

How the Regime in Equatorial Guinea Exploits Football

REPORT
JULY 2026

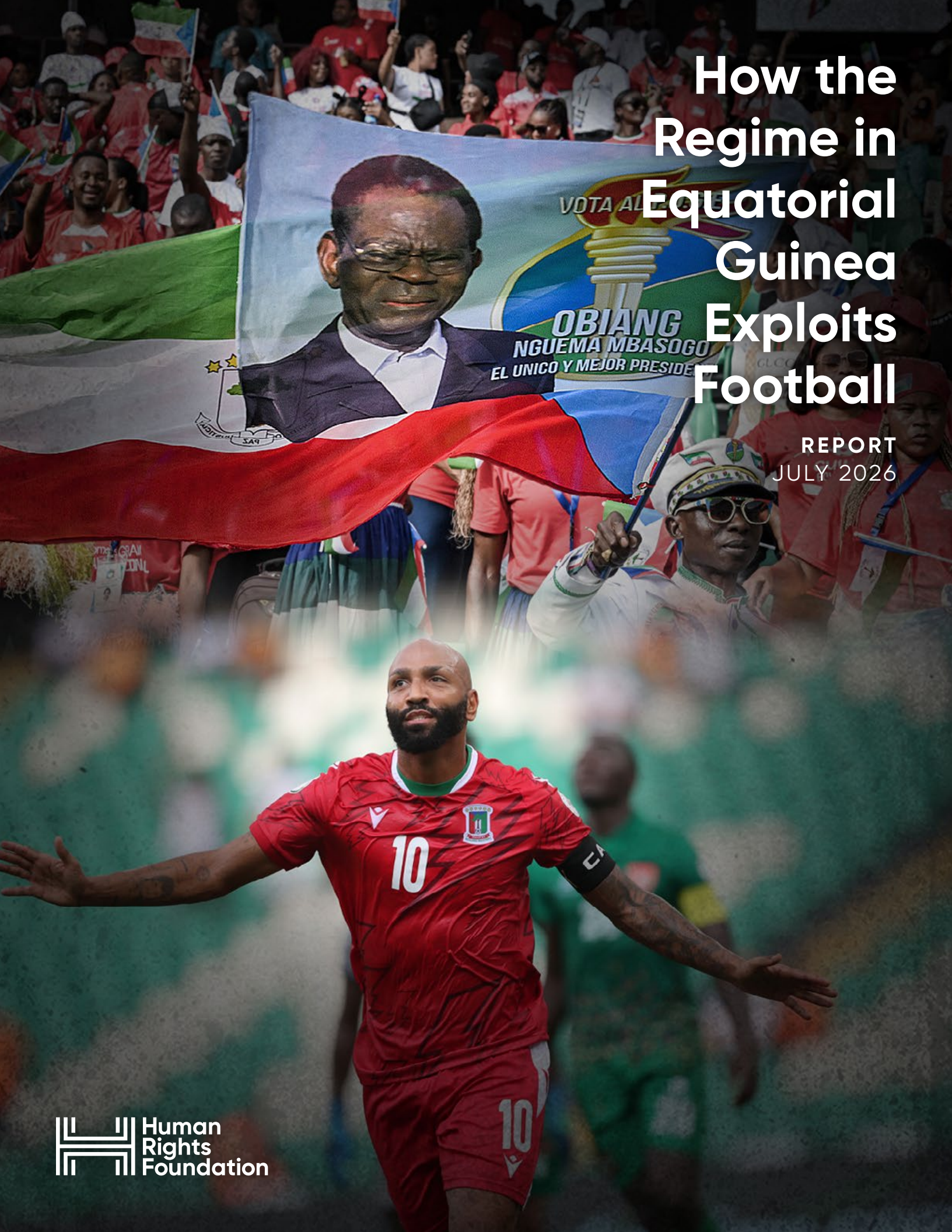


Table of Contents

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The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) is a nonprofit organization that promotes and protects human rights globally, with an expertise in the Americas. HRF unites people in the common cause of defending human rights and promoting liberal democracy. Our Mission is to ensure that freedom is both preserved and promoted around the world.

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01	Introduction	05	A National Team With Naturalized or Foreign-Born Recruits	36
02	Background	06	The Exploitation of Diaspora Recruits' Emotional Ties	38
03	Part 1: Equatorial Guinea at AFCON 2023: Glory on the Pitch, Corruption off the Field	09	Using Passports To Trap and Control Foreign-Born Recruits	40
	Emilio Nsue and Nzalang Nacional's Protest Against Corruption	10		
	Nzalang's AFCON Fever and the Semblance of a Happy Football Nation	12		
	"Tiempo de Ambiente:" Football as a Distraction	15		
	Unabated Repression During AFCON	17		
04	Part 2: How Football Became a Tool for Dictatorship	19		
	A Francoist Heritage in Equatorial Guinea	20		
	Playing Defense: The cost of Macías's Obsession with Control on Sports	22		
	The "Freedom Coup" and Spain's Gift of a Coach	25		
	Distraction Through Entertainment Under Obiang	26		
	The Politicization of Football: From a Neighborhood Affair to Cronyism	27		
	Oil Wealth and the Rise of Spectacle Politics	29		
05	Part 3: Nzalang: The Crumbling Façade	31		
	AFCON 2012: Reaching for the Glow of International Football	32		
	AFCON 2015: From "The Nation that Saved AFCON from Ebola" to a "War Zone"	35		
06	Part 4: State of Play of Domestic Football in Equatorial Guinea	43		
	Behind the Crumbling Façade: The Reality of Local Football	44		
	The Regime's Neglect of Local Talent	47		
	Regime Control Stifles Football Development	48		
	The Promising Case of Cano Sport Academy	50		
	Bad Governance and Corruption in Football Administration	53		
07	Part 5: Legitimization and Complicity in the Image Laundering of Equatorial Guinea's Regime	55		
	Football Diplomacy	56		
	World Champions in a Dictatorship: Spain's 2013 Friendly Scandal	58		
	Spanish Football Leaders' Association with Equatorial Guinea's Regime	60		
	Guinea's "Forbidden Documentary" Finds No Screen Time in Spain	63		
	Feeding and Failing: Business in Kleptocratic Equatorial Guinea	64		
08	Recommendations	67		

Equatorial Guinea's supporters hold national flags, while one man in uniform bearing the country's colors carries a flag calling to vote for the ruling party during the 2023 AFCON.

Photo credit: Issouf Sanogo /AFP



Introduction

Equatorial Guinea's regime has strategically exploited the global appeal of football as a political tool. By leveraging the sport internationally, the regime maintains domestic control, shapes its public perception, and engages in reputation laundering through dubious partnerships, despite chronic shortcomings in local football development. Drawing on exclusive testimonies from former players for the national football team, Nzalang Nacional, regime critics, and experts in human rights, sports, history, and transparency in Equatorial Guinea, this report uncovers the political manipulation embedded in the regime's football policies.

This report examines how sports — particularly football — policies have, over time, evolved into a key tool in the regime's arsenal. **Part 1** begins with an analysis of the 2023 AFCON revelations from Nzalang Nacional players about the alleged embezzlement of public funds by the country's football federation and its sports ministry.

The report further exposes the stark contrast between the regime's fabricated football success in **Part 2** with the behind-the-scenes realities of national team management in **Part 3**, and the dire state of local football in the country in **Part 4**. Finally, **Part 5** explores cases of third-party complicity in legitimizing the regime through reputation-laundering efforts, diverting attention from its dynastic and kleptocratic abuses, while extending its repressive reach beyond the country's borders and the realm of football.

Through a case study of Equatorial Guinea, this report underscores how authoritarian regimes manipulate football and sheds light on the role of global sporting events in legitimizing such regimes. By exposing these dynamics, HRF aims to contribute to greater accountability in international football and raise awareness of the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Equatorial Guinean regime.

Background

Equatorial Guinea is a Central African country located in the Gulf of Guinea, bordered by Cameroon and Gabon. It is the only independent Spanish-speaking country in Africa. The nation consists of two main parts: the insular and the continental regions. The insular region consists of three provinces: two on the island of Bioko, home to Malabo, until recently the country's capital,¹ and one on the island of Annobón. The continental region, formerly known as Río Muni, is home to the country's largest city, Bata, and is made up of five provinces. The country also includes the islets of Corisco, Great Elobey, Little Elobey, Conga, Banie, and Cocoteros.

Since gaining independence from Spain, Equatorial Guinea has been ruled by two men from the same family and clan: Francisco Macías Nguema, the country's first dictator, who was notorious for his totalitarian rule and extreme brutality;² and his nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who overthrew Macías in a 1979 military coup and today remains the world's longest-serving republican head of state. Obiang and his party, the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE), have maintained a continuous hold on power. Both rulers drew heavily from Francoist

Spain, notably its 1947 Fundamental Law, embedding authoritarianism into the country's governance.

Obiang's power is absolute and only shared with his son, Teodoro Nguema, who is the country's vice president. On paper, the country's oil wealth and small population of 1.6 million have endowed it with one of the highest GDP per capita figures in sub-Saharan Africa.³ In reality, even the most generous estimates place poverty rates at more than fifty percent,⁴ while Obiang, his son, and the inner circle of the ruling family live in luxury. Dissent is brutally repressed, and the ruling family exercises absolute and arbitrary control over every branch of government and major institutions, including the national football federation, FEGUIFUT.

Though FEGUIFUT's statutes stipulate the federation's political neutrality and independence,⁵ its governance reflects the tight grip of Obiang's inner circle. Its president, Venancio Tomás Ndong, is a protégé of the first lady's brother, while the former Minister of Youth and Sports, Patricio Bakale Mba Medja, now serves as a trusted presidential advisor. Despite the regime's public pledges to invest in and develop professional football,

the men's national team, Nzalang Nacional, has remained in the lower tiers of international competition.⁶ In many ways, football mirrors Equatorial Guinea's society and offers a revealing window into the authoritarian regime's inner workings.

¹ On Jan. 3, 2026, a presidential decree changed Equatorial Guinea's capital city from Malabo to Ciudad de La Paz located on the mainland.

² "Equatorial Guinea: 40 years of repression and rule of fear highlights human rights crisis," Amnesty International (Aug. 8, 2022), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/08/equatorial-guinea-years-of-repression-and-rule-of-fear>.

³ "PIB per cápita (US\$ a precios actuales) - Sub-Saharan Africa," World Bank Open Data, http://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=ZG&most_recent_value_desc=true.

⁴ "Actualización económica de Guinea Ecuatorial 2025: Gestión de la riqueza de Guinea Ecuatorial para un crecimiento y desarrollo sostenibles," Grupo Banco Mundial (July 21, 2025), <https://www.bancomundial.org/es/country/equatorialguinea/publication/equatorial-guinea-economic-update-2025-managing-equatorial-guinea-wealth-for-sustainable-growth-and-development>.

⁵ "Estatutos Generales FEGUIFUT," Federación Ecuatoguineana De Fútbol, <http://www.feguifut.org/estatutos-generales>.

⁶ FIFA, "FIFA/Coca-Cola Men's World Ranking - Equatorial Guinea", <https://inside.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/EQG?gender=men>.





Emilio Nsue plays in a match between Equatorial Guinea and Guinea during the 2023 AFCON at Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan.

Photo Credit: Franck Fife / AFP

Part 1

Equatorial Guinea's Football at AFCON 2023: Glory on the Pitch, Corruption off the Field

The small country of Equatorial Guinea is not among the elite football nations in Africa, but Nzalang Nacional, the men's national team, made headlines with their thrilling performance in the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) in Côte d'Ivoire. The team's run in Africa's biggest sporting event offered rare and positive visibility to a country that otherwise receives little international attention. However, the intense excitement surrounding Equatorial Guinea's footballing moment on the international stage unraveled into a public scandal, exposing a culture of political manipulation, power abuse, and corruption emanating from the highest levels of the country's political leadership. This story, presented in this section, illustrates the intricacy of sports and politics in this oil-rich Central African nation, which has been under the repressive rule of a dynastic dictatorship for nearly six decades.



Emilio Nsue and Nzalang Nacional's Protest Against Corruption

On Feb. 11, 2024, Emilio Nsue, the captain of Nzalang Nacional — meaning “lightning” in Fang, the language of the country’s ethnic majority — received the Golden Boot award, crowning him as the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON)’s top scorer.⁷ He stood on the podium of champions at the trophy ceremony shortly after Côte d’Ivoire defeated Nigeria to win its third African championship. Nsue reveled in the glory of his most significant moment on the global stage, a consecration of his breakout performance in the tournament. Nzalang Nacional’s incredible run in the tournament included a historic 4-0 upset victory

against eventual champions Côte d’Ivoire.

But just two days later, as global attention had already shifted away from AFCON, Equatorial Guinea’s football federation FEGUIFUT suspended Nsue,⁸ who had become the nation’s golden boy, on vague accusations of indiscipline.⁹ The next day, Nsue and ten other Nzalang players issued an open letter rejecting the accusations.¹⁰ Instead, they claimed they had been “continuously humiliated, mistreated, swindled, threatened, and disrespected by FEGUIFUT president Venancio Tomás Ndong and Sports minister

Patricio Bakale,”¹¹ both cronies of Equatorial Guinea’s dynastic regime.¹²

“We know of no precedent in the world, not only in football but of sport, in which a player is awarded such an important recognition as the top scorer of the last Africa Cup of Nations [...] but the next day he is suspended from returning to his national team,” read the players’ protest letter.

The letter stated that the targeting of Nsue was meant to intimidate the other players into not speaking out against a number of abusive practices, including the embezzlement of more

than \$1 million in financial incentives promised to players and the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) funds earmarked for football development in the country.¹³ On Feb. 15, Nzalang’s players followed up with a video protesting the federation’s failure to meet a series of demands for improving conditions, which they had been making since 2017.¹⁴

The embarrassing public row prompted the intervention of dictator Teodoro Obiang’s son and vice president, Teodorín Nguema Obiang (also known as Teddy Nguema). The latter staged a televised meeting with all parties in his office.¹⁵ It was both a show of force and a play for popularity. He positioned himself as an intimidating judge towards the FEGUIFUT officials, one who carefully scrutinizes and analyzes the evidence before announcing his verdict. At the same time, he sided with the team by declaring that the temporary suspension was a very bad idea. Following the meeting, Teodorín went on social media to boast about his mediation.¹⁶ In a further demonstration of FEGUIFUT’s total subservience to the regime, the federation lifted the suspension shortly after the vice president’s communications team announced that Teodorín “suggested” it.¹⁷

In fact, the lifting of the suspension was moot, as Nsue had announced his retirement from Nzalang during the televised meeting. Furthermore, in another public show of defiance towards the dictator’s son’s public proclamation, Nsue maintained his position. In a letter to FEGUIFUT, which went viral on the messaging app WhatsApp, he revealed that it was an act of protest. “As a sportsman, I have always believed in integrity and fair play, values that I consider fundamental to the development of football in our country. Unfortunately,

the persistent presence of corruption in the federation undermines these principles and calls into question the credibility of Guinean football at a national and international level,” he wrote.¹⁸ He also called for “significant changes to be implemented in the federation to ensure a fair and transparent environment for all football players and fans.”¹⁹

Although his defiance proved short-lived when he later rescinded his decision to quit, the sad saga of Emilio Nsue illustrates the political manipulation, corruption, and abusive practices embedded in national and international football governing bodies worldwide. These problems are worse in countries under authoritarian rule, such as Equatorial Guinea, where the personalization and concentration of absolute dictatorial power around father and son leave athletes at the mercy of the cronies of the ruling regime and the arbitrary whims of rulers.

⁷ “Emilio Nsue Wins PUMA Golden Boot Award,” CAFonline (Feb. 11, 2024), <http://www.cafonline.com/caf-africa-cup-of-nations/news/emilio-nsue-wins-puma-golden-boot-award>.

⁸ Juan Antonio Nguema Meñe Abeso, “Comunicado de Prensa,” Federación Ecuatoguineana De Fútbol (Feb. 13, 2024), <https://www.feguifut.org/imgdb/NOTA%20PRENSA%20JUNTA%20EJECUTIVA%20>

09%2002%202024.pdf.

⁹ Asonga Radio y Television, “Noticias Asonga 14-2-2024 La FEGUIFUT suspende al capitán Emilio Nsue y Iban Edú del Nzalang,” YouTube (Feb. 14, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDimwzSzBi4>.

