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Elite strategy in resilient authoritarianism: Equatorial Guinea, 1979-2023

Austin S. Matthews and Ana Lúcia Sá

Abstract

The Equatoguinean dictatorship under Teodoro Obiang Nguema has spanned forty- four years, making him the longest-serving current head of state. Since his entry to power through a 1979 coup, Obiang has evolved in his style of governance. First ruling through a military junta, then a single party regime, and finally competitive authoritarianism. Across these eras, he has relied on a cadre of supporting elites to occupy top spots in the state administration. Has his strategy of retaining and dismissing these top elites evolved with his broader style of governance? What features has he looked for over time to signal loyalty? We explore these questions using original individual-level data on all ruling elites in Equatorial Guinea from 1979 to 2023. Drawing on a suite of biographical variables, we find evidence that certain professional and personal traits have made elites less likely to be dismissed at different eras of Obiang’s rule. However, co-regionality has been an enduring preference in his elite strategy, suggesting his preference for friends from “back home.” These findings demonstrate how elite strategies of dictators move beyond the ethnocentric and evolve alongside broader regime characteristics.

KEYWORDS: Autocracy; African politics; elites; Equatorial Guinea; ethnic politics; competitive authoritarianism

Introduction

How do dictators change their strategies of elite management over time? Previous literature has suggested that dictators balance the composition of their ruling elite based on strategic interests.¹

When military coups d’état are a concern, dictators may opt to include greater numbers of military officers or co-ethnics into their ruling circle.² This elite management choice can help buy off their support with political inclusion or to pack the ruling ranks with loyalists that can drown out potential rivals.³ When facing systemic pressures to democratize, they may co-opt

opposition figures to give the appearance of cooperative governance, even if the autocratic nature of the regime remains in place.⁴

Strategies of elite management are a top priority for autocrats, as these elites are both critical to ensuring the regime can function properly through distribution of administrative labor, while also being the biggest threat to the dictator's personal survival as the source of most coup attempts.⁵ In Africa, there is limited circulation of political elites, especially when we consider top-rank elites, as cabinet members. This has been a feature since the transition to multi-party regimes⁶, irrespective of a transition to a democratic or a hybrid regime or the maintenance of an autocratic rule. In this case, the dictator builds the ruling coalition so that it cannot pose any challenge to his rule during the lifespan of the regime. The Equatoguinean case allows us to look at elite management and political survival while managing the most fragile authoritarian regime type, personalist⁷, and while assuring the regime endures by staying at the hands of the ruling family.

Well into his fourth decade in power, Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea has shrewdly changed his style of rule since seizing power in a 1979 military coup.⁸ After seizing control from his president uncle, a multi-ethnic junta of military officers was installed, drawing from those who had supported Obiang's conspiracy.⁹ Dissolving the junta years later, Obiang shifted toward a non-party and then single-party form of civilian autocratic rule, adopting the vestiges of a presidential republic. Finally, after the Cold War withdrew cover for more autocratic leaders, he shifted the Equatoguinean system to a competitive autocracy with rigged elections and some opposition party presence.¹⁰

Across these eras of rule, how has Obiang managed those key elites in his winning coalition?¹¹ What individual characteristics mattered in his ruling elite during the military, single party, and multiparty eras of his time in power? Literature on elite retention in dictatorships typically focuses on how fixed traits determine political survival, such as education, military experience, or factional affiliation.¹² However, we still wonder whether the shifting character of the dictator's ruling strategy changes what traits they look to retain among their top supporters. Some initial evidence has pointed to this being the case for certain macro-level historical shifts in the international system, but major domestic shifts remain under investigated.¹³ We draw upon the motivating case of Teodoro Obiang's long rule in Equatorial Guinea to investigate this question.

Background and theory

The political survival of dictators has been a central concern of older and newer literature in political science and allied disciplines.¹⁴ Various scholars have provided ranging theoretical explanations and empiric evidence to address this phenomenon, drawing on economic, institutional, repressive, and other explanations for the longevity of both dictators and their regimes.¹⁵ Many works have pointed to the stabilizing effects that political institutions have in dictatorships. Ruling political parties and legislatures open spots in the regime for potential opposition to be co-opted into the regime.¹⁶ By maintaining these broad mass institutions of inclusion, dictators buy the cooperation of wider sectors of their societies, creating greater regime durability.¹⁷

Power-sharing is critical to the survival of the authoritarian leader, particularly as it relates to ensuring the support of the regime's winning coalition of high-power elites.¹⁸ Part of power-sharing involves the balance of resources between the dictator and their ruling elites.¹⁹ Dictators need elites to help them rule, but elites require guarantees of future survival and prosperity before they are willing to render support, fearing arbitrary withdrawal of that support in the unstable autocratic system. The issue of credible power-sharing at the elite level in both democracies and dictatorships can be solved partially through formal institutions and rules that govern elite behaviors at the top, even those of the dictator.²⁰ Creating specifically designated "ruling institutions" provides dictators with an council that can aide them in decision-making.²¹

