

Spain's relations with Equatorial Guinea: a triumph of energy realism?

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In a period when international condemnation of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's regime has reached new heights, events in another African country with an appalling human rights record have embroiled Spain in accusations related to a now-infamous mercenary plot. The ongoing trial in Equatorial Guinea of alleged coup leader and ex-SAS officer Simon Mann has become a political issue for Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero's government, which has been forced to repeat its denial that Spain provided any backing for the failed attempt to topple President Teodoro Obiang in March 2004. Mann's trial is undoubtedly a poorly-orchestrated charade in one of Africa's most corrupt and brutal states, but his repeated insistence that the government of former Prime Minister José María Aznar backed the coup attempt has thrown relations between Spain and Equatorial Guinea into sharp focus with less than flattering results for both the previous Partido Popular (PP) and the current Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) governments.¹

Spain's strong cultural links with Equatorial Guinea stretch back to the tiny West African state's former status as the only Spanish colony in sub-Saharan Africa. Today the descendants of Spanish settlers make up approximately five percent of the country's 616,000 population. Although some analysts have asserted that Spain treated Equatorial Guinea with neglectful indifference, Equatoguineans enjoyed living standards and literacy rates that were among the highest on the African continent upon gaining independence in 1968, testimony to the flourishing of Equatorial Guinea's cacao industry.² Equatorial Guinea's history since independence has, however, been marred by autocratic rule, economic mismanagement and gross human rights abuses. Independence brought the *Fang* ethnic group to power, a shift that saw a rise in systematic discrimination against the *Bubi*, the predominant ethnic group of the island of Bioko where the capital Malabo is situated, who were perceived as being closer to the former Spanish colonial authorities.³ In the initial period that followed independence, Spain's relationship with Equatorial Guinea was primarily limited to providing basic development assistance and protesting against the gross human rights abuses that were perpetrated there. During President Obiang's almost 30-year rule, opposition activists have frequently been granted asylum in Spain, where they have fought in vain to attract international attention to the abuses being committed in their homeland.⁴

Until the mid-1990s Equatorial Guinea was considered a troubled African backwater which occasionally made headlines in the Spanish press for its human rights record and an increasingly paranoid President, Teodoro Obiang. In 1995 the US Embassy ceased to operate in the country

¹ "Simon Mann: Mark Thatcher should be on trial too." *The Belfast Telegraph*, June 19th 2008.
<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/article3816641.ece>

² "Background Note: Equatorial Guinea" US Department of State. Washington DC: 2008.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/7221.htm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Monografía: Guinea Ecuatorial", Ministerio de Asuntos y Cooperación Exterior, España. Madrid: August, 2007.
<http://www.maec.es/SiteCollectionDocuments/Monografias/Guinea%20Ecuatorial.pdf>

after a period of deteriorating relations during which the Ambassador was accused by the Equatoguinean government of engaging in witchcraft.⁵ The sudden rise of Equatorial Guinea to international prominence is a direct consequence of the discovery by an American company of vast amounts of oil in the mid-1990s, an event which President Obiang later claimed was delayed by Spanish companies' inability to find oil during previous survey missions.⁶ Today Equatorial Guinea has one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world although it languishes 127th out of 177 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index, testament to the depth of corruption and misrule which afflict the country.⁷ Arbitrary imprisonment, execution and torture remain widespread and conditions for an independent media or civil society simply do not exist - in 2007 Equatorial Guinea shared the same score for political rights and civil liberties as Saudi Arabia, near the bottom of an annual survey conducted by the US-based Freedom House.⁸ However, Equatorial Guinea's emergence as the third largest exporter of oil in Africa, behind Angola and Nigeria, has obvious consequences for its relations with consumer states, granting its brutal leadership significantly more political clout.⁹

