterly France, West Germany, the United States and Eastern bloc countries, (notably Cuba, North Korea and USSR), as well as the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China. During the Macias Nguema regime, it is thought that the government survived only due to constant injections of foreign aid from one or another of these countries. Even 1982 figures showed a trade imbalance (in dollars) amounting to effective insolvency - Exports: \$16.9 million; Imports: \$41.5 million.

In 1979, the accession to power of Obiang Nguema occasioned a mild resurgence of confidence on the part of foreign investors and governments. One of the first acts of the Obiang government in 1979 was to ask Spain for financial aid. Between 1979 and 1982, the Spanish government responded with an

estimated 13 000 million pesetas (150 pesetas = 1 dollar). The EC, IMF, the ADB (African Development Bank) and World Bank have also become involved. In 1982, a UN Development Programme Conference was set up in Geneva to initiate and coordinate the country's economic reconstruction and approximately \$140 million was earmarked for various projects. Unfortunately, private foreign investment has been deterred by restrictions placed on the convertibility of the Equatorial Guinea currency (the epkuele, plural: bipkuele). The new regime also has entered into negotiations with the IMF to reduce the gap in the balance of payments. The development programme emphasizes agriculture, communications, water supply and housing.

Rio Muni benefited in 1982 from a new sawmill using Italian capital and the French undertook major extensions and modernisation in Bata harbour. A logical step, with far-reaching implications for the economic development of the country, has been taken in establishing closer ties with the neighbouring francophone states by joining the UDEAC (the regional customs union) and also the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc zone. This has resulted in a certain coolness between Spain and Equatorial Guinea, with a corresponding increase in financial warmth from the French. Spain nevertheless still maintains a very strong influence, and is a participant in one of the many commercial sea fishing agreements negotiated since the Russian agreement fell away in 1979.

Given the country's fortunate immunity from the drought conditions afflicting the Sahel to the north and the ability of the population to at least survive by subsistence farming even in times of economic hardship, there seems no reason why the 1979 regime should not slowly lead the country into an era of relative prosperity. Attempts by exile groups and military elements internally to overthrow the government, once in 1981 and again in 1983, unfortunately deter the private investor - particularly those formerly unassociated with the territory - from returning in large numbers. Seen from an East-West conflict - as well as from a First World-Third World economic - perspective, it is essential that the general Western-orientated direction of the present government and in particular its francophile attitude should be seen to bear fruit.

### Government and Politics

In this section we will deal only with developments occurring since the coup of 3 August, 1979, when Macias Nguema was deposed and subsequently executed, following the coup led by Obiang Nguema Mbasogo.

The first action of the new regime, apart from establishing creditworthiness with creditor nations - in particular Spain - was to set up a Supreme Military Council of military commissioners each responsible for a government ministry, under the control of the President, who had the power to rule by decree. In 1981 the military commissioners were retitled State Commissioners and civilians were also included. A new constitution was formulated with the guidance of the UN Commission on Human Rights but no political organisations or parties were recognized. In August 1982, 95% of the voters approved the new Constitution, which gave the President extremely wide authority (this after the President had appointed himself President for a 7-year period, with provision for return to civilian rule thereafter). The Presidential authority included virtually absolute power as Head of State, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Head of Government with the power to appoint and dismiss ministers, to make laws by decree and to dissolve the Chamber of Representatives and also to call elections, as well as to negotiate

and ratify treaties. Provision was made for a House of Representatives to be formed on a two-tier system, with an electoral college voted for by all adult citizens, which in turn selected from its numbers 45 representatives. These, added to the 15 nominated members chosen by the President, made up the 60-member House of Representatives. Provision is made for abolition of the Supreme Military Council but as of May 1984 it was still in being, functioning under a Prime Minister who acts as coordinator of all ministries, other than foreign affairs, security and national defence. In the absence of legal political parties, all candidates for the House of Representatives were in fact elected unopposed on 28 August 1983, having allegedly been selected from the electoral college delegates by the President. The latest information available (1984) indicates that the Government is fairly popular, as a result of the restoration of basic services, such as water, health, education and electricity, together with improved public order and respect for the rule of law. Educational standards, however, are still very low, with only primary schooling compulsory. Current information is scarce but it would seem that less than 10% of the school population has secondary schooling. There is no tertiary level at all. Spanish is the official language, and basic literacy is about 55%.

Administration is carried out through seven provincial governments, each with a governor and administrative staff, broken down further into districts and municipalities, the whole being coordinated under a Ministry of Territorial Administration.

While neither of the two coup attempts in 1981 and 1983 appeared to attract any popular support, being instigated by dissatisfied military and tribal echelons, it is the seeming absence of the ultimate democratic freedoms, including the right to form political parties, coupled with the even now virtually unrestricted presidential power, that seems to inhibit the 100 000 or so refugees from returning to Equatorial Guinea. The determinedly pro-Western stance of the new regime may also act as a deterrent to the more avowedly marxist and radical groups in exile. For instance, following the change in regime, Soviet and Eastern bloc personnel - including Cubans - in the military and economic spheres were sharply reduced in numbers. In 1981 the Libyan Embassy was closed down.

The one possible check on Presidential power was constituted in the form of the State Council, which has 11 members, including (ex-officio): the President himself, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence and other key political office holders. The powers of the State Council, apart from responsibility for national sovereignty, unity between the various territories comprising the state, etc., also extend to approval or rejection of Presidential candidature, to declare the President physically or mentally fit to remain in office and even to refuse acceptance of the President's resignation.