These ruling institutions include military juntas, party politburos, and presidential cabinets. Each creates seats for elites who are distributed powerful portfolios by merit of their inclusion. This inclusion produces power-sharing benefits for the members that go beyond simple legislative or party membership, making them the winning coalition whose continuing support is necessary for the dictator's political survival.²² However, these elites also pose threats, often being the individuals who use their power to threaten the dictator with actions like coups d'état.²³ To prevent future confrontation, dictators must carefully assess who they offer these positions of power and the qualities that make them more likely to maintain loyalty during crises.²⁴

In this sense, loyalty to the dictator may result from formal membership in ruling bodies, the party, or the legislature. However, there are informal dimensions, as "ethnic, sectarian, or tribal ties, patronage, or personal charisma"²⁵, which also factor into hiring and firing decisions for dictators. Professional backgrounds, past histories in conflict, and other factors are used by dictators to weigh

the likelihood that an elite will remain loyal or be a potential threat to be purged.²⁶ Certain factors make dictators more or less likely to purge or retain certain members of their elite, gauged using histories and contemporary threat assessments largely pointed toward coup threats.²⁷ Additionally, resilient authoritarian regimes display a low level of elite rotation, raising the question of the conditions that generate this stability for certain figures.²⁸

Literature in African elite politics often emphasizes the role of co-ethnicity, which has its roots the division of the continent and the description of ethnic groups during colonialism.²⁹ Ethnicity has been found to play a role in political inclusion, military command appointments, and physical security choices aimed at increasing autocrat survival.³⁰ The primary logic behind this is that co-ethnics rely on the dictator for valuable patronage networks, which they are less likely to jeopardize by siding with a rival group that could usher in their own co-ethnic regime.³¹ Dictators may also balance ethnicities to achieve a stabilizing equilibrium, putting elites of certain backgrounds in charge of supportive or threatening areas based on the local character.³² Ethno-regional is another category often used in the literature on African politics, pointing to the political relevance of regional identity alongside ethnic linkages.³³

When considering the tools of political survival, particularly how they function at the elite level, Equatorial Guinea raises an interesting case for further study. Literature on the political development of the country has been lacking, which is surprising given the current regime is now halfway through its fourth decade in power.³⁴ Equatorial Guinea is among the few authoritarian countries in Africa that have never had alternation in power (as Angola or Mozambique), and whose political life have been at the hands of the same family (as is the case of Togo). The ruling

dictator, Teodoro Obiang, is also a political chameleon; seizing political power via a coup, creating a single ruling party, and eventually introducing a limited form of competitive multi-party autocracy.³⁵ Thus, we move to perform a deeper exploration of the institutions, identities, and empirical evidence that have characterized Teodoro Obiang's enduring authoritarianism, which can shed light on the opaqueness of the dictator's strategies to endure.

Patronage politics in early modern Equatorial Guinea

Equatorial Guinea in modern times has comprised a range of ethnic groups with origins in different parts of the smaller country. The Annobonese from the island of Annobon, the Bubi from the island of Bioko, the Fernandinos from West Africa and Bioko, the Bisio and Ndowe from the coastal mainland, and the Fang from the inland mainland.³⁶ During colonialism as Spanish Guinea, only the Fernandinos received preferential socioeconomic advantages in the imperial system through biased land and trade privileges granted by European administrators. The remaining ethnic groups were subjected to a colonial system of subjugation known as the *Patronato de Indígenas* and could be impressed into forced labor in the cocoa plantations of Ferdinand Poo, the economic center.³⁷

This resulted in a system where the Fang were economically sidelined by the Spanish administration throughout the colonial era, remaining largely relegated to manual labor under colonial discriminatory policies.³⁸ As a result, the Fang also came to lead the anti-colonial liberation movements. The *Movimiento Nacional de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial* (MONALIGE, founded around 1950), was based in the colony's capital of Santa Isabel. It was a diverse organisation in its ethnic composition, including both "Bubi chiefs and educated Fang from the mainland."³⁹ Other Equatoguinean national liberation movements, such as *Idea Popular de*

Guinea Ecuatorial (IPGE) and *Unión Popular de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial* (UPLGE), were more directly associated with the Fang.⁴⁰

Given their prominent place in the liberation movement and population status among the population, Equatoguinean politics were quickly captured by the Fang majority. This capture was pursued even prior to decolonisation by Francisco Macías Nguema, a Fang from Mongomo area of Wele-Nzas. Macías had served as a minor bureaucrat in the colonial administration, later distinguishing himself in the mid-1960s through his anti-Spanish positions and advocating for complete independence for the entire colony, rather than separate statuses for Fernando Poo and Río Muni.⁴¹ He took national prominence as transitional deputy prime minister in 1964.⁴²

Facing intense pressure to decolonize from Equatoguinean nationalist groups and international organisations, the Spanish government withdrew administration of Spanish Guinea in 1968, forming the new sovereign state of Equatorial Guinea.⁴³ The process of decolonisation culminated with a constitutional referendum on 11 August 1968.⁴⁴ This referendum would determine the territorial integrity of the newly independent country, alongside general elections for parliament and the presidency. Francisco Macías Nguema won the second round of elections and was proclaimed President of the Republic on 3 October 1968.