The exclusion of Spanish companies from the lucratively under-priced contracts that were being offered in the initial years of the oil boom in Equatorial Guinea was a source of considerable resentment among the Spanish government and industry leaders. After some initial attempts at engaging with the Obiang regime, including a visit by then Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio in 2003, the Aznar government began to intensify its engagement with the Madrid-based Equatoguinean opposition. This policy was to result in an unprecedented low in relations in March 2004, when President Obiang accused Spain of assisting the now infamous mercenary coup led by Simon Mann.¹⁰ The coup was essentially foiled by a warning provided by South African freelance intelligence analyst Johann Smith, a service for which he was later handsomely rewarded and honoured by President Obiang. One party of 70 mercenaries was arrested in Harare airport in Zimbabwe en route to Equatorial Guinea while an advance party of 15 was rounded up in Equatorial Guinea itself. The plan was to install Equatoguinean opposition leader, Severo Moto, in place of Obiang who would then award oil contracts to the coup leaders and their backers. The mercenaries believed that they had at least the tacit support of the governments of South Africa, the United Kingdom and the former colonial power, Spain.¹¹

The allegations made by the Equatoguinean government against Spain centre around the role of two Spanish naval vessels which were dispatched to the Gulf of Guinea just prior to the coup with 500 marines on board, equipped to remain in the area for up to 45 days. According to a report published by Spanish academic, Carlos Ruiz Miguel, these two ships, the *Patiño* and the *Canarias*, were placed on high alert and the commanding officer was given details of his mission only 60 hours before departing for the Gulf of Guinea.¹² The Obiang government announced that these ships were part of a Spanish plot to act as an interventionist force and threatened to recall the country's Ambassador to Spain. Simon Mann, in giving evidence at his trial in Malabo this month, claims that the coup was launched specifically with the Spanish parliamentary elections in mind as it was believed the PP government would provide support in the period immediately after the overthrow of the Obiang regime. Mann stated that Lebanese businessman, Ely Calil, allegedly a key financial backer of the coup, had secured a commitment from the Spanish government

⁵ Shaxson, Nicholas, "Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil", London: Macmillan, 2007, pp. 31-32

⁶ Ibid, p. 126

⁷ "2007/2008 Human Development Statistics", UNDP, New York: 2008. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

⁸ "Freedom in the World: 2007", Freedom House, Washington DC: 2007.

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=372&year=2007>

⁹ For an account of human rights abuses in Equatorial Guinea and energy pragmatism on the part of consumer nations, see: "Rich in Oil; Poor in Human Rights: Torture and Poverty in Equatorial Guinea", *Der Spiegel On-line*, Alexander Smolczyk, 28 August 2006. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,434691,00.html>

¹⁰ "The US know, Spain knew, Britain knew. Who's coup was it?" *Sunday Herald*, 29 August 2004.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20040829/ai_n12590798

¹¹ For an in-depth account of the planning of this coup attempt, see: Roberts, Adam, "The Wonga Coup", London: PublicAffairs, 2006.

¹² Ruiz Miguel, Carlos, "El difícil acercamiento de España a Guinea Ecuatorial", Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid: 2004: www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/411.asp

to provide diplomatic and logistical support including the dispatch of a contingent of Spanish security forces who would act ostensibly as a type of peacekeeping force after the initial turmoil of the coup itself.¹³ The timing of such a naval mission to the region and the extraordinary manner in which it was undertaken has served to strengthen Obiang's persistent claims that the Spanish were aware of the coup attempt and were planning to assume a role in the aftermath of the successful overthrow of the government. Such a naval exercise in the waters surrounding Equatorial Guinea was unprecedented since that country's independence and its timing can, at best, be viewed as very unfortunate. The statement in 2004 by then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ana Palacio, that the Spanish Navy was conducting cooperative exercises with Equatorial Guinea is unusual as it would appear that the two ships set sail without the Spanish authorities making prior arrangements with their counterparts in Equatorial Guinea.¹⁴

Questions have also been asked of the Spanish failure to monitor or report on the activities of Equatoguinean opposition leader, Severo Moto. A private plane had been hired by the coup leaders to fly Moto to Equatorial Guinea via Mali but this trip was aborted after the pilot, Crause Steyl, was warned that the main contingent of 70 mercenaries had been detained in Zimbabwe en route to Equatorial Guinea. As Spanish intelligence reports attest, Severo Moto was then interrogated at the airport prior to the group being released.¹⁵ Either the Spanish authorities did not detect that Severo Moto was engaged in plotting an attempted coup or, like the UK and South Africa, they knew that a coup was imminent but chose not to warn the government of Equatorial Guinea. Spanish Senator Juan José Laborda recalled that: "In January he [Moto] was telling anyone who would listen that he was going back to Equatorial Guinea. First it was going to be a naval attack, then it was going to be by air."¹⁶