¹⁰ “Carta abierta de los jugadores de Nzalang” (Feb. 14, 2024), <https://estaticos-cdn.prensaiberica.es/epi/public/content/file/original/2024/0215/20/carta-abierta-nzalang23-pdf.pdf>.

¹¹ FIFA, “Equatorial Guinean FA President Venancio Tomás Ndong,” YouTube (Sept. 7, 2022), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS4IXh0AwPE>.

¹² Ornella Diana Molongua Djombe, “Nguema Obiang Mangue es un pilar en la FEGUIFUT”, ha dicho Venancio Tomás,” La Vicepress (June 23, 2023), <https://www.lavicepress.org/post/nguema-obiang-mangue-es-un-pilar-en-la-feguifut-ha-dicho-venancio-tom%C3%A1s>.

¹³ Adrian Bishop, “Emilio Nsue Alleges the Equatoguinean FA ‘Embezzled More Than £850,000 of Bonuses’ During AFCON...,” DailyMail (Feb. 17, 2024), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-13093055/Emilio-Nsue-alleges-Equatoguinean-FA-embezzled-850-000-bonuses-Africa-Cup-Nations-tournaments-scorer-suspended-indefinitely-gross-misconduct.html>.

¹⁴ La Voz De Los Sin Voz, “Emilio Nsue e Ivan Nos Cuentan Toda La Verdad,” YouTube (Feb. 16, 2024), https://youtu.be/IngVzEqKkns?si=66ulbHP1_pbf794s&t=158.

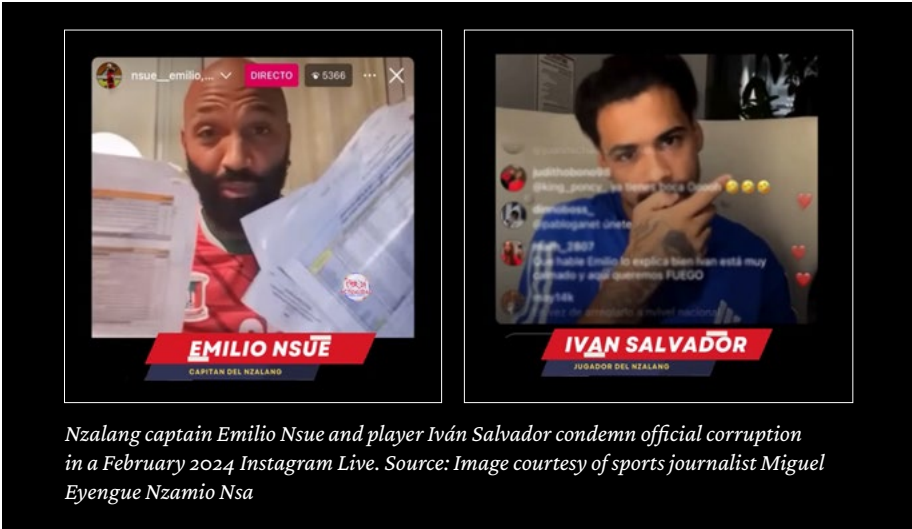
¹⁵ Asonga Radio y Television, “Video Integro Sobre el ‘Caso del Nzalang’ en el Palacio del Pueblo de Malabo,” YouTube (Feb. 22, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eYdf3OVD4>.

¹⁶ @teonguema, “He mantenido una reunión para resolver el desentendimiento que había entre Deportes, FEGUIFUT y selección nacional,” X (Feb. 20, 2024), <https://x.com/teonguema/status/1760007013625438630?s=20>.

¹⁷ La Vice Press Guinea Ecuatorial, “Caso FEGUIFUT | Reunion Mixta de S.E. Nguema Obiang Junto a Miembros de la FEGUIFUT y el M. Depor,” Youtube (Feb. 21, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13d0XNRKFlw>.

¹⁸ Abaha TV, “Carta De Emilio Nsue Lopez La FEGUIFUT,” Youtube (Feb. 22, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6nwZX7w6m0>.

¹⁹ Ibid



Nzalang captain Emilio Nsue and player Iván Salvador condemn official corruption in a February 2024 Instagram Live. Source: Image courtesy of sports journalist Miguel Eyengue Nzamio Nsa

Equatorial Guinea’s supporters wave ahead of the AFCON 2024 round of 16 football match between Equatorial Guinea and Guinea at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan.

Photo credit: Issouf Sanogo / AFP

Nzalang’s AFCON Fever and the Semblance of a Happy Football Nation

Ahead of AFCON 2023, Equatorial Guinea’s regime announced an allocation of 215 million CFA francs (approximately \$358,000) from the public treasury to “guarantee” the success of the Nzalang Nacional at the tournament,²⁰ an amount exceeding what the 2024 state budget earmarked for strengthening the new Baney district hospital.²¹ This decision is revealing in a country where 49% of all health centers are non-functional,²² chronic shortages of staff, equipment, and medicines persist, and nearly one in three people forgo care because they cannot afford

it.²³ The same funds could have been used to shore up the collapsing health system. Before traveling to Côte d’Ivoire, the team had obligatory but separate photo-ops with the dictator²⁴ and his son.²⁵ The latter, ever eager to show his readiness to take charge of the country and outshine his father, proclaimed that he was offering to buy 200 plane tickets for citizens who wanted to go to Nzalang’s first match.²⁶

Nzalang’s fan group traveled to Côte d’Ivoire to support the team.²⁷ On social media, videos of Equatoguinean

influencers dancing²⁸ to Nzalang’s popular theme song, “EG ONLY 1XXXX” by musician Mac Miguel B,²⁹ and colorful displays of fandom in the stadiums fueled nationalistic euphoria around the team.³⁰

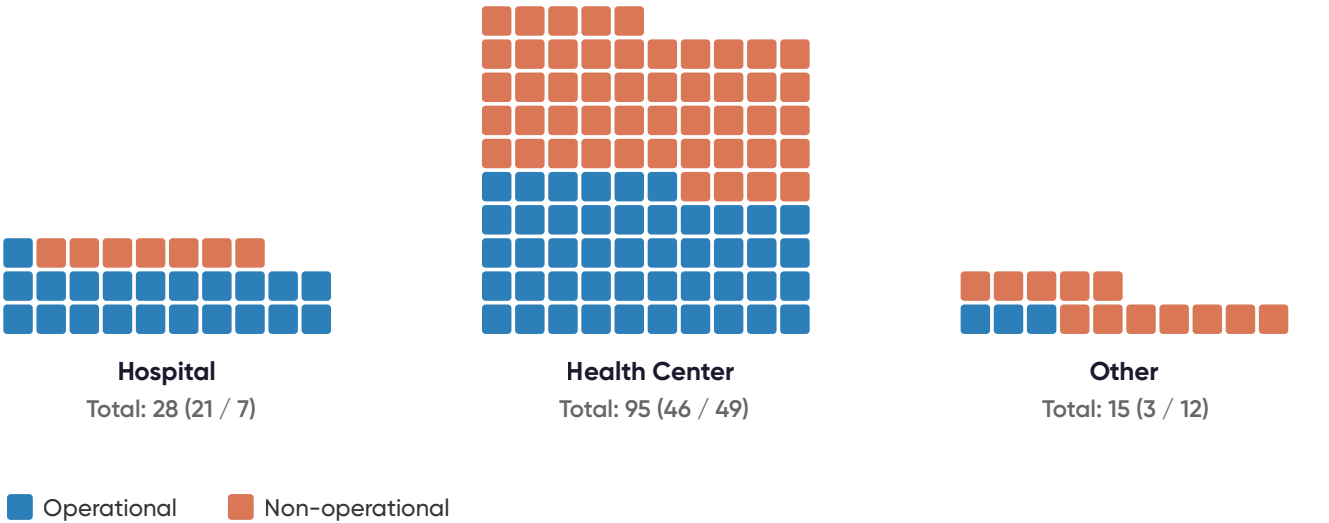
Teddy Nguema also traveled to Côte d’Ivoire, attending matches and making his presence highly visible both in and around the stadium. He published a video on social media to congratulate Nzalang after each victory.³¹ After Nzalang’s historic win against Côte d’Ivoire, dictator Teodoro Obiang surpassed his son’s

congratulatory message³² by announcing a 1 million euro bonus to the team³³ and declaring the next day a national holiday.³⁴ The ruling PDGE’s website trumpeted that Obiang, “as the first fan” and “the father of the nation,” was fulfilling his promise.³⁵ The victory appeared to create a rare moment of national consensus as the main opposition party, Convergence for Social Democracy (CPDS), also congratulated Nzalang Nacional.³⁶ From the outside, Equatorial Guinea presented a picture-perfect image of peace, prosperity, and benevolent leadership.



Public health centers by operational status in 2022

Each square represents one public health facility



Numbers in parentheses: operational / non-operational. "Other" includes blood transfusion centers, vaccine storage centers, and laboratories.
Source: D.G. de Infraestructuras Sanitarias, Equatorial Guinea

"Tiempo de Ambiente:"
Football as a Distraction

The celebrations surrounding AFCON exemplify what Equato-guineans commonly refer to as “tiempo de ambiente” — moments during festive periods or other occasions when citizens temporarily disconnect and forget their grim realities, which include arbitrary arrests, unemployment, limited opportunities, and restricted access to decent health and education.

For the regime, the euphoria surrounding Nzalang’s run in AFCON offered the kind of international prestige, nationalist fervor, and unity that it could not buy or coerce from ordinary citizens.

“Football in Equatorial Guinea is one more tool used by the tyrant and his family to distract the population and therefore sell a false image of the country,” Esono Eyoma, an exiled opposition activist and founder of YouTube channel Abaha TV, told HRF.

“Who does this image of happiness on social networks favor? Clearly, Obiang,” he said, pointing out that the effect of the appearance of normalcy is that “any person who does not know the country in-depth may wish to live in Equatorial Guinea.”

However, for ordinary citizens living in Equatorial Guinea, the harsh realities of daily existence dissipated the fleeting feverish euphoria. In a country where 57% of the population still lives in poverty,³⁷ the regime’s ostentatious display of generosity towards Nzalang led some citizens to beg for the same outpouring of benevolence publicly. Some even took to the internet. “Please don’t forget us when you hand out money to national team players,” said one citizen in a video addressing the president.³⁸ Journalist Mocache Massoko, founder and editor of the independent news website Diario Rombe, tweeted: “One million euros could solve many problems in Equatorial Guinea. [It] can buy

many medicines for many public hospitals that have neither syringes nor sterilization of surgical material.”³⁹

“The reason millions of dollars are paid to football players in Equatorial Guinea isn’t to develop football leagues or promote a football culture,” Tutu Alicante, Equato-guinean human rights lawyer and Executive Director of EG Justice,⁴⁰ told HRF. “It’s a tactic to control the population and project an image to the international community that is far removed from the reality most people in the country experience.”

²⁰ @eg_only_one, “La selección Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial ya tiene a disposición los fondos para su estancia en la CAN Costa de Marfil 2024,” Instagram (Dec. 30, 2023), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C1ex7WQo2uw/>.

²¹ Ley de Presupuestos Generales del Estado 2024, Presidencia del Gobierno de la República de Guinea Ecuatorial (Dec. 6, 2023) 56, <https://www.lavicepress.org/post/presupuestos-generales-del-estado-para-el-ejercicio-econ%C3%B3mico-2024>.

²² In 2022, 7 out of 28 hospitals in Equatorial Guinea were not functional. See: Guinea Ecuatorial en Cifras, Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guinea Ecuatorial (2023) 34, <https://inege.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Guinea-Ecuatorial-en-Cifras-2023.pdf>.

²³ Encuesta Nacional de Hogares de Guinea Ecuatorial, Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guinea Ecuatorial (Nov. 2024) 100, <https://inege.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Informe-Definitivo-de-la-ENH2.pdf>.

²⁴ @eg_only_one, “Si llegáis a la final de la CAN, me veréis allí en Costa de Marfil animando,” Instagram (Jan. 10, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C17T8pJIEDZ/>.

²⁵ @la_vice_press, “Continúan las investigaciones de los presuntos casos de corrupción,” Instagram (May, 19, 2021) https://www.instagram.com/p/CP-C8VNGs-wA/?img_index=1.

²⁶ @eg_only_one, “Como apoyo al Nzalang Nacional, ofrezco 200 billetes para quienes quieran ir al primer partido de nuestra selección nacional en Costa de Marfil,” Instagram (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C15P-gMolXI/>.

²⁷ @eg_only_one, “El grupo de fans del Nzalang Nacional encabezado por su presidenta @wendy_la_pija acompañada de varios influencers Ecuatoguineanos ya están volando para Costa de Marfil a animar al combinado del @_nzalang.nacional @nzalangnacional,” Instagram (Jan. 18, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2PFLn0IWIS/>.

²⁸ @cathy.afriorizada, “Todos con Nzalang Nacional,” Instagram (Jan. 13, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2CxoCofbQ/>.

²⁹ @sandrasiosa, “Nosotros somos Guinea Ecuatorial,” Instagram (Jan. 19, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2SYOTolPRs/>.

³⁰ @k.eyamaofficial, “Yo por mi patria, hasta mi último respirar,” Instagram (Jan. 29, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2sNebwo02I/>.

³¹ @la_vice_press, “El Vicepresidente felicita a los Nzalang Boys por el resultado frente a Nigeria,” Instagram (Jan. 15, 2024), https://www.instagram.com/p/C2GPc26l1el/?img_index=1.

³² @teonguema, “¡Bravo a Nzalang Nacional!”, X (Jan. 22, 2024), <https://twitter.com/teonguema/status/1749528022477148524>.

³³ @T_Obiang, “A parte de la prima de partici-

pación, por el buen partido realizado esta tarde ante Costa de Marfil yo les prometo al Nzalang Nacional una prima de “un millón de Euros”,” X (Jan. 22, 2024), https://twitter.com/T_Obiang/status/1749518038250987712.

³⁴ Efe, “Locura por La Roja en Ginea Ecuatorial,” Diario AS (Jan. 23, 2024), <https://as.com/futbol/internacional/locura-por-la-roja-en-guinea-ecuatorial-n/>.

³⁵ María Jesús Nsang, “El Jefe de Estado entrega a la Selección Nacional el millón de euros prometido,” PDGE, <https://www.pdge-guineaequatorial.com/el-jefe-de-estado-entrega-a-la-seleccion-nacional-el-millon-de-euros-prometido/>.

³⁶ @ParaCpds “Graciaaaaaaassssssss, Zalang!!!!”, X (Jan. 22, 2024), <https://x.com/ParaCpds/status/1749527887940555070?s=20>.





Police clash with fans outside Malabo Stadium on Jan. 29, 2012, as supporters without tickets try to enter ahead of an AFCON match.

Photo Credit: William Sands/
ZUMAPRESS.com / Alamy

Unabated Repression During AFCON

FIFA President Gianni Infantino takes pride in affirming that football brings people together and fosters peace and understanding, with the subtext that it has the power to nudge closed societies towards opening and reform. In the case of Equatorial Guinea, the national fervor around Nzalang did not cause the regime to pause its repression or treat its citizens more favorably.

Just before AFCON, police detained a citizen for criticizing corruption in audio messages shared on WhatsApp,⁴¹ even as the country's prisons were already bursting with prisoners of conscience and political dissidents.

On Jan. 22, 2024, as people celebrated Nzalang's victory over Côte d'Ivoire in the city of Bata, a police patrol intervened, ordering revelers to stop singing and shouting.⁴² When some refused, officers tried to arrest them.⁴³ Antonio Ngüi, director of state-controlled Radio Bata, filmed the scene but was reportedly handcuffed when he refused to surrender his phone.⁴⁴ This event underscored a chilling reality: in a regime ruled by fear and violence, even joy is seen as a threat.

Days after the Côte d'Ivoire match, police brutally arrested prominent human rights activist Anacleto Micha Ndong.⁴⁵

Ndong had just been released from nine months of imprisonment in the country's notorious Black Beach prison and had announced his intent to file a complaint against a prison guard for acts of torture.⁴⁶ Instead, he was held for more than a month without charges, then charged with

slander, and transferred to return to the same prison where he alleged he had been tortured. Then, in April 2024, Ndong disappeared in the Black Beach prison.⁴⁷ To this day, his family and friends have been unable to locate him and fear that he was transferred to the remote Oveng Azem maximum-security prison,⁴⁸ where dissident Julio Obama Mefuman died under suspicious circumstances in January 2023 amid allegations of torture.⁴⁹

On Jan. 28, 2024, Guinea's last-minute goal against Nzalang in the AFCON's round of 16 abruptly ended the country's fleeting tiempo de ambiente.⁵⁰ As critics like Esono Eyoma assert, "Nothing has changed, and everything will remain the same as long as Obiang continues to hold power hostage."

plained about public corruption, nepotism, and other abuses in the country," X (Jan. 22, 2024), <https://x.com/HRF/status/1749475540564603385>.