In 1972, Macías took an autocratic turn by using his Fang political network to successfully revise the Equatoguinean Constitution and proclaimed himself president for life.⁴⁵ The first president of Equatorial Guinea created a system that privileged the Fang people while discriminating against other ethnicities. As Aixelà-Cabré points out, “under Macías, not belonging to the Fang ethnic

group could lead to automatic repression and death, as membership in another ethnicity was enough to arouse suspicion of treason and rebellion.”⁴⁶ However, being a Fang didn't guarantee political patronage in every case. Close familial linkages were Macías' main strategy of ensuring elite loyalty, promoting members of his Mongomo clan to public offices, while establishing a political system of subservience to his despotic rule based on identity features.⁴⁷

The autocracy of Macías was also a regime of terror, rife with state repression against any individuals or groups deemed as real or imagined threats against the president's political survival⁴⁸. The terror did not spare the Fang elites he had drawn support from since decolonisation, with members of his cabinet being executed in escalating numbers as the regime entrenched⁴⁹. Macías also sought enforced social change by implemented a system of “African authenticity”, which included de-Europeanizing personal and locational names in the country.⁵⁰ Those who resisted the government's acknowledged “Fangisation” were subjected to discrimination, arrest, and even further violence.⁵¹

Equatoguinean politics under Obiang

Like a handful of other modern autocracies, Equatorial Guinea continues to exist as a country ruled by the same family since independence.⁵² However, the succession from uncle to nephew was not a managed one. Current president Teodoro Obiang Nguema was elevated to a privileged position under the regime of his uncle. He was given foreign military training in Spain and subsequently placed in charge of the state's security apparatus.⁵³ However, he was not untouched by the pervasive fear that encompassed the Equatoguinean elite in the mid-1970s, as Macías turned his repression toward even the upper familial class of the regime.⁵⁴ Fearing he may be the next to

suffer this wrath, Obiang orchestrated a coup d'état on 3 August 1979 backed by a multi-ethnic coalition of officers. After seizing power, the junta tried and executed Macías, ending that phase of the “family” regime.⁵⁵

Since seizing power, Obiang has from time-to-time fundamentally altered the institutional features of his regime to meet the moment. For the first three years after the 1979 coup, Obiang ruled through the Supreme Military Council (SMC), a junta comprised mainly of powerful military elites, with some technocrats later added.⁵⁶ The SMC was dissolved in 1982 and Obiang “civilianized” the regime, soon also creating a single-party regime under his *Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial* (PDGE) in 1987.⁵⁷ Even when dictators were to be considered a figure of the past after the third wave of democratization,⁵⁸ Obiang endured.

The post-Cold War Equatoguinean regime has been labeled as an electoral or competitive autocracy.⁵⁹ Multiparty elections were introduced in 1993 and the PDGE’s legal monopoly on representation was lifted, but actual democratic promises from Obiang were not honored.⁶⁰ The electoral system continues to be manipulated by Obiang’s forces to ensure PDGE dominance through electoral laws tailored to favor incumbents in the regime, rampant electoral fraud, and the military intervention to hinder opposition activities.⁶¹

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo was re-elected on 20 November 2022 to another 7-year term. To the present, Obiang stands as the longest serving leader in Africa.⁶² He has managed this feat in part because of his evolving style of personalized autocratic rule, which has changed the institutional features of the regime over time to meet his needs and the international climate.⁶³

Despite the high level of personal control that Obiang manages over Equatorial Guinea, he has still like other dictators⁶⁴ relied on top supporters to help him govern the state. The consequences of these individuals being moved in and out of the regime can have major effects on domestic and international outcomes, making them worthy of greater study.

Elite management strategies in Obiang's regime

Periods of nascent autocratic rule can be extremely turbulent. During the early years of their rule, dictators often face internal challenges that threaten their survival with counter coups.⁶⁵ Most often these challenges come from the very people who they entrust to help govern their regimes, the ruling elite.⁶⁶ Insider threats may be particularly acute if the dictator draws upon principal support from elites within the military, who possess independent coercive threats through their direct command of armed patronage networks.⁶⁷ These linkages and their ruling institutional positions can be leveraged by disloyal elites to plot coups against the dictator, credibly backed by their independent and potentially collective coercive strengths.

