The Continuing Corruption

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2020)

Tomorrow I May Be Far Away, Romare Bearden, 1967

I see that the International Monetary Fund has just granted Equatorial Guinea a loan of $280,000,000. Could there be a better illustration of the famous dictum, usually attributed to my late friend, Peter Bauer, but denied by him as ever

having been his, that foreign aid is the means by which poor people in rich countries give money to rich people in poor countries—except that Equatorial Guinea is no longer, at least on the basis of Gross Domestic Product per head, a very poor country? Rather, it is a country in which a tiny kleptocracy ensures that most of the population continues very poor. One might ask whether any of the directors of the IMF would have extended a loan of even $280 to Equatorial Guinea if the money had to come from their own pockets.

While I am no friend to economic egalitarianism, and indeed regard equality of economic outcome, if it could truly exist anywhere, as a manifest injustice, this is not to say that I do not recognise the category of illicit enrichment. Clearly thieves enrich themselves illicitly, or try to do so (most of them fail in the attempt); but there are often other, subtler means, such that the borderline between licit and illicit is sometimes blurred. But we do not say that there is no such thing as a tall man merely because there is no categorical dividing line between a man who is tall and a man who is not. And when it comes to illicit enrichment, the President of Equatorial Guinea is nowhere near the fuzzy border.

The history of his country is not a happy one, even by African standards. It was the only Spanish colony in black Africa. The authorities there were long suspected of having given their approval to a system of indentured labour that amounted *de facto*, if not *de jure*, to slavery on the coffee and cacao plantations. By the time the country gained its independence from Spain in 1968 things had greatly improved; it was said to be the second most prosperous country in black Africa, with as high a rate of literacy as the metropole and with relatively good medical services.

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Unfortunately, the first president, the democratically-elected Francisco Macías Nguema, was not at heart a democrat: he preferred autocracy, not to say tyranny. Until he was overthrown eleven years later (1979) in a coup d'état led by his nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, still president 40 years later and until the coup a pillar of his uncle's regime, he maintained a reign of terror the equal of any in a wide field of competition. He killed or drove into exile at least a third of the population; he reintroduced virtual slave labour, and production of all the commodities on which the country's prosperity depended collapsed; he closed the country off from practically all contact with the rest of the world; soon there was no electricity; torture was the main way of obtaining information; the national currency, the *ekwele*, was worth less than the paper on which it was printed; anyone who wore glasses was suspected of being a dangerous intellectual and executed; all reading matter was prohibited and it was dangerous to possess any; and the national treasury was in Macías Nguema's personal possession. He gave himself the title of *The Unique Miracle*, which in a sense was true, if miracles can be bad as well as good.

Macías' paranoia, so it is said, derived from having at the age of 7 witnessed his father beaten to death by a colonial official, and perhaps even more importantly a deep insecurity about his own capacity relative to others. Early in his career, he repeatedly failed examinations to advance his career under the colonial regime and felt the humiliation deeply. (This is the failure-of-Hitler-to-gain-admission-to-

art-school-as-the-explanation of Nazism school of historiography.) But not every disappointed or resentful failure becomes a Unique Miracle à la Macías, even in circumstances such as European colonialism in Africa which were calculated to humiliate large numbers of people. We shall never be able to pluck out the heart of Macías' mystery.

After his nephew overthrew him, Macías was tried and sentenced to death, executed on a beach by a firing squad of Moroccan mercenaries. Not even the most ferocious opponent of the death penalty would have said that he *deserved* to live, but no doubt would point out that those who brought him to trial were themselves complicit in the crimes for which he was condemned.

Nephew Teodoro had been in power for seven years when I paid my only visit to the country. It was hardly surprising that the country had not fully recovered from its trauma. You could tell when the president left the capital because the electricity supply was turned off for much longer than the usual power cuts. Then the private generators began to whirr and hum, almost all of them in the possession of the aid workers who had flooded into the country after Macías' forced departure. They lived very well, the aid workers, and most of the sparse traffic in the capital consisted of their comfortable and large vehicles.

Nephew Teodoro was no friend to freedom, however, and was good only in the sense that he was better than his uncle, not a very high hurdle to jump. I was told by someone who knew the regime well that if it were discovered that I was a journalist, I should be arrested, probably cut into pieces and thrown into the sea. No one would know: I would have disappeared without trace.

Oddly enough, I received this information, or warning, not with fear but exhilaration. I had never before been important enough for anyone to want to kill me. In addition, being still quite young, I did not really believe that this could happen, or be done, to me, that I really *could* be killed. Thus I had the best of both psychological worlds: on the one hand that of being under threat and therefore of significance to at least *somebody*, and on the other that of actually being, or rather feeling, perfectly safe.