⁴² Information gathered by sources who spoke to HRF on the condition of anonymity.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kgalalello Gaebee, "Equatorial Guinea: Free Activist Anacleto Micha Ndong Nlang and End Brutality Against Rights Defenders," CIVICUS (Feb. 22, 2024), <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/6867-equatorial-guinea-free-activist-anacleto-micha-ndong-nlang-and-end-brutality-against-rights-defenders>.

⁴⁶ "Equatorial Guinea: Jailed Human Rights Defender at Risk of Torture: Anacleto Micha Ndong," Amnesty International (March 13, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/documents/afr24/7794/2024/en/>.

⁴⁷ @HRF, "1/ It has been two weeks since human rights activist Anacleto Micha Ndong disappeared in the custody of prison officials in Equatorial Guinea," X (May 7, 2024), <https://x.com/HRF/status/1787930496837550490>.

⁴⁸ "Equatorial Guinea: Human Rights Defender's Whereabouts Unknown," <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent-actions/human-rights-defenders-whereabouts-unknown>.

⁴⁹ "Equatorial Guinea dissident dies in prison," France 24 (Jan. 16, 2023), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230116-equatorial-guinea-dissident-dies-in-prison>.

⁵⁰ "Last minute goal sees Guinea into AFCON quarterfinals," ESPN (Jan. 28, 2024), https://www.espn.com/soccer/report/_/gameld/697523.

ANNOUNCEMENT May 4, 2025

HRF Secures Victory at the UN: Working Group Orders Equatoguinean Lawyer Anacleto Micha Ndong Nlang's Immediate Release



Part 2

How Football Became a Tool for Dictatorship

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo delivers a speech at the draw ceremony for AFCON 2015, held in Equatorial Guinea.

Photo credit: Stephane De Sakutin / AFP

Since colonial times, football in Equatorial Guinea has been deeply intertwined with political power. Introduced by Spain as a tool for colonial control, the sport was later suppressed by the first dictator, Francisco Macías, who feared it could undermine his absolute control during his reign of terror. After deposing Macías, Teodoro Obiang revived football to legitimize his rule, using the sport for mass distraction and propaganda. Over time, the ruling elite captured football institutions, turning clubs into private assets and politicizing the national sport. Today, football remains a mechanism for maintaining regime control, masking corruption, and projecting a false image of national unity. This section explores how football became a pivotal instrument for dictatorship in Equatorial Guinea, highlighting its role in consolidating power and shaping public perception.

A Francoist Heritage in Equatorial Guinea

When Spain solidified its control over what is now Equatorial Guinea, it used sports to promote colonial institutions and exert control over the local population.

As in other African territories, colonial officials and missionaries sought to instill their ideals of discipline, self-control, and respect for rules through sports and physical education.⁵¹

Following the Spanish Civil War, General Franco consolidated control over sports in Spain through the National Sports Delegation.⁵² Football became a powerful instrument for foreign diplomacy and propaganda, as well as domestic nationalism and social control, a strategy that extended to Spain’s colonial territories. By 1945, Spanish Guinea’s colonial governor, Juan María Bonelli Rubio, formalized these efforts, establishing two sports delegations: one for the islands and another for the mainland. Three years later, the Football Federation of Spanish Guinea was founded.

According to Carles Viñas, Spanish historian and expert on football and extremism, the 1960s in Spanish Guinea were marked by intense rivalries between the provincial towns of Rebola and Baney for the colonial Governor’s Cup, similar to Spain’s Copa del Rey.⁵³ At the time, the colonial provinces had at least seven professional clubs.⁵⁴

Cruz Melchor Eya Nchama, an Equatoguinean author and international human rights advocate, recalls how, like many Equatoguineans, he followed the Spanish league with fervor and how some, even from across continents, won betting pools on Spanish teams — a testament to Spain’s immense influence in sports across the globe.

⁵¹ Susann Baller et al., The politics of football in Africa: Mobilizations and Trajectories, 2010/2 No. 118, Politique africaine, 5–21, CAIRN.INFO, <https://shs.cairn.info/meta-selection/article/39a4fc5d-e592-5d78-8017-a9ab390123fc?lang=fr>.
⁵² “A History of Sports & Dictators, Part 3: Post-WWII Soft Power,” Human Rights Foundation (Dec. 12, 2024), <https://hrf.org/latest/a-history-of-sports-dictators-part-3-post-wwii-soft-power/>.
⁵³ “Discriminación Étnica y Colonialismo. El Fútbol Ecuatoguineano Bajo el Franquismo (II),” Blog de Carles Viñas (April 24, 2012), <https://carlesvinyas.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/discriminacion-etnica-y-colonialismo-el-futbol-ecuatoguineano-bajo-el-franquismo-ii/>.
⁵⁴ “Equatorial Guinea – List of Champions,” RSSSF, <https://www.rsssf.org/tablese/eqguineachamp.html>.



Santa Isabel Stadium in Fernando Poo,
Spanish Guinea, 1950
Photo credit: El Museo Canario

Playing Defense: The Cost of Macías's Obsession with Control on Sports

Francisco Macías Nguema, a former colonial administration official turned fierce anti-colonialist and ultra-nationalist, became the first president of independent Equatorial Guinea. A swift consolidation of control marked his rise to power. Just four months after independence, Macías invoked a failed coup attempt to unleash a wave of terror and political purges across the country, characterized by torture, massacres, ethnic cleansing, and mass killings.⁵⁵ In 1973, Macías formalized a one-party system and declared himself president for life.⁵⁶ During his 11-year reign, Macías' regime is estimated to have killed 80,000 Equatorial Guineans and forced nearly a third of the population into exile.⁵⁷

Macías, an open admirer of Adolf Hitler and Spanish dictator Franco, exerted totalitarian control by banning anything associated with the West, including Christian names, churches,⁵⁸ western medicine, and cinemas.⁵⁹

Football was one of the very few forms of popular entertainment that Macías did not ban. At the same time, the dictator steered young people away from football and sports.

“Macías had such an obsession with security that he didn’t want the youth to have the independence to play or move freely,” according to Nchama, who was at the time a leader of the National Alliance for the Democratic Restoration of

Equatorial Guinea, the leading opposition group in the early 1970s.

Instead, the regime absorbed the youth into the paramilitary group *Juventudes en Marcha con Macías* (Youth on the March with Macías), which became an instrument for the regime’s terror and persecution.⁶⁰ His fear of internal threats was so all-consuming that it gave rise to the Ant-Youth, in which children were trained to spy on and report their own families.

⁵⁵ Simon Baynham, Equatorial Guinea: The Terror and the Coup, 36, No. 2, *The World Today*, 65–71, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40395170> (accessed 27 Jan. 2025).

⁵⁶ Constitución de 1973 (B.O.E. 1973) (Equatorial Guinea), Art. 50, § 5, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m6606laWM-g2Qh4k1V8LisbZ6Xg-6bXm/view?usp=drive_link.

⁵⁷ “Biografía de Francisco Macías Nguema,” cmeyanchama.com, http://www.cmeyanchama.com/Documents/Guinee/Francisco_Macias_Nguema.pdf

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Francisco Macías, El Hitler Africano,” *El Cuaderno* (Oct. 17, 2018), <https://elcuadernodigital.com/2018/10/15/francisco-macias-el-hitler-africano/>

⁶⁰ Ibid.



President Francisco Macías Nguema raises his fist while addressing a crowd inside Bata’s football stadium on March 11, 1969, less than a week after a failed coup attempt, transforming a football ground into a platform for political consolidation.

Photo credit: Smith Archive / Alamy

Equatorial Guinea's president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, meets Spanish prime minister Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo at the Palace of Moncloa, Spain in May 1982. Photo credit: Ministry of the Presidency, Government of Spain (Moncloa Pool) / Wikipedia Commons



The “Freedom Coup” and Spain’s Gift of a Coach

In August 1979, Macías’ nephew and head of the presidential guard, Lieutenant Colonel Teodoro Obiang, fearing his inclusion in an impending bloody purge, deposed his uncle Macías in a coup. Obiang called the takeover “Golpe de Libertad” (Freedom Coup). While his Supreme Military Council (CMS) junta claimed to have liberated the country from the terror of Macías’ rule, in reality it was just a palace coup. “It’s the same dog, just with a different collar,” wrote Nchama in a commentary in the Swiss newspaper *Journal de Genève*.⁶¹

However, Obiang, who previously served as the director of the infamous Black Beach prison under Macías, adopted a different approach to exercising power and football. A graduate of Spain’s Zaragoza Military Academy, run by the Franco regime, he reversed his uncle’s anti-Spain stance and appealed to Spain for assistance in rebuilding the country. In December 1979, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain accepted Obiang’s invitation for a state visit. The official visit, in which the king conferred legitimacy onto the new regime and expressed hope for “a future of respect for human rights,” consecrated a rewarming of relations between the two countries.⁶²

Spain, which had undergone a democratic transition from Franco’s dictatorship, responded to Obiang’s appeal to help the new regime rebuild the country, which had been left impoverished by the 11 years of Macías’ rule. Sports were featured among the public sectors — including education, health, the judicial system, the ministries, the police,

and others — that the new regime sought to restructure, and Obiang made a specific request to strengthen the national football team.⁶³ The Spanish government financed a Spanish First Division coach, former Real Madrid star Manuel Sanchís, to coach the Guinean national team.⁶⁴ Sanchís coached Equatorial Guinea for only two years, a period during which the new regime complained about being denied the agency to manage and spend the Spanish cooperation funds earmarked for football as they saw fit.⁶⁵

Further diplomatic friction over the new regime’s resistance to pressure from the Spanish government to open up the political space led to a distancing between Spain and Equatorial Guinea.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng, “Contrapunto a la barbaridad de Moratinos: Un guineano es alcalde de un cantón ginebrino...” (Nov. 2, 2006), <https://www.guinea-ecuatorial.net/inicio.asp?cd=ni4972>.
⁶² “Palabras de su majestad el Rey al Presidente de Guinea Ecuatorial Teodoro Obiang y al pueblo ecuatoguineano,” https://casareal.es/ES/Actividades/Paginas/actividades_discursos_detalle.aspx?data=4566.
⁶³ “La cooperación militar española con Guinea Ecuatorial,” Ministerio de Defensa Español (Oct. 2006), https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/1/a/la_cooperacion_militar_espa_ola_con_guinea_ecuatorial.pdf.
⁶⁴ Alfredo Relaño et al., “Sanchís, Seleccionador De Guinea Ecuatorial,” *El País* (Jan. 2, 1980), https://elpais.com/diario/1980/01/03/deportes/315702005_850215.html.
⁶⁵ “La cooperación militar española con Guinea Ecuatorial,” Ministerio de Defensa española (Oct. 2006), https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/1/a/la_cooperacion_militar_espa_ola_con_guinea_ecuatorial.pdf.
⁶⁶ “Teodoro Obiang Nguema,” CIDOB, <https://www.cidob.org/lider-politico/teodoro-obiang-nguema>.



Manuel Sanchís Martínez poses with Real Madrid at Heysel Stadium during the 1966 European Cup final against FK Partizan. Photo credit: Ron Kroon for Anefo (Nationaal Archief Fotocollectie Anefo) / Wikipedia Commons



Vice President Teodorín Nguema Obiang, son of dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, kicks a ball at Malabo Stadium before a football match between two local teams, as part of the celebrations for his 41st birthday.

Photo Credit: Jérôme Leroy /AFP

Distraction Through Entertainment Under Obiang

In the same year he seized power, Obiang revived domestic professional football, which had been abandoned under Macías’s rule, by formalizing independent Equatorial Guinea’s first national league.⁶⁷ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the regime promoted regional championships.⁶⁸ “There were teams of 1st, 2nd and 3rd division; we participated in Central African competitions; also football teams from Russia, China, and Korea came to play friendly matches against the national teams,” shared a member of the exiled opposition, who requested anonymity.

The regime strategically staged big matches on symbolic dates, such as independence celebrations or the anniversary of Obiang’s coup. Obiang used these events to grandstand his image. The father of human rights activist Tutu Alicante, founder of the NGO EG Justice, was then the president of the Duma Duma football team from the remote island of Annobón. Alicante told HRF that football was “a tool for Obiang to control people.”

Despite its resurgence, football was played by amateur players. “Because of the lack of resources that existed at

that time, I would be hard-pressed to put [Obiang’s football policies] against the football juggernaut that Franco created in Spain,” Alicante noted.

⁶⁷ “Discriminación Étnica y Colonialismo. El Fútbol Ecuatoguineano Bajo el Franquismo (II),” Blog de Carles Viñas (April 24, 2012), <https://carlesvinyas.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/discriminacion-etnica-y-colonialismo-el-futbol-ecuatoguineano-bajo-el-franquismo-ii/>.

⁶⁸ “Equatorial Guinea – List of Champions,” RSSSF, <https://www.rsssf.org/tablese/eqguin-eachamp.html>.

The Politicization of Football: From a Neighborhood Affair to Cronyism

Despite its lack of interest in developing professional sports, the Obiang regime turned football into a powerful tool of political control. For example, the regime occasionally staged a friendly football match between a military team and a team featuring senior regime officials. During such matches, it was common practice for military players to deliberately let government officials win, according to an opposition activist in exile who witnessed this and requested anonymity.

The ruling PDGE party tolerated no dissenters in the football arena. For example, in 1998, the regime arrested Ildefonso Montero, coach of Jau — a club linked to the Bubi ethnic minority — along with CPDS opposition party members in retaliation for alleged political activities.⁶⁹

In the late 1990s, the discovery of oil in Equatorial Guinea brought unprecedented wealth to the country,

transforming its economy. Obiang’s absolute grip on power produced a situation in which a significant portion of the state’s massive oil revenues was systematically diverted into the personal coffers of the ruling family and its cronies.⁷⁰ The wealthy ruling elite then took over neighborhood football clubs. For example, Melchior Esono Edjo, a cousin of the dictator, purchased Café Bansong FC. Clubs owned by members of the ruling elite, such as Real Humildad and Akonangui, enjoyed superior equipment and resources.⁷¹

Members of the ruling family also expanded their influence and corrupted the governance of national sports. For example, Ruslan Obiang Nsue, a son of Obiang, not only took control of top clubs such as The Panthers and Akonangui FC, but he also secured his father’s appointment as Secretary of State for Youth and Sports. Critics, including Pablo Owono Bindang of the independent civil society organization

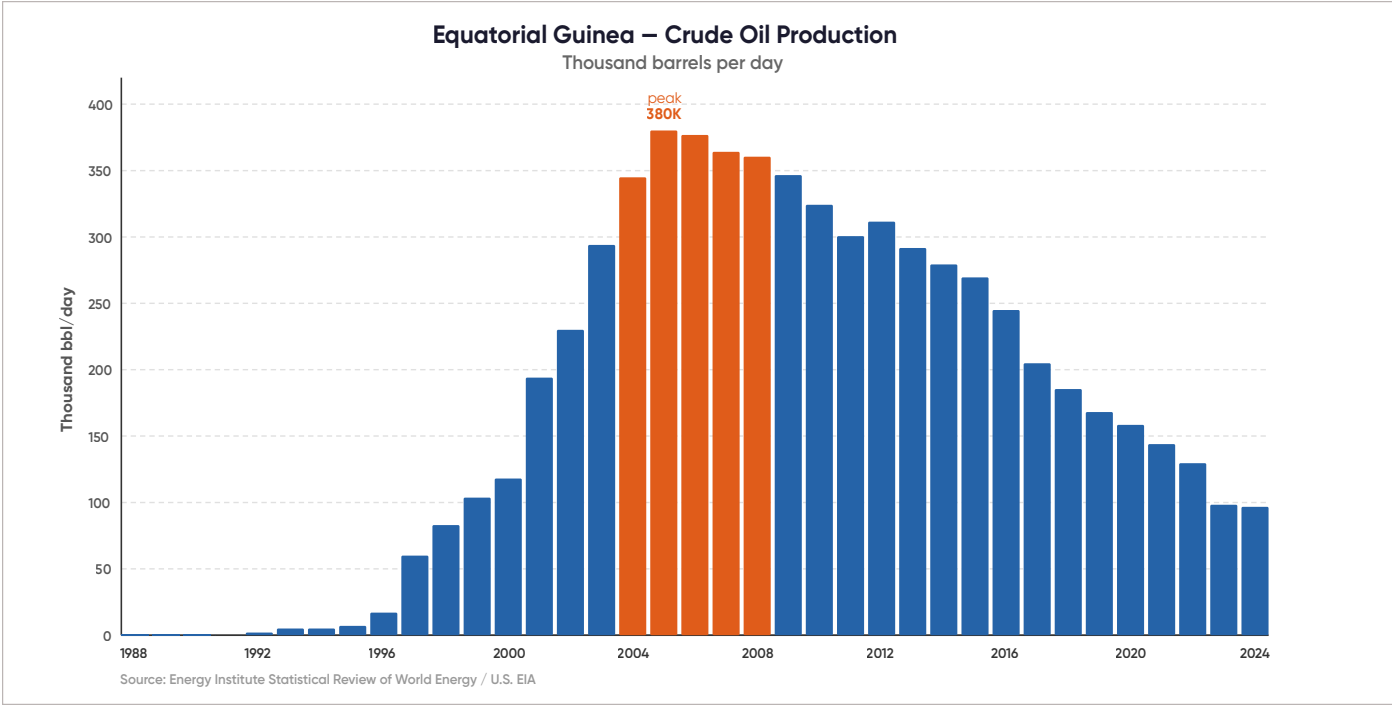
GE Nuestra,⁷² condemn a persistent culture of nepotism, cronyism, and corruption in the governance of sports. “Instead of appointing competent people, Obiang surrounded himself with his own, solely intent on stealing public funds,” Bindang told HRF.