Following the 1979 coup in Equatorial Guinea that brought his regime into power, Teodoro Obiang initially rewarded his co-conspirators with seats in the ruling military junta and the cabinet. This placed him in the dangerous position of surrounding himself with military elites who had already demonstrated their coup capabilities.⁶⁸ Given the risk they endured to get Obiang into power, if the new dictator attempted to violate their power-sharing arrangement with subsequent elite dismissals or purges, it would likely be viewed as a breach of their ruling agreement. Such a breach would prompt early retaliatory counter coup attempts by these military elites to prevent further personalisation of the regime under Obiang.⁶⁹

Not wanting to risk an early elite schism that could boil into a regime ending coup, it is likely that Obiang avoided confrontation with his military co-conspirators. Instead, it is more likely that he focused his efforts to personalize the elite of the regime by shuffling civilian ministers who functioned as cabinet technocrats. These individuals could not pose a coup threat if removed and gave Obiang the opportunity to replace them with individuals more centrally loyal to himself. Thus, we expect that the elite management strategy during Obiang's initial years will have advantaged military elites over civilians, not wanting to provoke a countercoup through the dismissal of the former. This logic motivates our first hypothesis:

H1: Military elites were less likely to be dismissed during Obiang's military era than civilians.

The structures of confidence that materialize in identity solidarities are essential for building loyalties. It is the case within the mass institutions of the state, where leaders reward co-ethnics with institutional advancement and entrenchment ⁷⁰, but also in elite institutions such as the cabinet ⁷¹. Elite selection is a major form of patronage, which an extensive body of work has studied in the regional context of sub-Saharan Africa ⁷². Plurality at the political heights has been found to encourage regime stability, while exclusion can prompt irregular attempts to seize power ⁷³. More recent works have found that ethnic distribution of government portfolios in African regimes have been generally proportionate to population representation, but the rate of co-ethnic distribution of key portfolios remains disputed ⁷⁴.

For dictators, co-ethnicity is an important consideration in the development of institutional power, as fears of ouster motivate these leaders to pack their regime with co-ethnics, they believe will be bonded to their political survival ⁷⁵. Accommodation of different ethnic groups is also used as a strategy of coup-proofing the regime ⁷⁶. Literature on the region emphasizes the co-optative challenges of domestic ethnic diversity and the strategies used by dictators under ethnic hetero- and homogeneity for conflict prevention and political regime survival ⁷⁷. As such, ethnic patronage is a critical individual-level component to consider when studying autocratic cabinet strategies, even for ethnically homogeneous countries like Equatorial Guinea.

In Equatorial Guinea, both Macias and Obiang have promoted system of institutional privilege benefitting their Fang co-ethnics, although most of this population remains politically marginalized under the autocratic system ⁷⁸. Most government portfolios during the first presidency of Macias Nguema were co-ethnics, drawing on the majority population which constitutes around 85% of the population and continued under Obiang to staff central state offices ⁷⁹. Under Obiang, Fang provincial authorities even in regions containing greater minority ethnicities (such as the island of Bioko) play an important role in administering state decision-making and rent distribution ⁸⁰. We presume that like many other dictators and reflecting on his packing at other levels of government, Obiang has opted for a co-ethnic cabinet strategy ⁸¹. Thus, we propose our second hypothesis about the effect of co-ethnicity on elite retention.

H2: Elites who share Fang co-ethnicity with Obiang will be less likely to be dismissed.

Finally, is it possible that more narrow links than co-ethnicity exist within the privileged elite politics of Equatorial Guinea, influencing Obiang's long- or short-term cabinet management strategies. In the Africanist literature, regional origin has been juxtaposed or considered conjointly with co-ethnicity as major factors in understanding political cleavages and exclusion.⁸² Simply being a co-ethnic may not be enough to solicit the patronage of a political leader, but rather they narrow their focus to providing rents to those from their more local origin points.⁸³ Recruitment of high-rank officers can be made from the region of the leader, as in the Eyadema's regime in Togo.⁸⁴ In Equatorial Guinea where the Fang majority span the country, clan affiliation understood through regional origin have been linked to the distribution of political patronage by Obiang.

Okenve⁸⁵ notes how Obiang's initially limited rent sources were primarily directed in early years toward his close relatives from the Mongomo district. The patronage network of Obiang was then expanded to co-opt more individuals from broader region of Wele-Nzas, which included Mongomo.⁸⁶ Wele-Nzas came to constitute Obiang's core constituency, receiving preferential state resources and political opportunities in exchange for the perceived familial loyalty that came with co-regionality with the long-time leader. As such, we may expect that Obiang's elite management strategy also includes a regional component in addition to ethnic and professional considerations. If co-ethnics are too broad of a group to rely upon, perhaps regionality is the key signal of loyalty and thus patronage. Through this logic we propose our third hypothesis advancing this logic of regional affiliation.

H3: Elites who share regional affiliation with Obiang will be less likely to be dismissed.

Research design

We test our hypotheses using new minister-year quantitative data covering members of the “ruling elite” within Equatorial Guinea from 1979-2023. These elites are qualified as individuals holding formal membership in what Goldring and Matthews⁸⁷ deem the ruling institutions. The ruling institution broadly is the center of power of the regime, which has rotating membership and contains the individuals whose portfolios are the most hierarchically significant.⁸⁸ From 1979-1982, we code ruling elites as individuals with formal membership in the Supreme Military Council. From 1983-2023, we code them as full ministers in the presidential cabinet. These institutions are described briefly below to explain their role as the ruling institutions of this regime over time.