In fact, I had at the time a taste for terrible places. Danger acts as a tonic for the mind, a little like cocaine or amphetamine. It has an alerting effect. Furthermore, terrible places act as a counter to an awareness of the banality of existence that is inclined to accompany too comfortable or routine a billet in life. If terrible places did not exist, it would be necessary to invent them.

Not all dictatorships are equal, which is to say equally bad. I entered Equatorial Guinea via Gabon, an oil-rich little country that was formerly a French colony. By the time I arrived, Omar Bongo had been president for only 19 of the 42 years of his presidency, which was brought to an end only by his death. I left Equatorial Guinea for Cameroon, which was then in only its fourth year of the presidency of Paul Biya, which has lasted (so far) up to the present day.

Bongo had a few peculiarities, apart from kleptomania, related to his small size. He wore platform shoes to give him a couple of extra inches, photographs were not permitted showing others in his presence much taller than he, and the word pygmy was

expunged from the language. All the same, one did not get in Gabon feeling of bizarreness or even menace that one got in Equatorial Guinea. As for Paul Biya, he was, for an African dictator, a grey and uninteresting figure, with none of the flamboyance that one associated with that particular metier.

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A few years after my one and only visit to Equatorial Guinea, oil was discovered in its territorial waters and within a short time the country's annual GDP per head rose to more than $20,000, a colossal sum for tropical Africa, though with the reduction in the price of oil it has fallen back to $9000. Of course, the figure of an average gives no indication of the distribution, and in fact what one reads suggests that the population of Equatorial Guinea as a whole hardly saw its standard of living rise after this manna was discovered. The money went to Nephew Teodoro, his family and hangers-on, to the great benefit of some of the real estate markets in Europe and America, where the inheritors of Macías Nguema accumulated luxurious properties, no doubt kitted out with the utmost vulgarity.

If Equatorial Guinea had used its revenues with minimal wisdom it would not now need a loan from the IMF, but it has very little to show for its seven fat years apart from a very rich presidential family and crony elite. This is not an unusual story: resource-rich countries in the Third World are so rarely rich in any other sense that what is often regarded as a paradox, that a country rich in resources should be sunk in poverty, is not a paradox at all. Rather it is the opposite that is the paradox, at least in the sense that whatever happens only rarely is paradoxical.

The granting of a loan by the IMF to Equatorial Guinea has aroused the ire of some African commentators or intellectuals, in so far as it amounts to an acceptance or subsidy of a regime that is abjectly corrupt, and which the loan will help to preserve. I sympathise with their point of view, though the moral situation is perhaps more complex than at first sight appears.

Who would suffer if the loan were withheld, assuming it to be vitally necessary to avoid an economic collapse? Would it be the clan of Equatoguinean kleptocrats? Assuredly not, unless an inability to increase their ill-gotten wealth yet further be considered a form of suffering. They have put away so much wealth that, in the absence of violence towards them, their future in the utmost luxury is secure. The same cannot be said for the majority of the population, who are always the first to suffer when economic collapse occurs and are already living on the margins of existence.

African commentators and intellectuals have called for the IMF to impose conditions on Nephew Teodoro before releasing any funds, for example that he should disclose if not disgorge his assets, but it is very unlikely that he would do so with any degree of honesty. In general, people like dictators and their hangers-on are much craftier than those who investigate them, just as any minor bureaucrat can run rings round any central government. ‘I obey but I do not comply’ said Spanish imperial bureaucrats on receiving the King’s orders, and that is a principle which has been applied the world over.

Then again, the idea that the IMF should impose conditions on

recipients of its assistance, usually in the direction of balancing budgets, opening markets to foreign competition, floating currencies, etc., has usually been regarded as a form of imperialism, despite the fact that the opposite policies—government deficits, protection, fixed exchange rates—have usually (at least in Africa) been associated with the most flagrant corruption. But because deleterious policies have often been pursued as a result of economic ideologies which have found favour with intellectuals, the IMF has been detested for imposing conditions on its loans.

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Nephew Teodoro, however, has no pretensions to a positive ideology, only to a negative one, that of non-interference in the internal affairs of a country by outside agencies. He wants to be left alone to get on with his systematic looting of natural resources in the name of national independence.

It sticks in the craw that he should not merely be allowed, but actually paid, to do so; but regime change, alas, which ought to be easy enough to bring about in the case of a country as weak, small and insignificant as Equatorial Guinea, does not have an unmixed record of success from the point of view of benefits brought to the population. Nephew Teodoro, it is true, is better than Uncle Francisco; but many counter-examples could be found, of the worse following the bad, even when the bad was so very bad indeed that many had difficulty in imagining anything worse.

Is the achievement of the better after the worse in politics (assuming they can be unequivocally distinguished, which is not always the case) a matter of luck or of judgment.

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