⁶⁹ “Discriminación Étnica y Colonialismo. El Fútbol Ecuatoguineano Bajo el Franquismo (II),” Blog de Carles Viñas (April 24, 2012), <https://carlesvinyas.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/discriminacion-etnica-y-colonialismo-el-futbol-ecuatoguineano-bajo-el-franquismo-ii/>.

⁷⁰ “Equatorial Guinea: US Senate Probe Reveals Massive Theft of Oil Revenue,” Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (July 16, 2004), <https://www.business-humanrights.org/fr/derni%C3%A8re-actualit%C3%A9s/equatorial-guinea-us-senate-probe-reveals-massive-theft-of-oil-revenue/>.

⁷¹ “You had Real Humildad, a team of military folks, as well as Club Deportivo Mongomo and Akonangui. All these teams were connected to government figures, and you could tell who had power by the quality of their gear. The difference was clear in the shoes they wore and the equipment they used on the field,” Tutu Alicante told HRF.

⁷² Guinea Ecuatorial También Es Nuestra, <https://ge-nuestra.weebly.com/>.



Teodorín Nguema Obiang hands money to athletes in Malabo in 2013, during celebrations for his 41st birthday.

Photo Credit: Jerome Leroy / AFP



Oil Wealth and the Rise of Spectacle Politics

In the early 2000s, Equatorial Guinea was producing over 300,000 barrels of crude oil per day, a figure that has since plummeted to around 80,000 barrels.⁷³ The oil boom of that era marked a turning point for the regime, as it increasingly spent top dollar on world-class entertainment to make a splash in global pop culture.

Teodorín Obiang, the dictator’s son and the country’s vice president, epitomized this extravagance, as evidenced by his acquisition of the world’s largest collection of Michael Jackson memorabilia.⁷⁴ Teodorín’s flamboyant excesses drew multiple international corruption investigations into his assets in the United States, Spain, and France.

In this context, the regime launched a quest to polish its global image, distract from accusations of human rights abuses and corruption, and project a façade of a modern, emerging nation. The strategy included luring internationally acclaimed celebrities to perform in the country. For example, the regime succeeded in luring American rapper Fat Joe, Nigerian-American singer Davido, and global music icon and former footballer Julio Iglesias to Malabo for performances.⁷⁵

At the same time, the regime began investing in hosting prestigious international football matches and events.⁷⁶ “Obiang thinks that by distracting the people, he can last much longer in power and guarantee continuity,” Alicante told HRF.

⁷³ David Lewis, Filipp Lebedev and Giulia Paravicini, “Russian power creeps across West Africa with Equatorial Guinea mission,” Reuters (Nov. 12, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-power-creeps-across-west-africa-with-equatorial-guinea-mission-2024-11-12/>.

⁷⁴ Casey Michel, “Michael Jackson Memorabilia Bought With Dirty Money of Dictator’s Son,” Rolling Stone (Oct. 8, 2021), <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/teodoro-obiang-michael-jackson-memorabilia-collection-1237437/>.

⁷⁵ “Gran éxito de Julio Iglesias en Malabo,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Oct. 10, 2012), <https://www.guinea-ecuatorialpress.com/noticias/gran-exito-de-julio-iglesias-en-malabo>.

⁷⁶ Before the oil boom, the state’s investment in sports infrastructure was negligible. As Alicante recalls, “Estadio La Paz used to be laughable.” Today, the country boasts state-of-the-art stadiums in Malabo, Bata, and Mongomo, symbols of a transformation driven more by optics than genuine development.

Translated tweet: “The results of the Nzalang Nacional have us all euphoric, but I want to focus on our young goalkeeper, Jesús Owono. If E.G. wins [AFCON], I’ll give him one of Michael Jackson’s gloves for his impressive work during the competition.”

Sourced from X, @teonguema, Jan. 2, 2022



Part 3

Nzalang: The Crumbling Façade



Emilio Nsue during a 2015 AFCON match at Bata Stadium.

Photo credit: Khaled Desouki / AFP

Since discovering oil in the 1990s, Equatorial Guinea's regime has used part of its newfound wealth to recruit foreign coaches and naturalized or diaspora recruits into the national football team. It also spent lavishly to host international football tournaments to make a splash on the international stage. This controversial strategy, designed to uphold the crumbling façade of a football nation, has robbed the country of local football talent development, diverted public resources from improving the lives of ordinary citizens, and maintained an exploitative and coercive football ecosystem. This section examines how the regime's pursuit of football glory serves as a smokescreen for deeper systemic failures.

AFCON 2012: Reaching for the Glow of International Football

In 2012, Equatorial Guinea and its neighboring country, Gabon, became the smallest nations to secure co-hosting rights for AFCON, the continent's biggest sporting event.⁷⁷ While such an honor was typically reserved for Africa's great footballing nations, Equatorial Guinea's participation was not merely about football. It was a calculated move by its ruler, Teodoro Obiang, to grandstand on the international stage and polish his regime's tarnished reputation. At the time, Obiang's regime was mired in an explosive international scandal over ill-gotten wealth in France and the United States. In 2011, US authorities filed complaints against the Minister of Forests and Agriculture, then Obiang's son Teodorín, for laundering \$70.8 million in assets,⁷⁸ including a Malibu mansion and a collection of Michael Jackson memorabilia, acquired through misappropriation of public funds, embezzlement of natural resources, corruption, extortion, bribes, and kickbacks.⁷⁹ In France, he faced separate charges of embezzling and laundering \$174 million of public money into luxury goods, sports cars, and a Paris mansion.⁸⁰ Against this backdrop, hosting AFCON provided an opportunity to divert attention and reframe his nation's image.

The president of the organizing committee of AFCON 2012 at the time was Ruslan Obiang Nsue, one of the dictator's sons. To host AFCON, Ruslan had a budget of 50 billion CFA francs (approximately \$80 million)

for constructing stadiums in Bata and Malabo.⁸¹ This extravagant spending stood in stark contrast to the reality of a country where 75% of the population lived in poverty.⁸² In fact, many stadiums would be nearly empty of local spectators during the tournament, as the cheapest tickets cost the equivalent of a week's income for most Equatoguineans.⁸³

The opaque procurement process, controlled by the ruling family, fed an already endemic corruption.⁸⁴ The Spanish newspaper El País reported that a foreign businessman was forced to pay 200,000 euros for a meeting with Ruslan to secure a contract for building AFCON 2012 stadiums.⁸⁵ When the businessman refused to continue paying bribes, his contract was canceled, and his investments — amounting to half a million euros — were withheld.⁸⁶

Prioritizing the construction of an international façade over local welfare was not new. In 2011, ahead of the 17th African Union Summit, residents were displaced from the capital, and officials detained large numbers of young people and foreigners in a bid to sanitize the city's image for visiting dignitaries.⁸⁷ However, four years later, in 2015, this pattern reached its zenith.⁸⁸

⁷⁷ Chris Murphy, "African ambition: Tiny nations host football feast," CNN Sports (Jan. 20, 2012), <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/20/sport/football/football-africa-cup-nations/index.html>.

⁷⁸ "Department of Justice Seeks to Recover More Than \$70.8 Million in Proceeds of Corruption from Government Minister of Equatorial Guinea," Office of Public Affairs (Oct. 25, 2011), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/departement-justice-seeks-recover-more-708-million-proceeds-corruption-government-minister>.

⁷⁹ "Second Vice President of Equatorial Guinea Agrees to Relinquish More Than \$30 Million of Assets Purchased with Corruption Proceeds," Office of Public Affairs (Oct. 10, 2014), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/second-vice-president-equatorial-guinea-agrees-relinquish-more-30-million-assets-purchased>.

⁸⁰ "Obiang Verdicts: Transparency International Welcomes the Corruption Conviction and Seizure of Assets, Transparency International (Oct. 27, 2017), <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/obiang-verdict-transparency-international-welcomes-the-corruption-convictio>.

⁸¹ Mays Mouissi, "Afrique : Comparaison des coûts de construction des stades," mays-mouissi (April 27, 2016), <https://www.mays-mouissi.com/2016/04/27/afrique-comparaison-couts-de-construction-stades/>.

⁸² Equatorial Guinea, AFDBB (2012), <https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Equatorial%20Guinea%20Full%20PDF%20Country%20Note.pdf>.

⁸³ Reuters, "Fans go it Alone at Africa Cup of Nations," Al Jazeera (Feb. 6, 2012), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/2/6/fans-go-it-alone-at-africa-cup-of-nations>.

⁸⁴ José María Irujo, "The High Price of Doing Business in Equatorial Guinea," El País (April 3, 2013), https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2013/04/03/inenglish/1365000844_044894.html.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ "Equatorial Guinea: Surge in arbitrary arrests ahead of AU summit," Amnesty International (June 20, 2011), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2011/06/equatorial-guinea-surge-arbitrary-arrests-ahead-au-summit/>.

⁸⁸ Anthony Hernandez, "Football : La CAN, Une arme diplomatique pour la Guinée-équatoriale," Le Monde (Nov. 14, 2014), https://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2012/01/25/football-la-can-une-arme-diplomatique-pour-la-guinee-equatoriale_1633664_3242.html.

Fireworks are seen during the opening ceremony of the 2012 AFCON at the stadium in Bata, Equatorial Guinea.

Photo credit: Abdelhak Senna / AFP



A police helicopter hovers above the stadium during a match interruption in the 2015 AFCON semifinal between Ghana and Equatorial Guinea at Malabo Stadium.

Photo credit: Mohamed Hossam and Anadolu Agency /AFP



AFCON 2015: From “The Nation that Saved AFCON from Ebola” to a “War Zone”

In 2015, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa triggered widespread fear across the continent, leading the original host of that year’s AFCON, Morocco, to withdraw and propose a postponement, citing public health concerns. The crisis threatened the tournament, as no other nation seemed willing to step in. In response, Obiang seized this moment, offering Equatorial Guinea as a last-minute replacement and proclaiming his decision as one made “for African youth.”⁸⁹ While Obiang’s move succeeded in positioning Equatorial Guinea as what a Saudi newspaper article dubbed “The nation that saved the AFCON,”⁹⁰ it imposed on a population already challenged with inadequate access to essential services such as running water, and a crumbling healthcare system,⁹¹ health risks that other nations had deemed unacceptable. When dissenting voices raised concerns, the regime silenced them. Security forces arrested members of the opposition party Popular Union (UP) for distributing flyers that called for a peaceful boycott of the tournament.⁹²

To avoid the embarrassing optics of empty stadiums, the regime reduced ticket prices to as low as \$1 and allowed civil servants to end their workday by 2 PM on match days so they could help fill stadiums.⁹³ To top it all off, the dictator made a sensational announcement on national television. “We have to buy tickets to fill stadiums,” he said, adding, “Let those who have the means help the poor! Myself, I bought 40,000 tickets.”⁹⁴

However, the most revealing scandal of the tournament came during the Feb. 5, 2015 semifinal match between Ghana and Equatorial Guinea. Late in the game, angry outbursts from Equatoguinean fans over their team losing 0-3 to Ghana descended into violence, targeting the Ghanaian fans inside the New Malabo Stadium. Security forces in the stadium responded to the chaotic situation with reckless brutality. “In a disturbing and downright dangerous manoeuvre, a police helicopter swooped within 30 feet of the crowd in the west stand,” *The Guardian* reported, adding that the aircraft circled three times over the stands, lowering its rotors to scatter the chaotic melée of fans. In addition, riot police fired tear gas in the stands and other parts of the stadium.⁹⁵ The incident, which left 36 people injured⁹⁶ and caused the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to fine Equatorial Guinea \$100,000,⁹⁷ exposed a deeper issue: a security failure due to the fact that the police in the stadium were special forces flown in from Angola.⁹⁸ The Ghana Football Association compared the chaos to “a war zone,”⁹⁹ and images of the scenes made worldwide headlines.¹⁰⁰ The headlines drew the ire of world football governing body FIFA’s president at the time, Sepp Blatter.

⁸⁹ “Guinée Équatoriale : Le pays qui sauva la CAN...,” *Franceinfo* (Feb. 3, 2015), https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/guinee-equatoriale/guinee-equatoriale-le-pays-qui-sauva-la-can_3066161.html.

⁹⁰ “How Equatorial Guinea stepped up and saved African Cup of Nations,” *Alarabiya news* (Jan. 27, 2015), <https://english.alarabiya.net/sports/2015/01/28/How-Equatorial-Guinea-stepped-up-and-saved-African-Cup-of-Nations>.

⁹¹ Zoe Spriet-Mezoued, “Equatorial Guinea and EITI Candidacy, Slow but Steady Progress?,” *Publish What You Pay* (Oct. 19, 2023), <https://pwwp.org/equatorial-guinea-and-eiti-candidacy-slow-but-steady-progress/>.

⁹² Jonathan Wilson, “Letter From Equatorial Guinea: Forget Human Rights – Here Comes the Football,” *New Statesman* (Feb. 12, 2015), <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/sport/2015/02/letter-equatorial-guinea-forget-human-rights-here-comes-football>.

⁹³ Mark Gleeson, “African Nations Cup bids to entice fans with tickets under \$1,” *Alarabiya news* (Jan. 16, 2015), <https://english.alarabiya.net/sports/2015/01/16/African-Nations-Cup-bids-to-entice-fans-with-tickets-under-1>.

⁹⁴ “2015 Nations Cup: Eq Guinea President Buys Tickets for Fans,” *BBC Sport* (Jan. 14, 2015), <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30786453>.

⁹⁵ Nick Ames, “Ghana Players, Fans Pelted With Missiles in Win Over Equatorial Guinea,” *The Guardian* (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/feb/05/africa-cup-nations-ghana-equatorial-guinea-violence>.

⁹⁶ “African Nations Cup semifinal erupts in violence like a war zone,” *Ghana soccer officials say*, *The Washington Post* (Feb. 6, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/02/06/african-nations-cup-semifinal-erupts-in-violence-like-a-war-zone-ghana-soccer-officials-say/>.

⁹⁷ “Equatorial Guinea Fined for Fan Turmoil in African Nations Cup Semi,” *ESPN* (Feb. 6, 2015), https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37401569/equatorial-guinea-fined-fan-turmoil-african-nations-cup-semi.

⁹⁸ “Equatorial Guinea Fans’ Violence: ‘I Was Choking, My Eyes Burning,’” *The Guardian* (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/feb/06/equatorial-guinea-fans-violence-ghana-africa-cup-nations>.

⁹⁹ @ghanafaofficial, “Police helicopter hovers above the pitch with the #Ghana fans in real danger,” *X* (Feb. 5, 2015), <https://x.com/ghanafaofficial/status/563441543055294464>.

¹⁰⁰ Tom Bryant, “Equatorial Guinea V Ghana Semi-final Marred by Violence – in Pictures,” *The Guardian* (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/gallery/2015/feb/05/equatorial-guinea-v-ghana-semi-final-marred-by-violence-in-pictures>.