Equatorial Guinea was ruled by two separate ruling institutions during the tenure of Obiang, reflecting the changing nature of his rule across over five decades in charge of the country. The first ruling institution from 1979-1982 was the Supreme Military Council, a military junta led by Obiang.⁸⁹ The SMC ruled somewhat collegially for several years, with members of the junta often concurrently assuming portfolios in the cabinet. Cabinets under these forms of revolutionary command council are generally technocratic or entirely occupied by military officers from the junta or lower ranks.⁹⁰ This arrangement leaves the cabinet to be more of an administrative organ of the state, while the true locus of de facto decision-making power remains the SMC.⁹¹

The SMC was dissolved in late 1982 following an irregular constitutional referendum that nominally civilianized the military regime and authorized Obiang to hold the office of the

presidency for seven additional years.⁹² From that point, the elite was officially “demilitarized”, with Obiang and his key supporters focusing power within the state’s presidential cabinet. Cabinet portfolios became the institutions of political power, with some (like overseeing the lucrative petroleum and agriculture industries) bestowing large prestige. The presidential cabinet has since 1982 remained the institutional focus of formal policy-making power in Equatorial Guinea.

Guided by these insights into the institutional organisation of the ruling elite in Equatorial Guinea following the 1979 coup, we then moved to collecting individual-level data on these political figures. The temporal range we searched was from 1979 to 2023, focused on SMC members (1979-1983) and subsequent cabinet ministers (1983-2023). Biographical and professional data on these ruling elites are not fully centralized for the Obiang period, requiring us to piece together a complete picture from a host of source materials. These include the WhoGov dataset on cabinet ministers⁹³, Europa World Yearbooks⁹⁴, government documents, and media accounts. This collection process resulted in a set of 205 individual ruling elites who held office in the ruling institution for at least one year as a member of the SMC or a full member of the presidential cabinet. Excluding observations for Obiang, this produced an elite-year data sample of 979 observations, which serves as the baseline group for our statistical analyses.

Dependent variable

The primary dependent variable for the analysis involves *elite departure* from the ruling institution each year. We define departure as any method of exit by which an elite’s presence is not observed between two years among the named ranks of the ruling institution. Elite departures

may be conflictual, taking the form of a political purge, wherein dictators forcibly expel or demote elites through a reshuffle from their offices as a process meant to punish disloyalty or incompetence.⁹⁵ It may also include the elite's voluntary resignation or retirement, requiring the dictator to replace them with a new elite that takes over the vacant portfolio or personalizing the position under his personal control.⁹⁶

We capture the exit of elites from the ruling institution as a form of reshuffling, regardless of the intent of the dictator to purge or simply allow them to depart, as another figure will ultimately fill that role in their place.⁹⁷ For the dependent variable, we model departure dichotomously. A value of one is assigned to the elite-year in which the individual elite exited the ruling institution; values of zero are assigned to all other years, indicating retention. Elites who remained in office until the temporal end of the sample are issued a null value for the final year in office.

Independent variables

The first key personal status for elites related to our hypotheses on departure is the ethnic background of the elite. We are interested in ethnic matching between Obiang and elites who are from the shared **Fang** ethnic group. The majority Fang has since Equatorial Guinea's independence been the politically dominant group.⁹⁸ Okenve⁹⁹ notes that the ethnic identity of the Fang became socio-politically relevant during the colonial period of modern Equatorial Guinea, resulting in political mobilisation as independence approached. The numerical consequence of this majority-identity mobilisation has been a presidency always controlled by a Fang, first under Francisco Macías Nguema Biyogo (Obiang's uncle), then under Obiang after

the 1979 coup. This may have led to a 'Fanguisation' of the regime, with other minority ethnic groups being institutionally excluded or highly marginalized.¹⁰⁰

We draw upon Sá and Rodrigues Sanches'¹⁰¹ data on ethnic identity to code many of our sample cabinet ministers from 1994-2020. Their process of identifying ethnic identity based on signaling naming conventions at the individual level is extended to compile new ethnic background data on SMC members and ministers before 1994 and after 2020. We identify the following ethnic groups within our full data: Annobon, Bisio, Bubi, Fang, Fernandino, Ndowe, and a group for smaller ethnicities or unidentifiable individuals. Co-ethnics of Obiang in the Fang group constitute an overwhelming 79% of the ruling elite since 1979. The second largest far behind at 10.9% were the Bubi, representatives of whom held the Second Vice President position in the original ruling military junta. The full distribution of ethnic backgrounds across the minister-year sample of ruling elites is depicted below in Table One.

TABLE 1 HERE

The second key independent variable assesses the region of origin of each elite, specifically whether they hail from the Wele-Nzas region. This is the home area of President Obiang, so it could be that he favors retaining elites who share this point of origin. Strategies of retention based on region may be used by some dictators like how others favor certain ethnic affiliations for stacking their elite or coercive institutions. It may also be the case that due to the ethnic preponderance of Fang in Equatorial Guinea, Obiang looks more to region for elite retention, as Fang co-ethnicity may not necessarily infer direct loyalty to his person or regime.