Upon learning of the coup attempt, President Obiang was convinced of Spanish involvement and threatened to withdraw Equatorial Guinea's Ambassador from Madrid. The failure of the coup was a profound embarrassment to several governments, including the government of the United Kingdom which was forced to admit that it had prior knowledge of plans to topple Obiang's government, in addition to the involvement of Mark Thatcher, the son of former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.¹⁷ South Africa's international reputation was also damaged by the revelation that most of the mercenaries were citizens of that country and that preparations for the coup had principally been made on South African territory in a glaringly open and indiscreet fashion. The bizarre saga claimed another victim in 2008 when President Thabo Mbeki was forced to sack the director of the country's National Intelligence Agency, Billy Masetlha, for accepting a bribe of over €250,000 to provide support to the coup plotters.¹⁸

The victory of the PSOE in the Spanish elections of 2004, which were held in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt and the national trauma of the Madrid bombings, deflected attention away from the very serious accusations being levelled at the Spanish state. During its subsequent first term in office, the PSOE moved to try and improve relations with the Obiang regime. Reflective of this was the rather muted reaction of the Spanish government to the grossly fraudulent parliamentary elections held in May of this year in which the ruling party, the Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial (PDGE), won 99 of the 100 seats in the National Assembly. This contrasts markedly with the current international outrage over fraudulent elections and violence in Zimbabwe. The contrast between the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs "strongly condemning" recent elections in Zimbabwe, denouncing the "widespread corruption"

¹³"Simon Mann: Mark Thatcher should be on trial too." *The Belfast Telegraph*, 19 June 2008.

¹⁴"Exiled Leader in Spain denies any link to coup attempt." *The Guardian*, 27 August 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/aug/27/uk.spain>

¹⁵"Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo, Recurso Num: 192/2006" 27 March 2008. <http://www.aranzadi.es/index.php/informacion-juridica/jurisprudencia/contencioso-administrativo/sentencia-del-tribunal-supremo-sala-de-lo-contencioso-administrativo-de-27-marzo-2008>

¹⁶"Exiled Leader in Spain denies any link to coup attempt." *The Guardian*, 27 August 2004.

¹⁷"Revealed: How Britain was told full coup plan" *The Guardian*, 28 November 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/nov/28/uk.equatorialguinea1>

¹⁸"Butcher Shop", *Africa Confidential*, 28 March 2008

and “clientelist practices” of the Mugabe regime and its general “concern” over elections in Equatorial Guinea was not lost upon Equatoguinean opposition leaders. Plácido Micó, the leader of the Opposition party, Convergencia para la Democracia Social (CPDS), criticised Spain’s policy with regard to Equatorial Guinea: “We hoped for more from Spain, but in the end, like all Westerners, the only thing which interests them is to prioritise good relations with the regime because it has oil.”¹⁹

In 2006, President Obiang was granted full state honours when he made an official visit to Madrid, a trip which included meetings with King Juan Carlos and Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero. The trip followed an earlier visit to Equatorial Guinea by Miguel Moratinos, the Spanish Foreign Minister, and the president of Repsol. It should be noted, however, that the Spanish government does occasionally raise human rights issues with the Equatorial Guinean regime. Prime Minister Zapatero raised the matter of political prisoners with Obiang during his visit to Madrid in 2006.²⁰ The criticism of Micó and other opposition activists, however, is that this is done infrequently and human rights in Equatorial Guinea come a poor second to Spain’s trade interests. Spain is currently making preparations to welcome President Obiang to Expo 2008 in Zaragoza on July 25.²¹

Relations between the Spanish government and the exiled opposition leader Severo Moto have worsened considerably since the PSOE came to power in 2004. Several highly unorthodox incidents have occurred in recent times including a period where Severo Moto’s disappearance was reported by his family only for him to later surface in Zagreb where he gave an interview to a local newspaper stating his conviction that Spanish intelligence agents would try and assassinate him.²² In 2005 Moto’s political asylum was revoked by the Spanish Government, a decision which was overturned in March 2008 by the Supreme Court in Madrid. More recently Moto was arrested by Spanish police shortly before parliamentary elections on May 4 for arms trafficking. Spanish police had previously arrested an associate of Moto in Valencia after three weapons were found in the boot of a second-hand car being exported to Equatorial Guinea. According to the Spanish police, who secretly recorded Moto’s phone conversations, a Catalan businessman, Francisco Javier Roselló, provided funding to purchase the arms after Moto promised him favourable business contracts when he seized power in Equatorial Guinea.²³