Outlined briefly below are certain "fundamental principles" upon which the re-constituted state has been founded, namely: Education as first priority; the guarantee of civil liberties, basic human rights and the vesting in the state itself of certain fundamental instruments and basic resources, such as: electricity, water supply, posts and telecommunications, radio and television, minerals and coal mines. Reasonable as these aims appear to be, they are, like all noble exercises when reduced to paper, ultimately only as valid as the consenting parties wish them to be.

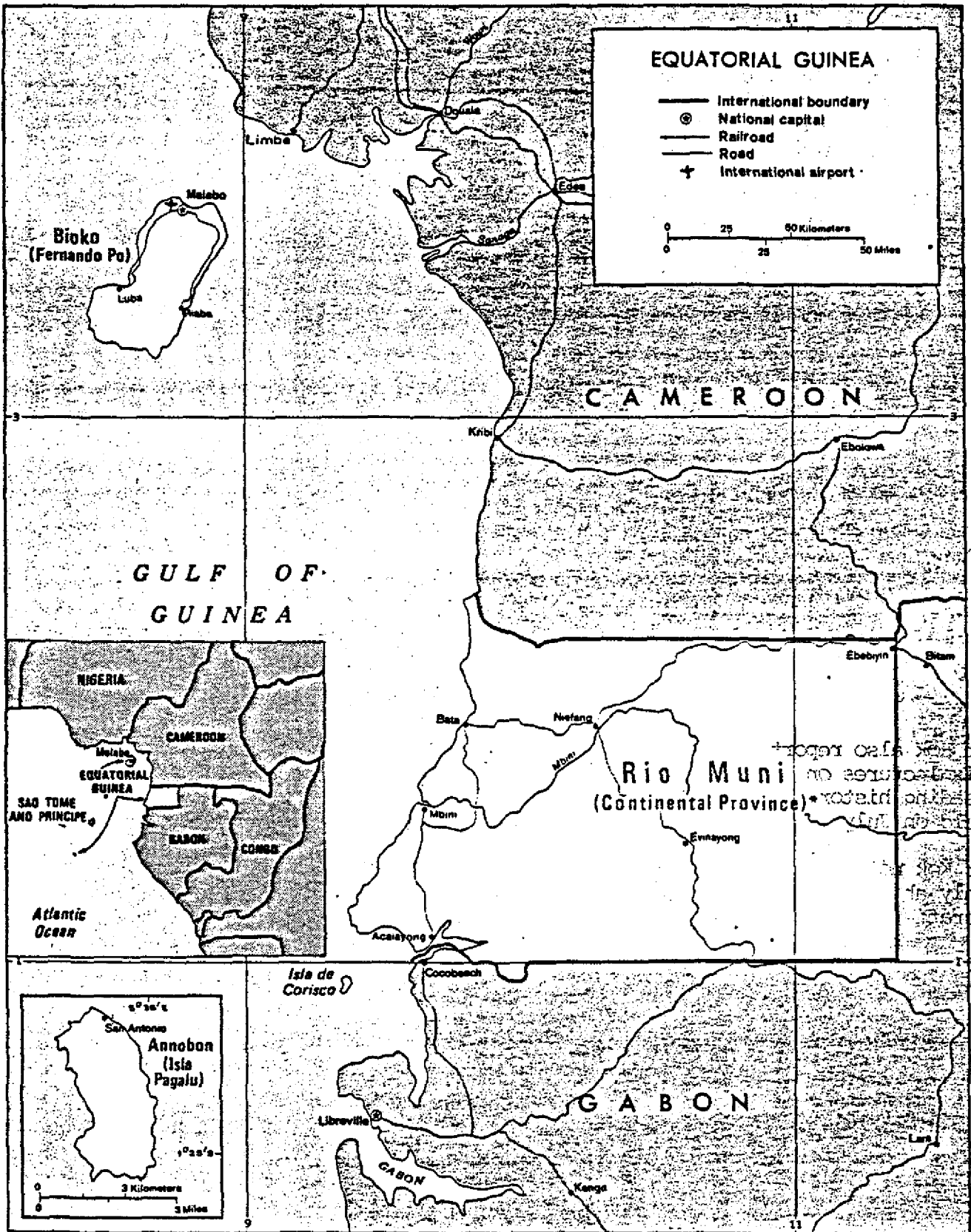
The dominance of the Fang tribe in office is inevitable, if only because of the sheer preponderance of numbers - being some 80% of the total population, but this does not prevent resentment among the minority groups. This

factor, coupled with the continued petty corruption seemingly endemic among African regimes, and continued inflation, possibly prevents the 1979 regime from obtaining 100% endorsement of its policies. However, it does seem distinctly probable that, given continued fiscal restraint and adherence to the policies laid down by the IMF and other creditor nations, the country could sustain a fairly high level of prosperity on an agricultural base. If eventually oil is found in the Equato-Guinean waters of the Biafran Gulf (and there seems no reason to doubt its existence in the area, with proven reserves to the north and south), then even at today's prices, the revenue therefrom would be more than sufficient to finance the development needs of this small territory for many years.

Recent reports monitored from radio and the press refer to an official visit by President Obiang to France, indicating a further cementing of the relationship with the francophone region. A Nigerian journalist visited Malabo in early June this year and found little sign of any real and outward amelioration in the country's economy, although the Nigerian labour force is slowly returning. This bears out the comment of a UN Development Fund official in May that some four or five years will elapse before the reshaping and revitalization of the economy will begin to bear fruit.

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