

Reflections on West African Coups: Changing Faces of Power



by Theodore Dalrymple

A change of rulers is the joy of fools, goes the old Romanian folk saying, and I recalled it as I saw pictures of rejoicing crowds in the street after the recent military coups in the West African countries of Niger and Gabon.

Of course, one never knows how representative of the population as a whole such a crowd is. The entire population or a thousandth part of it? Any political event whatsoever will make some part of the population rejoice.

It's many years since I visited either Niger or Gabon. I was on my way by public transport, such as it was, between Zanzibar and Timbuktu. At no point in this long journey did the thought occur to me that any of the countries was ripe for democracy. Now, such a journey would be impossible unless one

were suicidal. Even then, most people thought it was hazardous.

Gabon is where the latest coup in West Africa has taken place, ending the 56-year-old Bongo dynasty— though the leader of those who ended it was a cousin of the Bongos, and therefore it has been only partially ended.

Bongo the First was president when I was in Gabon, and he had already been president for 20 years. He was known as le Grand Camarade, though he was so small and sensitive about his size that he wore platform shoes to make himself a little taller, forbade the use of the word pygmy (a case of political correctness avant la lettre), and insisted that any photograph of him be taken in such a way and from such an angle that he never appeared shorter than anyone else in the room.

Gabon was rich in resources. It had manganese, oil, and, being covered in rainforest, timber. Having been a French colony, the resources were all extracted by French companies, and the regime was de facto an alliance between the French government, the mining, oil, and timber companies, and the great nepotist kleptocrat. When Bongo, early in his presidency, first visited Charles de Gaulle, the latter said afterward, "He's all right, he can stay."

Bongo the First took the wise precaution of having Moroccans in his presidential guard because he knew that his own countrymen were not entirely to be trusted, as Bongo the Second has learned to his cost. The Moroccan guard was notorious for falling upon the remains of state banquets and devouring them like locusts.

Bongo started out as Albert-Bernard but became Omar, converting from Christianity to Islam for reasons that might not have been entirely due to the truth or otherwise of the respective religions. He must have been something of a womanizer, for he reportedly had 53 children. Small as he was, he did things on a large scale: He became one of the richest

men in the world.

I suppose I should have been outraged at the time, but somehow I wasn't. I suppose I saw it all as par for the course: Africa, after all, was never going to be Scandinavia. Several of the nearby states still have the presidents they had when I passed through them 37 years ago: Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville, Paul Biya of Cameroon, and Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea.

The last is particularly interesting. He has been president since he overthrew his uncle, Francisco Macías Nguema, and had him executed in 1979. Teodoro Obiang Nguema was an accomplice of one of the worst, and certainly among the most bizarre, regimes in world history.

Macías Nguema was democratically elected the first president after the independence of the only Spanish colony in Sub-Saharan Africa. By the end of his 11 years of dictatorship, the economic product of the country had declined by 95 percent, the word "intellectual" had been banned, wearing spectacles was a capital offense, the national treasury was kept in the president's villa, and up to a half of the population had been killed or driven into exile. The president had awarded himself the title of The Unique Miracle. His children were sent to North Korea for safety, Kim Il Sung having been a friend of Macías. One of his daughters, I believe, still lives there.

Teodoro was a privileged member of this most murderous regime, which both starved and tortured its prisoners to death; indeed, he was one of its pillars, and he's still president, addressing the United Nations as if he were respectable. In the meantime, Equatorial Guinea has become rich on oil—or perhaps I should say the regime has become rich on oil. The people remain mired in poverty, though it must be admitted that the nephew is not nearly as bad as his uncle. But this is to damn with the faintest of praise, considering what his uncle was like (amazingly, there seems to be no biography of

this appalling but most interesting figure).

The Bongo dynasty was not nearly as bad as the Macías dynasty. I traveled through Gabon as if it were a normal country. True, I was briefly arrested there as a South African spy by a policeman as I alighted from a truck that had given me a lift. The policeman sat me down in his little hut-like office, and when he learned that I was a doctor, he circled the chair in which I was sitting and said admiringly, “Vous avez beaucoup de papier dans la tête” (You have a lot of paper in your head), which was very high praise indeed. He let me go, and we parted on the best of terms, once I had advised him on what to do about his syphilis. My espionage had been forgotten.

One of my best moments in Gabon was coming across an excellent French restaurant in the jungle, with immaculate table linen. The chef was from the Périgord region, whose cuisine is rich but not light.

I also visited Lambarene, where Albert Schweitzer founded his hospital. Dr. Schweitzer was very famous in his day and his face was as recognizable as Einstein's, but I don't suppose that more than 1 in 10,000 20-year-olds would recognize it now. A German film company was making a film about Dr. Schweitzer but found the real hospital not good enough, so it erected a new, cleaner, temporary and disposable one nearby.

When the chancelleries of the world say that they're “concerned” by a coup in Gabon, I can't help but think they're using the word “concerned” in some technical sense.

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