FIFA fined the Equatorial Guinean Football Federation €151,000 for fielding an ineligible player and banned Emilio Nsue for six months

Sourced from Inside.fifa.com, May 24, 2024

A National Team With Naturalized or Foreign-Born Recruits

With its oil wealth, Equatorial Guinea’s regime pursued an ambitious strategy to strengthen its national football team, not by developing local talent but by recruiting foreign-born talent worldwide.

Starting in late 2005, Ruslan Obiang assigned Brazilian coach Antonio Dumas the mission to recruit players from his homeland into the Nzalang team. The regime put a large budget at Dumas’s disposal to offer financial incentives to Brazilian players. For example, Brazilian striker André Neles was offered \$200,000 to naturalize, plus \$10,000 for each match played, according to the Citizen Rights in Africa Initiative.¹⁰¹ By the 2012 AFCON, Nzalang had over ten foreign-born players.¹⁰² By 2013, 21 Brazilians, 14 Cameroonians, 4 Senegalese, 3 Colombians, 2 Ghanaians, 2 Ivorians, 2 Nigerians, 1 Liberian, and 2 Spaniards were reportedly naturalized to play for the team.¹⁰³ The excessive naturalization of players led French coach Claude Le Roy to mockingly dub Nzalang the

“United Nations of Football,” but resistance to the procedure also came from within Equatorial Guinea. Nzalang coach Henri Michel voiced opposition to the practice and eventually resigned after complaining of constant interference by officials.¹⁰⁴

However, the regime’s ambition of building a team with naturalized foreign talent became unsustainable as FIFA repeatedly ruled players ineligible, forcing the national team to forfeit critical matches. This pushed Equatorial Guinea to target diaspora players with ancestral ties to the country for recruitment.¹⁰⁵ “Since the beginning of the 2000s, European players born to at least one African parent have been able to apply to play for the national team of their African parent, thanks to a FIFA regulation that authorizes players to play for their country ‘of origin,’” explains Franco-Cameroonian sociopolitical analyst Fred Eboko.¹⁰⁶

The new strategy appears to have partially succeeded. Over the last decade, Nzalang Nacional surged in FIFA’s Africa rankings from 41st in 2012 to a remarkable 16th in 2024.¹⁰⁷ However, a controversy exposed the pitfalls of this recruitment strategy. In May 2024, FIFA’s Disciplinary Committee declared Emilio Nsue, the top scorer of AFCON 2023, ineligible to play shortly after he reversed his decision to leave the national team.¹⁰⁸ Investigative journalist Mocache Massoko revealed that Nsue’s Equatoguinean passport was fraudulent, falsely listing his birthplace as Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, instead of Palma de Mallorca, Spain.¹⁰⁹ According to FIFA’s Disciplinary Committee, Nsue, who had already played for Spain’s youth teams before obtaining his Equatoguinean nationality through naturalization in 2013, had broken the rules to become eligible to represent Equatorial Guinea for 11 years.¹¹⁰ The ruling suspended Nsue for six months, fined FEGUIFUT, and stripped the

Friday 24 May 2024, 08:30

Legal

FIFA Disciplinary Committee sanctions the Equatorial Guinean Football Association and the player Emilio Nsue López on grounds of ineligibility



team of two crucial victories in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers.¹¹¹ Nsue had previously been disqualified in 2013, forcing Equatorial Guinea to forfeit two matches in the 2014 World Cup qualifiers, as FIFA rejected his change of association.¹¹² Even if Nsue has since been cleared by FIFA to play for Equatorial Guinea — despite FEGUIFUT’s failure to properly follow procedure in 2013 — these repeated sanctions deepen doubts about the legality of past diaspora and naturalized players fielded by the team, raising questions over whether they were ever legitimately eligible to represent the country.¹¹³

Exiled Equatoguinean writer and poet Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, who spoke to HRF, highlights the regime’s hypocrisy, pointing to its selective application of dual nationality laws:

“In Guinea, they claim not to accept dual nationality but turn a blind eye when it comes to football players.”

Ávila Laurel adds, “During COVID, a plane repatriated Spaniards, including those with dual nationality. Those who boarded were threatened with losing their Guinean passports.” Meanwhile, “Those in power, like Teodorín, have double or triple nationality.”

¹⁰¹ “Equatorial Guinea: Naturalisation at a New Level,” Citizen Rights in Africa Initiative (March 8, 2013), <https://citizenshiprightsfrance.org/equatorial-guinea-naturalisation-at-a-new-level/>
¹⁰² “La Guinée équatoriale et sa légion étrangère,” BBC News Afrique (Feb. 2, 2012), https://www.bbc.com/afrique/institutionnelles/2012/02/120202_cguinee.

¹⁰³ Citizen Rights in Africa Initiative, supra note 101.

¹⁰⁴ Jon Fadugba, “Equatorial Guinea: How Africa’s 41st Best Footballing Nation Came to Host the AFCON,” Fourfourtwo (Jan. 20, 2012), <https://www.fourfourtwo.com/features/equatorial-guinea-how-africas-41st-best-footballing-nation-came-to-host-afcon>.

¹⁰⁵ Olisa Agbakoba Legal, “FIFA’s Change of National Team Allegiance Regulations: Case Study on Nsue Emilio — Lessons For Football Players, Stakeholders, Member Associations and FIFA,” Medium (Nov. 21, 2024), <https://oal-law.medium.com/fifas-change-of-national-team-allegiance-regulations-case-study-on-nsue-emilio-lessons-for-a11a134ced3b>.

¹⁰⁶ Fred Eboko, Des enfants de la balle aux stars du mondial sud-africain : Une inversion africaine des paradigmes de la mondialisation, IRD-INSERM,

Aix-Marseille Université, 1–128, https://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers19-01/010064492.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ “FIFA Rankings: Nigeria Break Into Third Position in Africa,” CAFonline (April 4, 2024), <https://www.cafonline.com/news/fifa-rankings-nigeria-break-into-third-position-in-africa/>.

¹⁰⁸ “FIFA Disciplinary Committee Sanctions the Equatorial Guinean Football Association and the Player Emilio Nsue López on Grounds of Ineligibility,” Inside FIFA (May 24, 2024), <https://inside.fifa.com/legal/media-releases/fifa-disciplinary-committee-sanctions-the-equatorial-guinean-football-association>.

¹⁰⁹ “CNEDOGÉ emitió un pasaporte en fraude de ley, según el xcal, Emilio Nsue López nació en Malabo y no en Palma De Mallorca,” Diario Rombe (May 27, 2024), <https://diariorombe.es/deportes/cnedoge-emitio-un-pasaporte-en-fraude-de-ley-segun-el-cual-emilio-nsue-lopez-nacio-en-malabo-y-no-en-palma-de-mallorca/>.

¹¹⁰ Colin Millar, “AFCON top scorer Emilio Nsue should never have played for Equatorial Guinea, says FIFA,” The Athletic (June 3, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5536889/2024/06/03/emilio-nsue-equatorial-guinea-fifa-afcon/>.

¹¹¹ Anin Yeboah, Mark Anthony Wade and Paola López Barraza, FIFA Disciplinary Committee Decision FDD-17441 (FIFA, 2024), https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/451be0f530729bab/original/Mr-Emilio-Nsue-Lopez_10052024.pdf.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Piers Edwards, “Ineligible’ Equatorial Guinea skipper cleared to play by Fifa,” BBC Sport (March 7, 2025) <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cy5n012wz7ro>.

Left winger Rubén Belima, of Equatoguinean and Spanish descent, celebrates Nzalang’s victory over Sierra Leone at the 2021 AFCON in Cameroon, surrounded by teammates.

Photo credit: Issouf Sanogo / AFP



The Exploitation of Diaspora Recruits’ Emotional Ties

For players of Equatoguinean origin hailing from the country’s diaspora, the emotional pull to the nation masks the harsh realities of playing in an exploitative football ecosystem. This was the experience of now-retired players Jacinto Elá and Alberto Edjogo-Owono, who each have ties to both Spain and Equatorial Guinea.

Jacinto Elá, a former winger who excelled in Spain’s youth ranks, was crowned Best Young Player in the

World at the Nike Premier Cup in 1996. Born in Equatorial Guinea but raised in Spain, Elá became the first Spanish player under 22 to debut in the English Premier League. Elá’s initial motivation to join the Nzalang Nacional was deeply personal. “When the opportunity [to join the Equatoguinean national team] arose, I saw it as an enormous chance to contribute to Guinea. It wasn’t about personal ambition anymore but about giving back to my homeland,” he told HRF.

Born in Barcelona to an Equatoguinean father and Spanish mother, Alberto Edjogo-Owono had a promising start in Spain’s Division of Honor, the highest level of youth football in Spain, before joining the Nzalang Nacional in 2003. Now a prominent match commentator in Spain and the author of “Indomitable: African Football Notebooks,” he recounts being recruited after standout performances in Spain’s youth leagues.¹¹⁴ Like Elá, he was drawn by

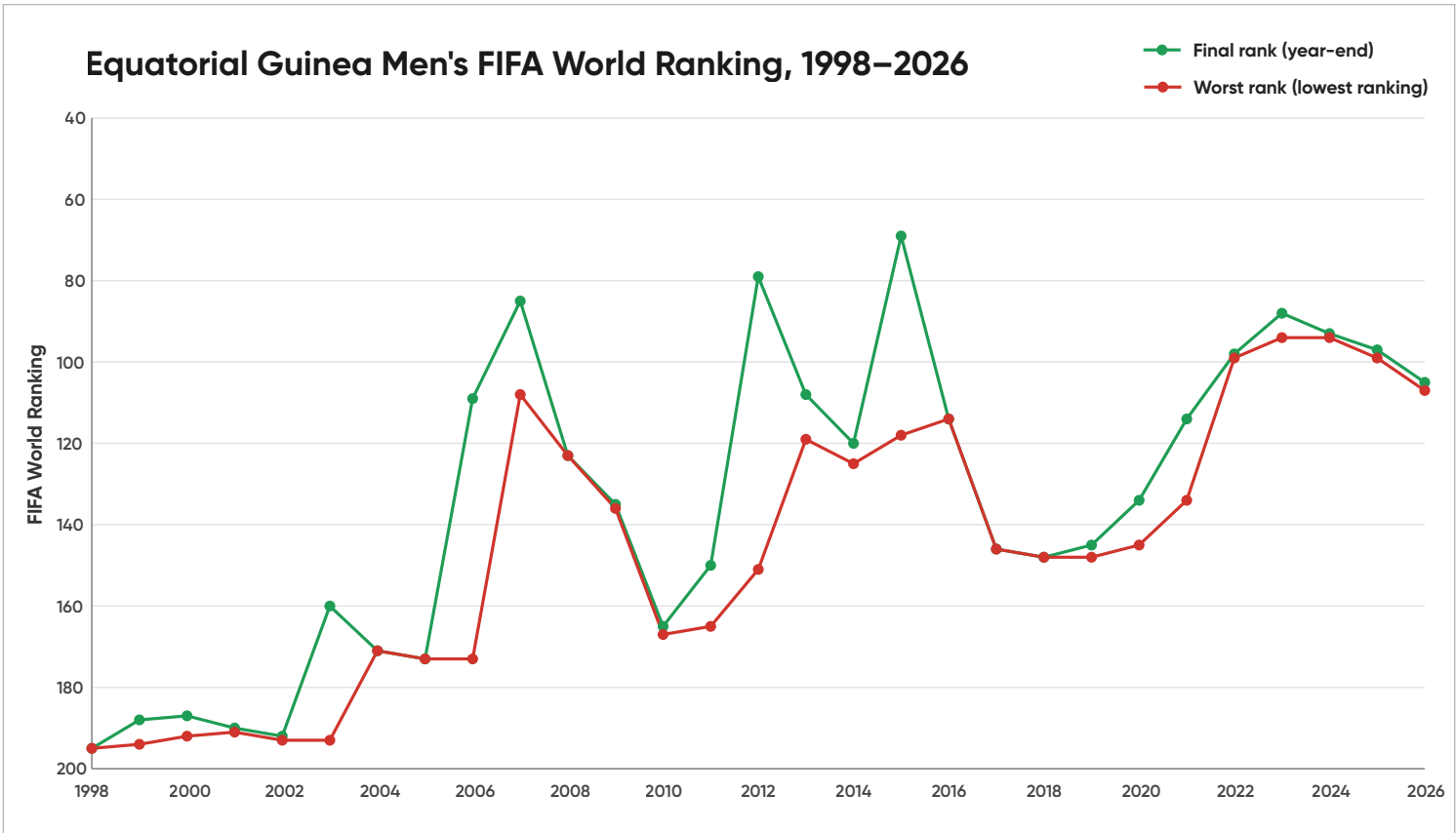
the emotional pull of reconnecting with his roots. Scouted at 17 years old by Elá’s younger brother, who was collaborating with FEGUIFUT as a player, Edjogo-Owono joined a cohort of players of Equatoguinean descent during a time when Nzalang Nacional was desperate to shed its reputation as the continent’s underdog. “The team lost every match and was the laughingstock of Africa. [...] Someone decided to recruit the children of Equatoguinean exiles to boost performance,” he told HRF. That’s how players like Ruslan Elá, Sergio Barila, Kike Senobua, and himself were brought in, he explained. However, his initial enthusiasm gave way to disillusionment.

While the emotional connection was, in his words, “deeply spectacular,” the harsh realities on the ground could not be ignored. Upon returning to Equatorial Guinea in 2004, Elá experienced what he described as

a “capsule of about 3, 4 years” of culture shock. Disparities in pay, poor infrastructure, and a sense of powerlessness shattered his initial optimism. “I thought that through football I could [contribute], but when I got there, I saw that there was little I could do as an individual because there was a system that you could not control, much less as a player,” he told HRF. Edjogo-Owono echoed Elá’s frustration.

“The experience was really bad because the hotel was a disaster, the Federation didn’t pay us, and sometimes we went without food. Our families brought pineapples, yuca [casava], and mangoes just so we could eat,” he disclosed.

¹¹⁴ “Alberto Edjogo: ‘El fútbol une a gente muy diversa. Es la única institución africana que lo hace,’” El Nacional (Nov. 9, 2019), https://www.elnacional.cat/es/cultura/alberto-edjogo-owo-no-indomable-futbol-africa_439182_102.html.



Using Passports To Trap and Control Foreign-Born Recruits



The gilded cage, reserved for those supposed to be the nation’s pride, kept the foreign players bound, even as they witnessed the crumbling façade of the structure they had hoped to strengthen. The dysfunction ran deeper than mere mismanagement: the regime weaponized passports as instruments of control. Like many

foreign-based players, Elá never formally applied for an Equatoguinean passport. Instead, the Federation issued him one on the spot, a practice common at the time. Yet the passport was not truly his. It remained in the officials’ hands, stripping him of autonomy. Though it was presented at every game, Elá himself never once

saw or held it. At just 22 years old, Elá felt utterly powerless.

“You weren’t free to speak out because they had your passport. It was such a strange situation,” he recalls.

After matches, players were left to fend for themselves, unable to return

home without the Federation’s consent. “Once you played, you didn’t matter much. [...] You had to keep calling to get [plane] tickets,” Jacinto Elá explains. He described his teammates, some naturalized Brazilians, as trapped in an almost hostage-like existence, entirely dependent on the regime for

fundamental freedoms like entering or leaving the country. When asked if he ever obtained the passport post-retirement, Elá responded with a wry smile: “No, no, no, I never got the passport.”

Reflecting on the state of football in Equatorial Guinea, former Nzalang

player Jacinto Elá shared with HRF: “It’s a system so rotten that even when you come in with good intentions, you take two steps forward but could have taken six. People burn out, and the ones who try to make a difference leave, defeated.”

Part 4

State of Play of Domestic Football in Equatorial Guinea



Equatorial Guinea's Bata Stadium in November 2016.

Photo credit: Uwe Michael Neumann / Shutterstock

Domestic football in Equatorial Guinea suffers from the regime's lack of interest in investing in local talent and reflects broader governance failures, including centralized control, chronic mismanagement, and entrenched corruption. While funding is directed toward international tournaments and high-visibility infrastructure, grassroots development remains chronically deprioritized. In the absence of a coherent national strategy, local talent development is left to fragmented and under-resourced initiatives, constrained by political priorities and a lack of institutional autonomy. This section shows how the regime undermines accountability, continuity, and sustainable development at every level of the game, leading to the stagnation of domestic football.