The current proceedings against Severo Moto have made reference to his role in the 2004 attempted coup as evidence against him. Moto has previously denied such a role although it remains to be seen whether the politician, who considers himself a friend of José María Aznar of over 20 years, will in turn accuse his host state of having abetted rather than restricted his illegal activities. Afterwards, the Equatoguinean police arrested the man they claimed was to take delivery of the car upon its arrival in Malabo, Saturnino Ncogo Mbomio, who later died in custody. According to official records, the cause of death was a fractured skull he suffered when he committed suicide by throwing himself from the top of his bunk in Black Beach Prison.²⁴ A further six men were arrested by the Equatoguinean authorities in connection with the incident

¹⁹ Retirada candidato opositor, Sr. Morgan Tsvangirai, a elecciones presidenciales en Zimbabwe, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y Cooperación, June 24th 2008. <http://www.maec.es/es/MenuPpal/Actualidad/Comunicados%20DG%20Com%20Exterior/Paginas/42comunicado20080624.aspx> and “Obiang se otorga 100% en Guinea”, *El País*, 9 May 2008. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Obiang/otorga/Guinea/elpepuint/20080509elpepiint_13/Tes

²⁰ “Obiang se compromete ante Zapatero a liberar”, *ABC*, 15th November 2006. http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-15-11-2006/abc/Nacional/obiang-se-compromete-ante-zapatero-a-liberar-a-presos-politicos-en-guinea_1524266287873.html

²¹ “La Expo multiplica las visitas a España de casas reales y presidentes extranjeros.” *ABC*, 20 June 2008. http://www.abc.es/20080622/nacional-nacional/expo-multiplica-visitas-espana_200806220248.html

²² “Murdered’ exile at centre of coup plot surfaces in Zagreb”, *The Guardian*, 28 April 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/apr/28/equatoguinea.gilestremlett>

²³ “La Audiencia Nacional confirma la prisión sin fianza contra Severo Moto”, *La Vanguardia*, 9 June 2008. <http://www.lavanguardia.es/lv24h/20080609/53475699379.html>

²⁴ “Arrests and death in custody of a political opponent”, Amnesty International, April 2008. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGAFR240032008>

and were put on trial in conjunction with Simon Mann. After denying the charges of plotting to overthrow President Obiang and stating that they signed confessions under duress, their sentences were increased from four to 20 years of imprisonment.²⁵

Spain, despite the deference given by other EU Member States to its leadership on Equatoguinean affairs, has not pushed for a meaningful European response to the ongoing human rights violations taking place in Equatorial Guinea. In May of this year an electoral observation mission led by parliamentary deputies from the PSOE, PP and the Catalan CiU party travelled to Equatorial Guinea to observe the legislative elections. They concluded that the elections marked a significant improvement in the democratic transition of Equatorial Guinea, a view that is contradicted by the glaringly fraudulent election results which gave the ruling PDGE party over 100 percent of the vote in some constituencies.²⁶

Spain plays a major role in providing development assistance to Equatorial Guinea, which receives approximately €7.5 million annually, placing the country second behind Mozambique as a sub-Saharan recipient of Spanish development funds. Spain's bilateral aid to Equatorial Guinea has been criticised, however, for channelling money through government ministries despite the government's coffers already being swollen with oil revenues. Spain continues to focus on improving education and healthcare in the country and has also worked to support capacity building in the public sector.²⁷ The valuable *Radio Exterior de España* programme dedicated to Equatorial Guinea ceased transmitting in 2001 and the commitment of the Spanish government to provide independent media information requires urgent review.²⁸ The government of Equatorial Guinea has also become more sophisticated in deflecting criticism from abroad and has employed former International Republican Institute (IRI) President Bruce McCollm to help manage its public relations. This shift has seen Equatorial Guinea seek to manage its international image through engaging with international organisations and in February of this year it became a candidate country of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). It is not clear whether the EITI process can lead to a meaningful reform of the status quo. Participants in a recent FRIDE seminar on Spain's EITI commitments called on the Spanish government to ensure the EITI process is implemented and to press the government of Equatorial Guinea to allow independent civil society space to operate.²⁹ In 2003 Equatorial Guinea successfully lobbied the UN Human Rights Commission to withdraw the mandate of a Special Representative for Human Rights in the country, a move strongly condemned by international human rights experts as well as the former Special Representative.³⁰