We capture this regional origin using a combination of Sá and Rodrigues Sanches' data on Equatoguinean cabinet ministers, along with additional research using government and public source materials. The *Wele-Nzas* variable is modeled dichotomously, with 1 signaling that region of origin for an individual and 0 representing all other regions or unknown origins. We find that around 50.46% of elites in Obiang's regime came from Wele-Nzas. The second and third most common points of origin were the Litoral and Kie-Ntem regions, respectively contributing 13.59% and 12.97% of elites. Descriptive statistics for the regions of origin of all elites in the sample are presented below in Table Two.

TABLE 2 HERE

Controls

In addition to our key variables, we also control in our models for other professional and personal traits of elites that may affect their inclusion over time. Elites who stay in office longer may turn into “lifers”, remaining in their positions or the cabinet for decades, while other ministers frequently rotate in and out. We check for this with an indicator of *minister tenure*, being the logged number of years that an individual spends in any ruling elite portfolio. Obiang also seized power via a coup, with the victorious clique forming a military junta. Coercive elites (meaning those from the military and state security) like those in the SMC pose a greater coup risk, making them more likely to be purged.¹⁰² We account for this danger including an indicator for *military background*, qualifying whether the elite had professional martial experience. This status is determined through individual assessments of professional background using historical accounts, encyclopedias of cabinet composition, and the WhoGov dataset's rank category.¹⁰³

It should be noted that there is an association between autocratic governance and the exclusion of women from the political spaces. There are many possibilities for this male-favored gender imbalance in countries like Equatorial Guinea, including traditionalist misogyny¹⁰⁴, institutional barriers¹⁰⁵, co-optation to alleviate coup concerns¹⁰⁶, and openness to corruption as a political prerogative¹⁰⁷. As such, women who can attain the status of political elite in an autocratic system may be less likely to retain this status, as they are shuffled out to make room for a co-gendered replacement or a new male. This may be the case even if they achieve high status offices, such as newly appointed Prime Minister Manuela Roka Botey, the first female Equatoguinean head of government.¹⁰⁸ We account for this potential exit pressure by including a dichotomous variable noting whether the minister is identified as *female*, using ethno-linguistic signaling in given names.

There may also be greater loyalty perceived from individuals who share their party membership with Obiang, being part the PDGE that he created in 1987.¹⁰⁹ However, it may also be the case that minor party leaders who achieve cabinet posts are considered more valuable to Obiang, acting as representatives to ensure the co-optation of those groups into the regime's interests.¹¹⁰ We check for the retention effect of co-partisanship with a dichotomous indicator of *PDGE membership* for each elite, drawn from Sá and Rodrigues Sanches' individual dataset, extended to cover 1987-1994 and post-publication years with additional resources. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented below in Table Three. We test our hypotheses using a series of logistic regression models with standard errors clustered at the individual elite-spell level.

TABLE 3 HERE

Results

We proceed to empirically assess the conditions underlying strategies of elite management in Equatorial Guinea across the forty-four years of Obiang's rule, focusing on the top institutions. As his strategies may have shifted over his tenure, we perform several temporally limited tests based on characteristic eras of institutional rule. Model One includes elite-years from 1979-1982, which we characterize as the period of military rule. This was effectively when Obiang governed through the SMC. Model Two covers the period of 1983-1991, after Obiang dissolved the junta and installed himself as president of a single-party dictatorship with the support of a presidential cabinet. Model Three includes 1992-2023, after the ruling PDGE ceded its status as the only legal party and Obiang permitted the creation of opposition parties to contest the 1993 elections. During this period, opposition elites were incorporated into the presidential cabinet, signaling their ascension to the level of ruling elites. Model Four tests all elite-years to assess Obiang's elite management strategy for his entire tenure as dictator.

The dependent variable for each logistic regression estimator is whether an individual in the military junta or presidential cabinet was removed after 1 January of a given year. Coefficients for each independent variable are presented in Table Four, along with their levels of statistical significance and standard errors clustered by individual elite-spell. Some variables are not included in earlier models, such as PDGE membership status, because the party would not have been a relevant indicator prior to its creation in 1987. To assess the possible temporal effects of removals by year, we include year fixed effects in additional models presented in the supplemental appendix, which do not significantly alter the findings.

TABLE 4 HERE

Model One focuses on the military dictatorship period in Equatorial Guinea, testing the effects of variables on the likelihood of an elite's exit from the ruling institution each year. The results demonstrate strong support for the coup-proofing hypothesis. The coefficient for an elite's military background is strongly significant in the theoretically expected negative direction. The marginal effects for this model demonstrate a substantively important difference. Military elites during this era had a 79% likelihood of retention per year, versus non-military elites only likely to be retained 29% of the time. To be clear, non-military elites were more than double as likely to be removed each year compared with their military peers during Obiang's junta era, suggesting purge avoidance was used as a strategy of early survival. We also find that the longer an elite was in power, the more likely they were to be removed. This is linked with the progressive cleaning of house that Obiang performed as the regime moved toward dissolving the military junta when many stalwarts of the original coup were dismissed in favor of junior officers and technocrats.