Children sit outside near the illuminated Bata Stadium during the 2015 AFCON.

Photo credit: Carl de Souza / AFP

Behind the Crumbling Façade: The Reality of Domestic Football

The contrast between the image presented during international sporting competitions and the reality of local professional football in the country is stark and troubling, and it is felt even within the national team itself. Former Nzalang players Elá and Edjogo-Owono explain that this gap manifests in the unequal treatment of locally born and based players compared to foreign-based ones. Elá revealed that during his time with the team, Spanish-based

players earned twice as much in a week as local players struggled to earn in a month. This divide also translates to this day in players’ differing ability to speak out: foreign-based players face fewer risks of reprisals, often acting as a buffer and public voice for the team’s demands and denunciations of abuse. “What hurt me the most was knowing that when we left, their conditions would drop drastically,” Elá said.

With Nzalang’s ascension and the highly publicized displays of generosity by Equatorial Guinea’s rulers, one might view this as evidence of the nation’s continued investment in football. In reality, however, the national team obscures the poor development of domestic football. According to Eyoma, an exiled opposition activist, the country’s rulers excelled at sensation with promises of offering bonuses for the national team rather than

investing in real sports development: “Giving away that money reflects a lack of vision, a lack of a plan, and a clear disinterest in promoting local football or providing opportunities for young people.”

Journalist Miguel Eyengue Nzamio Nsa, who covers Equatorial Guinean sports for the online news platform Actualidad Guinea Mundo, told HRF, “Personally, I don’t think the national team’s successes are successes for

football in Equatorial Guinea.” He noted that Nzalang is talked about more than any domestic league team, but attributed the performance of these high-level sportsmen largely to the foreign countries where their talent is grown. Nzamio Nsa added,

“Football in Equatorial Guinea is still amateur, a neighborhood sport; it’s not yet a professional sector.”

He explains that player base development is very limited and that most teams in the country lack lower categories. Eyoma accuses the Federation of lacking interest in developing homegrown talent. Like many avid football fans, he does not resent the “Nzalang boys,” as they are sometimes called, but rather the system that favors Equatoguineans raised in exile while neglecting investment in local clubs, talent, and adequate sports infrastructure.





A youth plays football in a suburb of Malabo, hours before the opening match of AFCON 2012 in Bata.

Photo credit: Alexander Joe / AFP

The Regime’s Neglect of Local Talent

The regime allocates resources to the School Football Federation (FEGUIDE), and the League, while additional funding comes from CAF and FIFA. Yet these financial inflows have not translated into sustainable professionalization or meaningful investment in domestic talent. In 2010, under pressure from FIFA and CAF ahead of the country’s hosting of AFCON 2012, the regime pledged 124 million CFA francs (approximately \$214,500) to professionalize clubs and the league.¹¹⁵ After AFCON 2012, Obiang pledged a further \$1.56 million to revive local leagues, but the promise went unfulfilled.¹¹⁶ This pattern reflects a broader lack of political will to develop homegrown players beyond moments of international scrutiny.

Obiang’s interest in football appears to dissipate once international visibility fades. Players have repeatedly called in vain on the regime to reinvest the funds generated from past AFCON tournaments into the development of the sport at home. Where does the money go? Tutu Alicante offers a blunt answer:

“The government is inherently kleptocratic. In political systems structured around the extraction and concentration of wealth by a small ruling elite, sustainable development and broad-based public welfare rarely emerge as genuine policy priorities.”

As a result, football development remains largely event-driven rather than systematic. FEGUIDE, for instance, organizes activities around politically symbolic dates, such as the ruler’s birthday.¹¹⁷ As sports journalist

Nzamio Nsa explains, “That’s when everyone suddenly organizes something, just for show, to make it look like they’ve done something. But throughout the rest of the year, there are no competitions, no tournaments, nothing.” The absence of regular competitions undermines players’ development, scouting, and the potential emergence of a sustainable domestic football pipeline.

¹¹⁵ “Guinea Ecuatorial dispondrá de una Liga de Fútbol Profesional,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Oct. 29, 2010), https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/guinea_ecuatorial_dispondra_de_una_liga_de_futbol_profesional.

¹¹⁶ Citizen Rights in Africa Initiative, supra note 101.

¹¹⁷ “FEGUIDE organiza actividades deportivas con ocasión del aniversario del Vicepresidente,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (June 24, 2022), https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/index.php/noticias/feguide_organiza_actividades_deportivas_con_ocasion_del_aniversario_del_vicepresidente.

Regime Control Stifles Football Development

Football development in Equatorial Guinea is reduced to fragmented, under-resourced initiatives trapped in a highly centralized system lacking strategy, clear goals, and institutional capacity. Regime control and weak organization leave clubs and academies without the autonomy or support required to develop local talent.

State investment has prioritized visibility over sustainability. The regime owns and manages four FIFA-approved stadiums in Bata, Malabo, Mongomo — the hometown of the ruling clan — and Ebebiyin, maintaining them for international tournaments while neglecting everyday use. Clubs and academies, most of which lack private training grounds, depend on these facilities and report poor conditions once major events end. The E16 Academy, a free initiative founded by former Nزالang players, struggled to get permission for training space; when access was granted, fields were severely degraded.

“The Malabo Stadium Annex field [sometimes given for training] has not had its grass replaced in over 20 years,” Nzamio Nsa noted.

Social sporting programs, such as summer camps, promote participation in the sport, but rarely offer professional pathways or sustained talent development. Only a handful of clubs and academies attempt to fill the gap left by the state, including Cano Sport, the 2025 national league champions Fundación Bata, and the “Chiki Mayele” academy in Ebebiyin.

However, clubs and academies lack financial autonomy. As Nzamio Nsa reports, “No club can finance itself. They all live off funds sent by FIFA.” Sponsorships, marketing, and merchandising are largely absent. Nzamio Nsa notes that the football federation has not developed a sponsorship strategy, and that clubs do not operate as businesses and usually fail to pay players or referees. Their limited financial autonomy severely hinders sustainable investment in grassroots football and the broader professionalization of the sport in the country.

Some private initiatives tied to regime insiders benefit from sponsorship and visibility. A case in point is the Real Madrid Foundation Clinic at Sport Club de Malabo, sponsored by state-owned companies,¹¹⁸ and launched in the summer of 2024, shortly after the club’s CEO, Manuel Osa Nsue Nsua, was appointed prime minister.¹¹⁹ Marketed as a grassroots development program that brings in a coach from Spain to work with children,¹²⁰ the clinic offers little more than a short “football experience” lasting a few days and is disconnected from any sustained development pathway.¹²¹ In addition, high participation fees (\$223 for club members and \$268 for non-members) restrict access to children from privileged backgrounds.¹²² As Nzamio Nsa observes, “It is an intermittent project that does not accompany young people in a continuous way,” adding that “for what it was meant to be, it has not delivered the expected impact.”

More credible progress has come from initiatives led by former international players, such as the Benjamín Zarandona Foundation which provides continuous support to a small group of children over several years. Yet even these efforts must operate within strict political boundaries: long-term viability depends on avoiding criticism of the regime, “staying out of politics,”¹²³ and promoting the country in a favorable light.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Engonga Ngui Eyang, “Sport Club y la Fundación Real Madrid realizan un clinic deportivo en Malabo,” *Revista Real EquatorialGuinea* (June 24, 2024), <https://realequatorialguinea.com/deportes/sport-club-y-la-fundacion-real-madrid-realizan-un-clinic-deportivo-en-malabo/>.
¹¹⁹ “Equatorial Guinea’s president names new PM,” *Club of Mozambique* (Aug. 19, 2024), <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/equatorial-guineas-president-names-new-pm/>.
¹²⁰ *Revista Real EquatorialGuinea*, supra note 118.
¹²¹ *Ibid.*
¹²² Gabriel Ebang Oyono Nkene, “Director de Sport Club Malabo: ‘La Fundación Real Madrid no puso condiciones para desarrollar sus clinics educativos en Guinea Ecuatorial’” *AhoraEG* (May 31, 2024), <https://ahoraeg.com/deportes/2024/05/31/director-de-sport-club-malabo-la-fundacion-real-madrid-no-puso-condiciones-para-desarrollar-sus-clinics-educativos-en-guinea-ecuatorial/>.
¹²³ “Audio: La llamada telefónica de un Inspector de Policía español amenazando con cordialidad a Diario Rombe” *Diario Rombe* (Oct. 28, 2016), <https://diariorombe.es/ultimas-noticias/audio-la-llamada-telefonica-de-un-inspector-de-policia-espanol-amenazando-con-cordialidad-a-diario-rombe/>.
¹²⁴ Alberto Esparza, “Benjamín Zarandona: ‘Guinea Ecuatorial es un paraíso’,” *Rumbo Malabo* (May 25, 2021), <https://rumbomalabo.com/benjamin-zarandona-guinea-ecuatorial-paraíso/>.

Children play a football game in a dry field in Malabo during AFCON 2012.

Photo credit: Alexander Joe / AFP



National team of Equatorial Guinea at the quarter-final match against Senegal in Yaoundé on January 30, 2022. Basilio Ndong, trained at Cano Sport Academy, is in the front row, third from the right.

Photo credit: Sebastian Frej / Alamy

The Promising Case of Cano Sport Academy

Cano Sport Academy stands out as a rare case of structured player development. Founded in 2014 by the younger brother of the First Lady, Cándido Nsue Okomo, it offered a clear model: identify local talent, provide education and stability, and facilitate international transfers.

Unlike other clubs, Cano Sport Academy had its own field. It also provided housing, schooling, and modest stipends for players (around \$18 per month). The results were tangible, with multiple players transferring abroad and several featuring in national team call-ups.

In the most recent national team call-up alone, four players were products of Cano Sport: José Nabil (France’s FC Nantes), Gael Joel Akogo (Spain’s Recreativo Granada), Basilio Ndong (Albania’s KF Tirana), and Luis Enrique Nsue (Malaysia’s Negeri Sembilan).

Yet Cano Sport Academy declined. When the public face of the academy, Venancio Tomás Ndong, became president of FEGUIFUT, his focus shifted to the federation and the national team. Cano Sport lost momentum, scouting interest faded, talent production slowed, and the

project stagnated. Its trajectory shows that well-designed initiatives, even supported by regime cronies, falter without consistent governance, institutional independence, and a coherent national football strategy. Overall, football development in Equatorial Guinea remains

constrained not by a lack of talent, but by weak incentives, dependence on the regime and poor governance with little focus on local football. The few successful initiatives reach only small groups of players and remain vulnerable to political interests rather than sporting logic.





Ángel María Villar, former president of Spain's football federation, poses with Domingo Mituy Edjang, the president of Equatorial Guinea's football federation before a 2013 friendly match between their national teams.

Photo credit: Mansueto Loeri / EFE

Bad Governance and Corruption in Football Administration

Equatorial Guinea's entrenched lack of transparency extends to the sports sector, where corruption and mismanagement have long undermined football development. In 2024, the country ranked 173rd out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.¹²⁵ That same year, the government's provisional budget allocated 3 billion CFA francs (approximately \$5.3 million) to sports federations,¹²⁶ yet detailed breakdowns of spending across federations such as athletics, tennis, or football are not publicly available.

At the national level, football likely receives a larger share of funding, partly due to FEGUIFUT's participation in international competitions such as AFCON, according to Nzamio Nsa. On this basis, at the regional level, Equatorial Guinea's football budget could reportedly exceed that of Angola¹²⁷ and be comparable to Gabon's 2025 football federation budget.¹²⁸ The problem, therefore, is not a lack of investment. The regime, FIFA, and CAF all provide funding, but these resources are absorbed by a governance system incapable of translating financial inputs into a coherent, professional football model. Corruption within FEGUIFUT follows a recurring pattern. As Nzamio Nsa explains, some pocket the money and others misuse it, instead of putting it to its intended purpose, namely, developing football in the country:

"Corruption in the Federation is sequential. It goes from president to president."

Several cases illustrate this pattern. Domingo Mituy Edjang, president of FEGUIFUT from 2013 to 2014, misappropriated FIFA Financial Assistance Program (FAP) funds and was sanctioned in 2019 with a four-year ban from all football-related activities.¹²⁹ In 2016, FIFA banned then-vice president Gustavo Ndong Edu for attempting to bribe match officials during an Africa Women's Cup of Nations qualifier, fining him \$25,000 and suspending him from football activities.¹³⁰

Despite this sanction, Gustavo Ndong Edu was elected president of FEGUIFUT in 2018 and, a year later, became president of the Union of Central African Football Federations (UNIFFAC). In 2021, Venancio Tomás Ndong, formerly his vice-president, succeeded him as head of the federation, continuing a leadership line already marred with corruption and embezzlement. His accession was widely questioned amid allegations of vote buying and patronage linked to his close ties to Cándido Nsue Okomo, the founder of Cano Sport, former CEO of the state oil company, and brother of the first lady.

The consequences of Tomás Ndong's mismanagement are concrete. In October 2025, Equatorial Guinea's 2026 World Cup qualifier against Malawi was cancelled due to logistical failures that compromised player preparation.¹³¹ Like Gustavo Ndong Edu before him, Venancio Tomás Ndong's alleged involvement in the embezzlement of more than \$1 million in player bonuses and FIFA

development funds during AFCON 2024 did not interrupt his career. On Nov. 16, 2025, he was reelected as federation president as the sole candidate, underscoring the depth of impunity within the federation.¹³² As Nzamio Nsa observes, the full extent of fund misuse may only emerge once FIFA conducts a post-mandate audit: "Football remains stagnant because it is held hostage in the hands of inexperienced people. There is no roadmap to make football professional."

¹²⁵ "Equatorial Guinea, 2024" Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/equatorial-guinea>.

¹²⁶ Ley de Presupuestos Generales del Estado, República de Guinea Ecuatorial 27, <https://mpde.gq/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LEY-PGE-2024.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Raimundo Ngunza, "Federação Angolana de Futebol no 'topo' da verba do OGE/2025," Novo Jornal, (Jan. 18, 2025), <https://www.novojornal.co.ao/desporto/detalhe/federacao-angolana-de-futebol-no-topo-da-verba-do-oge2025-63703.html>.

¹²⁸ Daniel Dematsatsa, "63e congrès Fegafoot : un budget de 3,3 milliards pour relancer le football gabonais" FootGabon (July 1, 2025), <https://footgabon.com/63e-congres-fegafoot-un-budget-de-3-3-milliards-pour-relancer-le.html>.

¹²⁹ "Adjudicatory chamber of the independent Ethics Committee sanctions Mr Domingo Mituy Edjang," InsideFIFA (Oct. 3, 2019), <https://inside.fifa.com/media-releases/adjudicatory-chamber-of-the-independent-ethics-committee-sanctions-mr-domingo-mi>.

¹³⁰ "FIFA extends match-manipulation sanction against vice-president of Equatorial Guinea FA," InsideFIFA (July 25, 2016), <https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/media-releases/fifa-extends-match-manipulation-sanction-against-vice-president-of-equ-2812980>.

¹³¹ Etienne Fermie, "BOARDING? PASS World Cup qualifier cancelled as team fail to board flight amid 'unforeseen travel complications'" The Sun (Oct. 9, 2025), <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/36959589/world-cup-qualifier-malawi-equatorial-guinea/>.

¹³² Mitogo Obiang Abumeyem, "Venancio Tomás Ndong Micha reelegido presidente de la FEGUIFUT con 6 votos a favor y 17 en contra," Aho-raEG (Nov. 16, 2025), <https://ahoraeg.com/deportes/2025/11/16/venancio-tomas-ndong-micha-reelegido-presidente-de-la-feguifut-con-6-votos-a-favor-y-17-en-contra/>.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and CAF President Patrice Motsepe (right) watch the AFCON 2024 match between Equatorial Guinea and Ivory Coast in Abidjan.

Photo credit: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds, Pool / AFP

Part 5

Legitimization and Complicity in the Image Laundering of Equatorial Guinea's Regime

The Equatorial Guinean regime has systematically used international football to legitimize its rule and project an image of prosperity and unity. High-profile matches and engagements with foreign powers, particularly Spain and the United States, have served as tools of image laundering, helping obscure the country's deep repression and corruption. Spanish football institutions and business elites have frequently collaborated with the regime, offering symbolic endorsements that bolster the ruling family's legitimacy. Meanwhile, critical voices and independent media efforts have faced suppression both inside and outside the country, revealing the extent of the regime's influence over international cultural and commercial networks.