Spain is not alone in establishing more pragmatic trade relations with Equatorial Guinea - the United States has also softened its criticism of the Obiang regime considerably and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has gone so far as to describe Obiang as "a good friend".³¹ After a decline in exports of oil to Spain in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, these are now steadily increasing, rising by almost a third between 2004 and 2006, although Spanish

²⁵ "Simon Mann awaits and exemplary sentence", *The Guardian*, 23 June 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/23/equatorialguinea.southafrica>

²⁶ "Declaración Conjunta: Elecciones Legislativas en la República de Guinea Ecuatorial", Aburto, Fátima., (Grupos Socialista), Ricomá, Francesc., (Partido Popular), Xuclá, Jordi., (CiU), Malabo: 2008. See also: Gorozpe, Iñaki., "La situación en Guinea Ecuatorial tras la parodia de elecciones legislativas y municipales: recomendaciones para España," Fundación Alternativas, Madrid: 2008. <http://www.falternativas.org/opex/documentos-opex/memorandos/memorando-opex-n1-90-2008-la-situacion-en-guinea-ecuatorial-tras-la-parodia-de-elecciones-legislativas-y-municipales-recomendaciones-para-espana>

²⁷ The Africa Plan: 2006-2008, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación. Madrid: 2006

²⁸ "La política exterior y de cooperación de España en Guinea Ecuatorial: Relevancia de los principios democráticos y el papel de la sociedad civil." FRIDE Conference Report, 15 December 2006. <http://www.fride.org/publicacion/22/la-politica-exterior-y-de-cooperacion-de-espana-en-guinea-ecuatorial>

²⁹ Fride Seminar, Madrid, 28 May 2008. See: "Transparency in the Extractive Sector: Perspectives for Deepening Spain's Commitment with the EITI", FRIDE Activity Brief, 28 May 2008. <http://www.fride.org/publicacion/434/la-transparencia-en-el-sector-extractivo-profundizando-el-compromiso-de-espana-con-la-itie>

³⁰ "Equatorial Guinea postpones visit of UN Human Rights Expert", UN News Center, New York, January 2008. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=25445&Cr=Equatorial>

³¹ See US Senate speech by Senator Carl Levin, 26 September 2006. <http://levin.senate.gov/senate/statement.cfm?id=263825>

companies are still not among the major investors in Equatorial Guinea's energy sector.³² Spain is nevertheless continuing to consolidate its trade links with Equatorial Guinea and has not moved to close bank accounts or restrict financial interests held by the Obiang family, some of which were cited in a recent corruption case in the United States involving Riggs Bank, which has laundered money for the regime.³³

Spain's commitment to promote democracy and human rights abroad has been found sorely wanting in Equatorial Guinea. Although Spain's alleged prior knowledge of the coup in 2004 has not been established, the reluctance of the government to transparently investigate mercenary activity on Spanish territory has fed public doubts over Spain's role. It is also apparent that the reluctance of Spain to take a stance against one of the world's most brutal regimes is directly linked to the corrosive influence of rising energy prices upon democratic reform in energy-rich countries. Such energy pragmatism was evident at the EU-Africa summit in Lisbon in December 2007, at which Equatoguinean Prime Minister Ricardo Mangue was flattered by a series of requests for meetings with European leaders and was the only lead delegate who left the Summit without signing a development agreement offered by the EU. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, whose presence at the summit precipitated a boycott by the British Prime Minister, might be forgiven for feeling a little envious.

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³² "Monografía: Guinea Ecuatorial", Ministerio de Asuntos y Cooperación Exterior, España. Madrid: August, 2007. <http://www.maec.es/SiteCollectionDocuments/Monografias/Guinea%20Ecuatorial.pdf>

³³ For an insight into the corrupt practices of the Obiang regime see "Private Estate", *Africa Confidential*, 21 July 2004.