Model Two shifts to examine the civilian dictatorship period of Obiang's rule from 1983-1991. Military background no longer appears to be a retention concern for Obiang during this period, lacking any reportable statistical significance. This perhaps suggests that the aversion to purging military elites has diminished after the dissolution of the junta and introduction of greater presidential powers in 1982. Co-ethnicity and regional affinity are also not statistically significant indicators of departure likelihood. The overall lack of compelling findings for this model in isolation may indicate that there are feature omissions from our models for each elite

that we did not register. However, it could present a scenario where Obiang was more balanced in his elite management strategy, not overtly favoring any group over others in the interest of building his broader non-military ruling coalition during the critical period of “civilianizing” the regime. These findings do not lend support for either our second or third hypotheses, at least during the civilian dictatorship era.

Model Three shifts to cover 1992 to 2023, after competitive authoritarianism was introduced into Equatoguinea politics. Evidence supports the notion that Fang co-ethnicity with Obang does not present a distinct benefit for cabinet ministers. Rather, we find that regional affinity with Obiang has a statistically significant and negative effect on departure. Marginal effects emphasize the advantaged status that ministers from Wele-Nzas enjoy, relative to their peers from other regions. Wene-Nzas ministers each year have a 16.8% likelihood of departing the cabinet, whereas ministers from all other regions have a 25.8% likelihood of exit. With other indicators not achieving reportable statistical significance for this larger sample period, we can conclude that regional affinity with President Obiang seems to be the most important indicator in this model. Model Four supports this conclusion by testing the full 1979-2023 sample, finding only co-regionality to be a statistically significant predictor of elite retention.

Thus, we find that Obiang has altered his elite retention strategies over the years, reflecting his own changing style of institutional rule. During the era of the military junta, when coup plotters transitioned into political figures, the military background of elites was associated with greater retention likelihood in the ruling institution. As the junta was dissolved and a civilian dictatorship developed into a competitive authoritarian system, regional identity came to serve as

the primary indicator of retention likelihood in the Equatoguinean cabinet. Although not a major factor during the earlier civilian era, it certainly had a profound effect on cabinet retention in the longer autocratic multiparty period of Obiang's rule. However, co-ethnicity appears to have not given a distinct advantage to elites across any of the eras of Obiang's tenure as executive, even being a detriment in the early years. In conclusion, we find evidence supporting two of our three hypotheses, advancing our theoretical narrative that Obiang's elite management strategy did evolve over time based on perceived coup risk and loyalty features observed in his inner circle.

Conclusion

How has the long-ruling dictator of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, shifted his strategies of elite management over his forty-four years in power? Prior literature on dictatorships in Africa generally asserts that co-ethnicity plays a key role in the political co-optation of elites into these regimes and the stacking of coercive institutions.¹¹¹ However, Equatorial Guinea has an unusually homogeneous ethnic composition in comparison to other countries on the continent, leading one to wonder whether this factor could be less of a consideration for elite retention in this regime.¹¹² Could it instead be that elite retention depends not on co-ethnicity with the regime leader, but some other personal or professional trait? And do these preferred traits change based on the shifting character of the regime?

We argued that the elite management strategies of Obiang over his time in power varied by the characteristics inherent in power-dynamics underlying his grasp on power. During the period of military rule, what token civilians were incorporated into the regime were easily replaceable, with powerful military junta members having higher survival horizons due to the coercive power

they wielded and thus coup threat they posed. As the junta was dissolved and Obiang shifted into two periods of non-military dictatorship, his reliance on military elites diminished. Instead, Obiang looked increasingly over time to support from supposed loyalists from his native Wele-Nzas region. This is interesting to contrast with the null effect of co-ethnicity status, which Obiang appears to have never favored at the ruling institutional level across any of his eras of rule. Co-ethnics were even more likely to be removed during the military dictatorship period, suggesting he was more concerned with coup insulation than ethnic packing.

In conclusion, the long rule of Teodoro Obiang helps to demonstrate how dictators shift their elite management strategies over time. The findings advance the notion that for some African countries, co-ethnicity may take lower priority, as Obiang instead looked increasingly over time to his home region for support. This study makes the important contribution of shining a light on an enduring dictatorship, which has received comparatively little attention relative to its regional peer regimes. Case-based knowledge of Equatorial Guinea allows us to better understand processes of elite management by the dictator in regimes that adapt to different features and chronological moments. The crafting of elites in this off-the-radar country shows how region is also an important basis of power, challenging assumptions that co-ethnicity is a primary strategy used by dictators. Based on the study of ruling institutions, future works should consider deeper examination of how individual dictators' survival strategies differ over time and how these have impacted their political present.

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Table One. Ethnic distribution of ruling elites in Equatorial Guinea.

Ethnicity	Min.-years	% total
<i>Annobon</i>	17	1.74
<i>Bisio</i>	16	1.63
<i>Bubi</i>	107	10.93
<i>Fang</i>	778	79.47
<i>Fernandino</i>	18	1.84
<i>Ndowe</i>	38	3.88
<i>Other</i>	5	0.51
Total	979	100

Table Two. Regional distribution of ruling elites in Equatorial Guinea.