Football Diplomacy

In 2009, Obiang marked thirty years in power. During a visit by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos, he dispensed with any democratic pretense. “I am a dictator because a dictator is the one who dictates the rules,” he asserted.¹³³ While the statement sparked some international outrage, it reflected Obiang’s self-assurance that gross human rights abuses, including systematic torture and arbitrary arrests, do not stop democratic governments and businesses from engaging with the regime.¹³⁴ Moratinos’ visit indeed illustrated that global powers’ strategic interests in Equatorial Guinea — such as regional influence, access to markets, energy, or even cultural connections — gave the regime standing as a legitimate and reliable international partner.

At different points in time, football has directly advanced the diplomatic relations of Obiang’s regime. A friendly football match between Equatorial Guinea and Spain in 2013 led to the first official visit by a Spanish prime minister to the country in 23 years.¹³⁵ In January 2024, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended¹³⁶ the Equatorial Guinea-Ivory Coast AFCON match as part of his Africa tour aimed at countering China and Russia’s growing influence on the continent.¹³⁷ Blinken has described football as “the world’s most powerful unifier,” and while he officially used the match to engage with Ivorian officials,¹³⁸ he witnessed a memorable game that cast Equatorial Guinea as a rising, happy football nation united behind its leaders. Three days after the match, a meeting took place in Washington between the Ambassador of Equatorial Guinea to the US Crisantos Obama Ondo and U.S. State Department officials. In a readout from the meeting,

the Equatorial Guinean embassy noted that Ambassador Ondo made a point to express gratitude to Blinken for his physical presence during the football match between Nzalang Nacional and the Ivory Coast.

*“Blinken brought luck to the Nzalang Nacional team of Equatorial Guinea,” Ambassador Ondo was quoted as saying.*¹³⁹

A month later, the US military donated \$24,000 in humanitarian supplies to Equatorial Guinea, part of the Biden administration’s effort to court the Obiang regime amid American concerns about Equatorial Guinea as a potential site for a future Chinese military base.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ “Obiang explica el significado de dictador,” Youtube (Oct. 18, 2009), <https://youtu.be/sTltvIZ-pSLk?si=ISsyGzIDndqOcRWO&t=70>.

¹³⁴ “Guinée équatoriale : 40 ans d’impunité depuis l’accession au pouvoir d’Obiang Nguema,” Amnesty International (Aug. 2, 2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/campaigns/2019/08/guineeéquatoriale/>.

¹³⁵ “Rajoy se reúne con Obiang y pide en Guinea Ecuatorial respeto a los derechos humanos,” El Mundo (June 26, 2014), <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/06/26/53abe0d8e2704eeb4b8b4570.html>.

¹³⁶ @SecBlinken, “I joined the Ivorian Foreign Minister for today’s Africa Cup of Nations match against Equatorial Guinea,” X (Jan. 23, 2024), <https://x.com/SecBlinken/status/174959745511639489>.

¹³⁷ Karim Zidan, “What Is Blinken Doing at an African Football Event?,” Sports Politika (Jan. 24, 2024), <https://www.sportspolitika.news/p/blinken-afcon-football-politics-us-china>.

¹³⁸ AFP, “Blinken Sees Bright Future For Ivory Coast Football Despite Loss,” Barron’s (Jan. 23, 2024), <https://www.barrons.com/news/blinken-sees-bright-future-for-ivory-coast-football-despite-loss-6b269ba1>.

¹³⁹ “Crisantos Obama Ondo se reúne con altos funcionarios del Departamento de Estado norteamericano,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Jan. 25, 2024), https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/index.php/noticias/crisantos_obama_ondo_se_reune_con_altos_funcionarios_del_departamento_de_estado_norteamericano.

¹⁴⁰ Nick Turse, “Squeezed By African Coups, Biden Cozies up to the World’s Worst Dictator,” The Intercept (March 25, 2024), <https://theintercept.com/2024/03/25/biden-equatorial-guinea-teodoro-obiang-aid/>.



Secretary Antony Blinken 
@SecBlinken

I joined the Ivorian Foreign Minister for today’s Africa Cup of Nations match against Equatorial Guinea. As a lifelong soccer fan, it was great to feel the energy of all the fans in the arena.

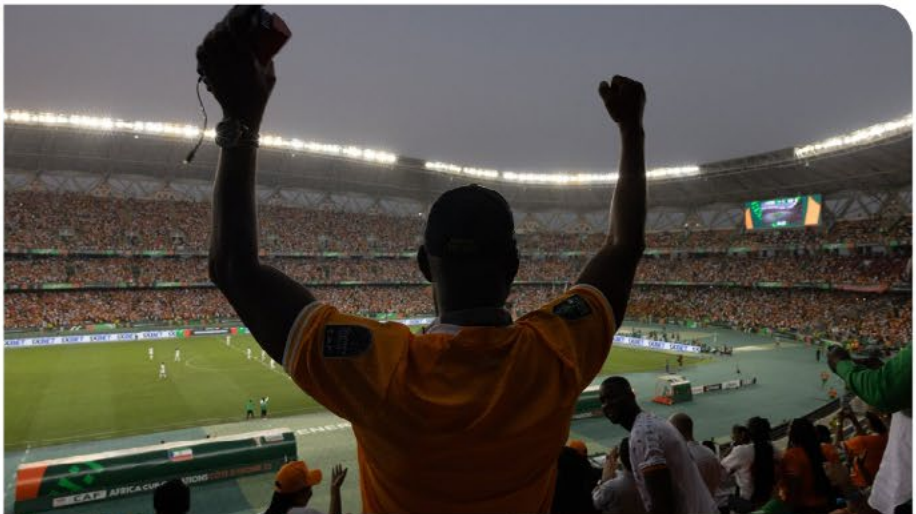


Photo Credit: Sourced from X, @SecBlinken, Jan. 23, 2024



Juvenal Edjogo-Owono of Equatorial Guinea (center) challenges Marc Bartra and Koke of Spain during a 2013 friendly match in Malabo.

Photo credit: Valentina Lizard / AFP

World Champions in a Dictatorship: Spain’s 2013 Friendly Scandal

On Nov. 8, 2013, the Obiang regime announced that the reigning FIFA World Champions, Spain’s La Roja, which was touring Africa at the time, chose Equatorial Guinea over Gabon and Angola to play a friendly match against Nzalang.¹⁴¹ Billing the game as “the great sporting event in Equatorial Guinea,” the regime, through Minister of Youth and Sports Francisco Pascual Obama Asue, boasted that La Roja

agreed to play without any financial compensation at the New Malabo Stadium.¹⁴² On Nov. 10, Teodoro Nguema announced a reward of five million euros to Nzalang if it won the match and 50,000 euros for every goal scored.¹⁴³

News about the event stirred a firestorm of controversy.¹⁴⁴ Equatoguinean human rights

defenders, including the late Dr. Wenceslao Mansogo, warned that the match and the spectacle of a passionate fan base would serve to obscure the country’s rampant repression and human rights abuses.¹⁴⁵

The Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF)’s decision to play in Equatorial Guinea raised questions and suspicions about the motives behind the

agreement. While RFEF justified the decision by citing strong cultural ties between the nations, Euronews reported at the time that the Spanish team had allegedly received 15 million euros for the match.¹⁴⁶ However, both the regime and RFEF later denied this claim, asserting that the game was played free of charge.¹⁴⁷

Spanish lawmakers accused RFEF of downplaying the game’s political significance, creating the appearance of endorsing a dictatorship.¹⁴⁸ Four political parties in Spain called on the government to boycott the friendly and take steps to prevent it from becoming a propaganda tool for the former colony’s corrupt regime.¹⁴⁹ In response to the pressure, RFEF attempted to distance itself from the controversy, insisting that it had negotiated the match solely with FEGUIFUT, not with the dictator or his inner circle.¹⁵⁰ “We are only soccer players, we are only sportsmen. We are not here to promote, nor prestige, nor overthrow, nor go against anyone,” World Cup-winning coach Vicente del Bosque asserted.¹⁵¹

Unfazed by the criticism, Obiang declared that “Equatorial Guinea is used to hosting all kinds of guests, thanks, among other things, to the peace and stability prevailing in our country’s soil.”¹⁵² Jerónimo Osa Osa Ecoro, secretary-general of the ruling PDGE, accused critics of “politicizing” a sporting event and seeking to deprive the population of the privilege of enjoying the match.¹⁵³

On Nov. 15, 2013, the world champions landed at Malabo International Airport, where thousands of fans welcomed them.¹⁵⁴ The regime lodged the Spanish players in the country’s only five-star hotel, the Sofitel Le Golf. The hotel was a showpiece of the \$830 million luxury Sipopo seaside resort, which the regime built in 2011 to welcome the week-long African Union Summit.¹⁵⁵

Inaccessible and unaffordable to the overwhelming majority of the population, the hotel was managed by Ruslan Obiang, then secretary of state for sports and youth.

Ahead of the match on Nov. 16, Ruslan, clad in the country’s colors, posed for photos with La Roja players as they trained.¹⁵⁶ Obiang and his other sons did not make appearances.¹⁵⁷ The match ended in a 2-1 Spanish win. It offered a temporary distraction for the population and projected an illusory image of national consensus and progress. However, it did not quell controversies. Spain’s leading sports journal, *Diario AS*, branded the saga a global scandal.¹⁵⁸

The two former Nzalang footballers interviewed by HRF both believe the Spanish team received some form of compensation. “Knowing the Spanish Federation and knowing Equatorial Guinea, I’m sure someone got more than their fair share,” said Alberto Edjogo-Owono. Jacinto Elá does not buy the Spanish Federation’s line about “cultural ties,” pointing out how little the team engaged with the local population.

Former football player Elá disagrees with the idea that the match only benefited Equatorial Guinea’s regime. He referred to the friendly as a massive smokescreen, claiming that aboard the same plane that brought the World Cup champions were several Spanish businessmen traveling to Equatorial Guinea to finalize deals. Even Edjogo-Owono, who believes that the game was to strengthen ties, acknowledged,

“At the end of the day, football is a show, but it is also a business.”

The question of whether the World Cup champions were paid for this friendly match has been the subject of much speculation and remains unresolved to this day.¹⁵⁹

¹⁴¹ “Toda la información del Nzalang – España,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Nov. 8, 2013), https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/index.php/noticias/toda_la_informacion_del_nzalang_-_espa%C3%B1a.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ “Nguema Obiang Mangué promete cinco millones de euros si Nzalang vence a España,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Nov. 10, 2013), https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/index.php/noticias/nguema_obiang_mangu%C3%A9_promete_cinco_millones_de_euros_si_nzalang_vence_a_espa%C3%B1a.

¹⁴⁴ “La selección española, en la corte de Obiang,” RTVE (Nov. 14, 2013), <https://www.rtve.es/deportes/2013/11/14/guinea-espana/789381.shtml>.

¹⁴⁵ “Las amistades peligrosas de La Roja,” El País (Nov. 8, 2013), https://elpais.com/sociedad/2013/11/08/actualidad/1383944597_990106.html.

¹⁴⁶ Euronews, “Spanish Football ‘Paid 15 million Euros’ for Controversial Friendly Against Equatorial Guinea,” YouTube (Nov. 16, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDXhA4eb46U>.

¹⁴⁷ “La Roja se desmarca de Obiang,” El País (Nov. 13, 2013), https://elpais.com/deportes/2013/11/13/actualidad/1384375120_020420.html.

¹⁴⁸ Raphael Minder, “Spanish Soccer Team Under Fire for Game in Equatorial Guinea,” The New York Times (Nov. 14, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/sports/soccer/spanish-soccer-team-under-fire-for-game-in-equatorial-guinea.html>.

¹⁴⁹ “Cuatro partidos piden al Gobierno el boicot al amistoso de La Roja en Guinea,” El País (Nov. 13, 2013), https://elpais.com/politica/2013/11/13/actualidad/1384298313_345614.html.

¹⁵⁰ The New York Times, supra note 148.

¹⁵¹ FFabian Sports, “Llegada De La Roja En Guinea Ecuatorial,” YouTube (Nov. 16, 2013) <https://youtu.be/AkJcwzmUzc?feature=shared&t=106>.

¹⁵² Joaquín Maroto, “El amistoso Guinea-España se convierte en escándalo mundial,” *Diario AS* (Nov. 15, 2013), https://as.com/futbol/2013/11/15/seleccion/1384477868_882244.html.

¹⁵³ “El Secretario del PDGE replica a los partidos políticos españoles que han criticado el encuentro entre las selecciones nacionales de Guinea Ecuatorial y España,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Nov. 14, 2013), https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/noticias/el_secretario_del_pdge_replica_a_los_partidos_politicos_espa%C3%B1oles_que_han_criticado_el_encuentro_entre_las_selecciones_nacionales_de_guinea_ecuatorial_y_espa%C3%B1a.

¹⁵⁴ “La Roja ya está en Malabo,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (Nov. 15, 2013), https://www.guineaequatorialpress.com/noticias/la_roja_ya_esta_en_malabo.

¹⁵⁵ David Smith, “Equatorial Guinea Builds Luxury Resort for Week-long Summit,” The Guardian (Oct. 19, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/07/equatorial-guinea-luxury-resort-sipopo>.

¹⁵⁶ José Félix Díaz, “A falta del dictador, su hijo se hizo fotos con los jugadores españoles,” (Nov. 17, 2013) https://www.elconfidencial.com/deportes/futbol/2013-11-17/a-falta-del-dictador-su-hijo-se-hizo-fotos-con-los-jugadores-espanoles_55463/.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *Diario AS*, supra note 152.

¹⁵⁹ Sean Jacobs, “Football and Dictatorships,” Africa Is A Country (Aug. 11, 2013), <https://africasacountry.com/2013/11/football-and-dictatorships>.

Spanish Football Leaders' Association with Equatorial Guinea's Regime

On May 17, 2016, Spanish businessman, film producer, and Atlético de Madrid president Enrique Cerezo visited Teodoro Obiang just weeks after he claimed 93.7% of the vote in an election that was neither free nor fair. Cerezo congratulated Obiang and presented him with an Atlético de Madrid jersey bearing his name, along with “other gifts.”¹⁶⁰ Cerezo was, in fact, thanking Obiang for the regime’s cooperation in allowing his production company to film the multi-million-dollar Sony movie 1898: “Our Last Men in the Philippines in Equatorial Guinea.”¹⁶¹ Cerezo has traced his love of Equatorial Guinea to a friendship he developed with Guillermina Mekuy Mba Obono, a former minister delegate for culture and tourism.

On Nov. 29, 2022, FC Barcelona President Joan Laporta welcomed Miguel Edjang, Equatorial Guinea’s ambassador to Spain, with a handshake at the club’s sports complex.¹⁶² Framed as an effort to expand Barcelona’s global presence, Laporta accepted a formal gift from the Guinean diplomatic delegation.¹⁶³

Equatorial Guinea’s regime has long sought legitimacy through high-profile international ties, and football offers a convenient avenue. As the

country attempts to raise its profile in the sport, its engagement with Spanish clubs is unsurprising. However, given the dynastic nature of its authoritarian power, these relationships are far from trivial. The oil-rich Obiang family has consistently leveraged its connections with influential foreign figures, including those in Spanish football, to enhance its image, cultivate a sense of respectability, secure strategic advantages, and consolidate its power.

The presence of Atlético de Madrid’s president at the private wedding of Obiang’s son Ruslan on June 2, 2018, underscores the troubling success of the ruling clan’s normalization strategy.¹⁶⁴ Though discreet, the event drew high-profile attendees, including Spanish businesswoman Marta Ortega (the daughter of the billionaire owner of clothing retailers Zara and Bershka), Queen Letizia of Spain, and Guillermina Mekuy Mba Obono’s ex-husband, Ignacio Palomo — later implicated in Spain’s 2024 Koldo corruption case.¹⁶⁵ Their attendance crystallizes the influential network the presidential family has carefully forged.

¹⁶⁰ “El Jefe de Estado recibe al Presidente del Atlético de Madrid,” Guinea Ecuatorial Press (May 18, 2016), https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/_el_jefe_de_estado_recibe_al_presidente_del_atletico_de_madrid.

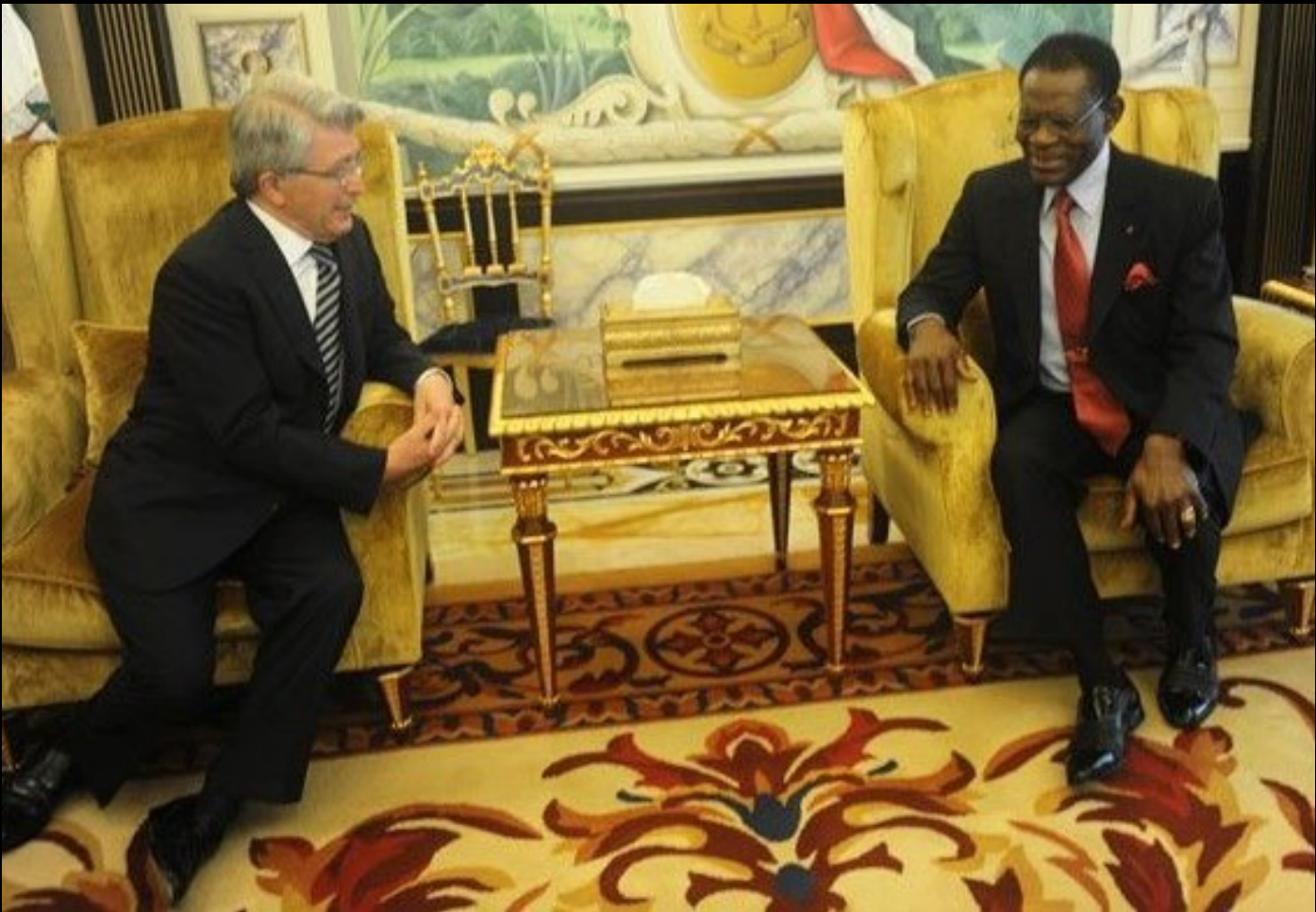
¹⁶¹ “Enrique Cerezo regala a Obiang una camiseta del Atlético Madrid” El Mundo (May 18, 2016), <https://www.elmundo.es/deportes/2016/05/18/573c392b46163f7d668b4608.html>.

¹⁶² “Miguel Edjang Angue mantiene conversaciones con Joan Laporta, Presidente del F.C. Barcelona,” Embajada de Guinea Ecuatorial en España (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://xn--embajadadeguineaecuatorialenespaa-yfd.com/miguel-edjang-angué-mantiene-conversaciones-con-joan-laporta-presidente-del-f-c-barcelona/>.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Vera Bercovitz, “¿Qué hacía Enrique Cerezo en la boda del hijo de Teodoro Obiang?,” Vanity Fair (June 11, 2018), <https://www.revistavanityfair.es/sociedad/celebrities/articulos/boda-hijo-teodoro-obiang-enrique-cerezo/31601>.

¹⁶⁵ Teresa Gómez, “El ginecólogo salpicado por la trama Koldo preside una asociación de guardias civiles,” The Objective (March 13, 2024), <https://theobjective.com/espana/tribunales/2024-03-08/ginecologo-koldo-asociacion-guardias-civiles/>.



Above: Atlético Madrid President Enrique Cerezo meets with Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in the Malabo Government Building in May 2016.

Photo credit: Manuel Mangue, sourced from PDGE Press Office



Right: Atlético Madrid jersey bearing the name of the president of Equatorial Guinea, gifted to Obiang by Enrique Cerezo.

From top to bottom: illustration of writer Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel; Annobón, Equatorial Guinea; Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel.

Photo credit: Still images from the film *The Writer from a Country Without Bookstores* used with the director Marc Serena's permission



Equatorial Guinea's "Forbidden Documentary" Finds No Screen Time in Spain

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel is well aware of the deep connections between politics and football in his country. In 2013, he joined other activists in protesting the friendly match between Spain and Equatorial Guinea, urging Spanish football stars like Sergio Ramos and Andrés Iniesta on X (then Twitter) to publicly oppose the game. But the regime's ties with influential foreign football figures do more than lend legitimacy to Teodoro Obiang — they serve as a means of extending his repressive rule beyond Equatorial Guinea's borders and into other sectors, including the Spanish film industry. This became evident when a Spanish documentary critical of the regime featuring Ávila Laurel faced significant distribution hurdles in Spain.

Before going into exile in Barcelona, Ávila Laurel was a well-known critic of the regime, mainly through his blog.¹⁶⁶ In February 2011, he made international headlines by staging a week-long hunger strike to protest the government's repression of civil liberties and to call for a democratic transition.¹⁶⁷ His protest was deliberately staged during the visit of the Spanish president of the Congress of Deputies to denounce Western complacency with the regime, a recurring theme in his criticism.¹⁶⁸ Years later, a 2019 Spanish documentary, "The Writer from a Country Without Bookstores,"¹⁶⁹ chronicled Ávila Laurel's dangerous return to Equatorial Guinea and his native island of Annobón — an extraordinary journey for one of the country's most prominent

intellectuals who openly opposed the regime.¹⁷⁰

The documentary is unprecedented. In addition to openly criticizing Obiang's dictatorship, it is the first feature-length documentary shot in Equatorial Guinea. It received multiple nominations at international film festivals and prestigious awards, including the DIG Award for Best Investigative Journalism.¹⁷¹ While it is unsurprising that the film has been ignored within Equatorial Guinea, where censorship is strict, it was still screened throughout the region, notably in Cameroon and Nigeria. What is more striking, however, is that no Spanish television network has broadcast it, despite neighboring Portugal having done so.¹⁷²

Spanish filmmaker and journalist Marc Serena, the film's director, told HRF: "The two countries seem to have agreed on mutual silence. This benefits Guinea, as it allows them to keep their population isolated. Spain has many people who have done and continue to do business with the country, and many who lived through the colonial period are still alive."

Ávila Laurel recalls the challenges the filmmakers faced in securing official distribution for the film in Spain. In some cases, requests to screen the documentary were denied, and one name repeatedly surface: Enrique Cerezo. According to Ávila Laurel, it is evident that the president of Atlético de Madrid, a powerful film mogul with known close ties to

the Obiang family, played a role in blocking the film. While the director of *The Writer from a Country Without Bookstores* avoids directly commenting on Cerezo's influence over its distribution, he concedes,

"Enrique Cerezo is the most powerful figure in Spanish cinema. He may own 70% of all film titles. He is a close friend of Obiang. His influence has been present for many years."

¹⁶⁶ "GUINEA ECUATORIAL | En Huelga de hambre por las libertades," RSF (Feb. 15, 2011), <https://www.rsf-es.org/guinea-ecuatorial-en-huelga-de-hambre-por-las-libertades/>.

¹⁶⁷ Alfonso Armada, "Huelga de hambre de un escritor guineano ante la visita de Bono a Obiang," ABC, Feb. 11, 2011, https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-huelga-hambre-guinea-bono-201102110000_noticia.html.

¹⁶⁸ "José Bono in Equatorial Guinea," El País (Feb. 11, 2011), https://english.elpais.com/el-pais/2011/02/11/inenglish/1297405245_850210.html.

¹⁶⁹ Vishnu Bachani, "The Exiled Writer From Equatorial Guinea," Africa Is A Country (Sept. 8, 2020), <https://africasacountry.com/2020/09/the-exiled-writer-from-equatorial-guinea>.

¹⁷⁰ Fora de Quadre, "Trailer From 'The Writer From a Country Without Bookstores,'" YouTube (Nov. 23, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-CP5-Zo7GtQ>.

¹⁷¹ "Marc Serena," Docs Barcelona, <https://docs-barcelona.com/en/profiles/marc-serena>.

¹⁷² "O Escritor de um País Sem Livrarias," RTP <https://www.rtp.pt/programa/tv/p41525>.

Feeding and Failing: Business in Kleptocratic Equatorial Guinea

In the kleptocratic regime of Equatorial Guinea, doing business often requires complicity with the ruling powers. This is evident in the case of Martínez Hermanos, a company that has operated in the country since 1927 and now leads the nation’s retail sector.¹⁷³ To maintain its status, the company actively sponsors events such as beauty contests¹⁷⁴ and Nzalang for AFCON 2023, consistently supporting the regime. Public expressions of loyalty are commonplace, most notably the state-mandated celebrations of the birthdays of President Obiang and his vice president.¹⁷⁵

Ties with the regime are a double-edged sword. They may grant privileged economic advantages, but at the cost of living under the yoke of an arbitrary power that demands total complicity: submitting to its whims, being forced to don the mantle it assigns, and bowing to its staged performances of public image. In August 2024, Martínez Hermanos faced a public scandal after widespread complaints about the poor quality of imported rice.¹⁷⁶ Vice President Nguema Obiang announced a “thorough investigation” on X, presenting himself as the man of the hour.¹⁷⁷ He then summoned the company’s president, Fernando Martínez, to the presidential palace, where Martínez delivered a formal apology on national television — footage later circulated by the vice president’s press service.¹⁷⁸ Facing the camera, Martínez not only apologized but also fawningly praised the vice president’s policies.¹⁷⁹ This spectacle not only served to bolster Nguema’s “presidentiality,” but is also a

reminder of the tight fusion of power and family in Equatorial Guinea: Fernando Martínez is married into the ruling clan, and his father-in-law is Armengol Ondo Nguema, the president’s younger brother.

Operating in Equatorial Guinea means aligning with a system where power is concentrated within a corrupt elite, and doing business often involves tacit participation in illegal activities.¹⁸⁰ With its international connections, this system creates an environment where businesses must either comply with the regime or face severe consequences, from financial ruin to the loss of personal freedom.¹⁸¹ Western investors who push back against the regime’s coercive demands have been detained, threatened, extorted, or prevented from leaving the country, often forced to abandon their assets.¹⁸² Retaliation has taken many forms, including arbitrary confiscation of property,¹⁸³ seizure of passports,¹⁸⁴ persecution and physical attacks abroad,¹⁸⁵ and even torture.¹⁸⁶

Equatorial Guinea’s kleptocracy concerns the international community as well as its citizens.

“The corruption that happens in Equatorial Guinea and the corruption that the Equatoguinean leaders engage in, both in their country as well as abroad, does not happen without the direct and indirect influence and involvement of Westerners,” the founder of the NGO EG Justice told HRF, calling for global solidarity in support of human rights and transparency.

¹⁷³ “Conócenos – Grupo Martínez Hermanos.” Grupo Martínez Hermanos (Nov. 29, 2021), <https://martinezhermanos.com/conocenos/#historia>.

¹⁷⁴ Martínez Hermanos, “Nos sentimos honrados de haber sido, una vez más, patrocinadores de este increíble certamen que cada año impulsa el talento, la elegancia y la dedicación de la juventud ecuatoguineana,” Facebook (Sept. 11, 2024), <https://www.facebook.com/MartinezHermanos1927/posts/pfbid0zquADvoveWR2PDskXqGjgyZMPFwbjny-8Cyy7ouxRG4Rofzpii2SZ8cxUbbZZXyzml>.

¹⁷⁵ Martínez Hermanos, “¡Feliz Cumpleaños a S.E. Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue!”, Facebook (June 25, 2024), <https://www.facebook.com/MartinezHermanos1927/posts/pfbid0EUUPpGEfYpUCuQ-ZLUBjcNbreXShD79pXcJ2FpKdoRGWAF5QMwdZ-puEck4AvKwoKMI>.

¹⁷⁶ Andrés Ondó Etoho Oye, “La mala calidad del arroz que comercializan Martínez Hnos y EGTC despierta indignación en Nguema Obiang,” La Vicepress (Aug. 28, 2024), <https://www.lavicepress.org/post/la-mala-calidad-del-arroz-que-comercializan-mart%C3%ADnez-hnos-y-egtc-despierta-indignaci%C3%B3n-en-nguema-obi>.

¹⁷⁷ @teonguema, “Tras recibir las quejas de la población sobre la calidad del arroz de Martínez Hnos. y EGTC, he ordenado una comisión multi-sectorial integrada por los Ministerios de Seguridad (Gendarmería), Sanidad y Comercio entre otros; para que hagan una inspección exhaustiva a fin de corroborar las quejas del pueblo,” X (Aug. 28, 2024), <https://x.com/teonguema/status/1828798548281905465?s=20>.

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Miguel González, et al., “Prisoner of Dictatorial Business Links,” El País English (March 17, 2013), https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2013/03/17/inenglish/1363529334_937982.html.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

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¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ José María Irujo, “El testigo más temido por Teodorin Obiang,” El País (June 21, 2017), https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/06/20/actualidad/1497979041_641638.html?event_log=go.

¹⁸⁶ Lusa, “Empresário português “sequestrado” na Guiné Equatorial apresenta queixa contra justiça do país,” Expresso (Dec. 28, 2022), <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2022-12-28-Empresario-portugues-sequestrado-na-Guine-Equatorial-apresenta-queixa-contra-justica-do-pais-37c83c78>.



Photo credits, top and middle:
Courtesy of director Marc Serena.

Caption translation, left:
“Happy Birthday to H.E. Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue! Today, June 25, we celebrate the 55th anniversary of our beloved Vice President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. Martínez Hermanos Ltd. and its staff extend congratulations to His Excellency and his distinguished family on this special day. We wish this new year of life full health, happiness, and great success.”

Sourced from Facebook, Martínez Hermanos, June 25, 2024, celebrating the birthday of Vice President Teodorín Nguema Obiang.

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo attends the 2015 AFCON final between Ivory Coast and Ghana in Bata, Equatorial Guinea.

Photo credit: Carl De Souza / AFP

Recommendations

To decision-makers and the international community:

- Refrain from official visits or other engagements that may contribute to legitimizing the Equatoguinean regime, including those framed as sports diplomacy.
- Advocate against awarding international sporting events to Equatorial Guinea as a means of opposing systemic human rights violations.
- Refrain from collaborating with the Equatoguinean regime, including participation in friendly matches and other football-related partnerships outside of official FIFA competitions.

To FIFA:

- Launch an investigation into the Equatoguinean regime's use of illegal naturalizations and fraudulent documentation in football, ensuring compliance with FIFA regulations on player eligibility.
- Conduct investigations over allegations of FIFA funds embezzled by the president of Equatorial Guinea's football federation.

To LaLiga:

- Implement regulatory provisions to prevent and penalize financial or institutional ties between LaLiga clubs and the Equatoguinean regime.
- Conduct investigations and enforce disciplinary measures against any clubs found to be maintaining such affiliations.

To professional football players:

- Publicly denounce human rights abuses and corruption in Equatorial Guinea's football governance and advocate for ethical standards in the sport.

To the Equatoguinean regime:

- Immediately release prisoners of conscience and cease repressive measures, particularly in the lead-up to international sporting events.
- Initiate an independent inquiry into the misappropriation of AFCON bonus funds by FEGUIFUT and government officials to ensure that funds are properly allocated to the development of local football infrastructure as demanded by national team players.
- Publicly disclose details of the sports budget of the past ten years.

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