Region	Min-years	% total
<i>Annobon</i>	16	1.63
<i>Bioko Norte</i>	65	6.64
<i>Bioko Sur</i>	50	5.12
<i>Centro Sur</i>	57	5.82
<i>Kie-Ntem</i>	127	12.97
<i>Litoral</i>	133	13.59
<i>Spain</i>	4	0.41
<i>Unknown</i>	33	3.37

<i>Wele-Nzas</i>	494	50.46
Total	979	100

Table Three. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obvs.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Elite departure</i>	947	0.226	0.419	0	1
<i>Fang</i>	976	0.795	0.404	0	1
<i>Wele-Nzas</i>	958	0.516	0.5	0	1
<i>Minister tenure (ln)</i>	979	1.067	0.842	0	3.555
<i>Military background</i>	979	0.106	0.308	0	1
<i>Female</i>	979	0.606	0.238	0	1
<i>PDGE member</i>	824	0.947	0.225	0	1

Table Four. Departure of ruling elites in Equatorial Guinea.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Years	1979-1982	1983-1991	1992-2023	1979-2023
<i>Fang</i>	2.734**	0.179	-0.337	-0.275
	(1.225)	(0.707)	(0.216)	(0.207)
<i>Wele-Nzas</i>	-0.136	-0.716	-0.538**	-0.522**
	(1.139)	(0.632)	(0.264)	(0.248)
<i>Minister tenure (ln)</i>	2.259***	-0.249	0.045	0.005
	(0.732)	(0.433)	(0.152)	(0.141)
<i>Military background</i>	-3.235***	-0.909	0.597	0.258

	(1.184)	-(1.074)	(0.507)	(0.392)
<i>Female</i>		Omitted	-0.007	-0.047
			(0.227)	(0.221)
<i>PDGE member</i>		Omitted	0.398	0.439
			(0.332)	(0.325)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.116**	-0.267	-1.246***	-1.249***
	(0.527)	(0.723)	(0.381)	(0.371)
<i>Pseudo-R-squared</i>	0.237	0.046	0.02	0.017
<i>Log pseudolikelihood</i>	-24.15	-31.965	-366.628	-401.146
<i>Observations</i>	49	56	721	777

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Standard errors in parentheses.

¹ Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Woldense, “The Ruler’s Game of Musical Chairs: Shuffling During Haile Selassie’s Reign.”

² Boix and Svolik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships”; White, “Generals in the Cabinet: Military Participants in Government and International Conflict Initiation.”

³ Egorov and Sonin, “Dictators and Their Viziers: Endogenizing the Loyalty-Competence Trade-Off”; Meng and Paine, “Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability: How Rebel Regimes Solve the Guardianship Dilemma.”

⁴ Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule”; Woldense and Kroeger, “Elite Change without Regime Change: Authoritarian Persistence in Africa and the End of the Cold War.”

⁵ Goldring and Matthews, “To Purge or Not to Purge: An Individual-Level Quantitative Analysis of Elite Purges in Dictatorships”; Raleigh and Wigmore-Shepherd, “Elite Coalitions and Power Balance across African Regimes: Introducing the African Cabinet and Political Elite Data Project (ACPED)”; Sudduth, “Strategic Logic of Elite Purges in Dictatorships.”

⁶ Daloz, “‘Big Men’ in Sub-Saharan Africa: How Elites Accumulate Positions and Resources.”

⁷ Osei, “Like Father, Like Son? Power and Influence Across Two Gnassingbe Presidencies in Togo.”

⁸ Chin, Wright, and Carter, “The Colpus Dataset: Case Narratives for Candidate Coup Events in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1946-2020.”

⁹ Yates, “Dynastic Rule in Equatorial Guinea.”

¹⁰ Sá and Rodrigues Sanches, “The Politics of Autocratic Survival in Equatorial Guinea: Co-optation, Restrictive Institutional Rules, Repression, and International Projection.”

¹¹ Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*.

¹² Kim, “Who Is Purged? Determinants of Elite Purges in North Korea”; Wong and Chan, “Determinants of Political Purges in Autocracies: Evidence from Ancient Chinese Dynasties.”

¹³ Woldense and Kroeger, “Elite Change without Regime Change: Authoritarian Persistence in Africa and the End of the Cold War.”

¹⁴ Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; De Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d'état*; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*.

¹⁵ Brooks and White, “Oust the Leader, Keep the Regime? Autocratic Civil-Military Relations and Coup Behavior in the Tunisian and Egyptian Militaries during the 2011 Arab Spring”; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*; Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*; Sudduth, “Strategic Logic of Elite Purges in Dictatorships.”

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⁵⁹ Lindberg, *Democracy and Elections in Africa*, 126.

⁶⁰ Nse and Micó, “La Oposición Guineana Entre Dos ‘Diálogos Nacionales’ (1993-2014),” 418.

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