The strange and evil world of Equatorial Guinea

When Nadine Dorries decided to lead Britain's first parliamentary delegation to one of Africa's richest states, Ian Birrell tagged along to see how our MPs coped with President Obiang's kleptocracy

Ian Birrell, The Observer, Sunday 23 October 2011

At the president's pleasure: Black Beach prison in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. Photograph: Observer

It is hard not to be impressed when you arrive in the newly rich nation of Equatorial Guinea, especially when you are invited as a guest of the president. There is just a brief wait in the VIP lounge, with its white leatherette sofas and *The Naked Gun* playing on a flat-screen television, before you are whisked into your limousine, the usual hassles of passport control handled by friendly officials. Leaving Malabo airport you see what looks almost like a modernist sculpture of discarded aeroplanes, one of which has its nose pointing into the air. You wonder if this is some kind of weird memorial to the infamous Wonga coup attempt, when British-led mercenaries failed to overthrow your host in an attempt to get their hands on his oil wealth.

Then there is a drive for several miles along a new three-lane highway. Strangely, it is devoid of traffic – we passed no more than five cars coming in the opposite direction. On either side are new buildings planted among the impossibly lush foliage. There are offices for oil and construction companies, together with scores of new blocks of flats – again all empty.

Eventually you pass the conference centre, a concrete edifice built to host a recent African Union summit. Beside it is a complex of 52 identical mansions, one for every African leader attending the week-long event. It has its own heliport, of course. The houses are all empty.

"Fantastic infrastructure here, isn't it, compared with the rest of Africa," enthuses one of my companions as we speed past. This is Adrian Yalland, an ebullient former spokesman for the

Countryside Alliance who now speaks up for this West African dictatorship. He has not visited the country before.

Next, you pass an artificial beach and an ultramodern hospital before turning into an impressive Sofitel hotel with 200 rooms, the country's first spa and a bespoke island nature walk. An 18-hole golf course is being hacked from the verdant jungle. Even the obligatory picture of President Teodoro Obiang has been given a black-and-gold makeover, giving him the look of JFK. There are, however, hardly any guests.

Welcome to Sipopo. This Orwellian complex, grafted on to the capital, Malabo, is the face Equatorial Guinea wishes to present to the world. Obiang, now the longest-serving ruler in Africa and a man accused of presiding over one of the world's most corrupt, kleptocratic and repressive governments, spent more than half a billion pounds creating it as part of his drive to rebrand his regime. It is small change for a man alleged to pocket £40m a day in energy revenues; his tiny country is sub-Saharan Africa's third-largest oil producer.

It is like something out of *The Truman Show*, one of many illusions in a land of artifice. Sipopo cost four times the annual education budget in what is perhaps the planet's most unequal society, a country where per-capita wealth exceeds Britain but three-quarters of its 675,000 citizens live on less than a dollar a day. Infant mortality rates are among the worst in the world, but that spanking-new hospital, said one doctor, has no patients most of the time. Ordinary people, it turns out, are barred from the area.

This makes it difficult for hotel guests to get taxis in and out of town. But I was travelling with Britain's first parliamentary delegation to Equatorial Guinea, so we were cocooned from reality, taken around in motorcades led by police cars with blaring horns. It was great fun – although judging by the angry glares rather less so for local drivers forced out of the way. They are unlikely to complain, however; a pharmacist recently stopped by police over a minor traffic mishap said they beat him "like an animal".

The invitation to join the trip came from Greg Wales, a British businessman with a long-standing interest in the murkier corners of Africa – not least when he was associated with fellow Brit Simon Mann's plot to overthrow Obiang. In a surreal twist, he now promotes the regime he sought to oust seven years ago. He asked me as a cultural representative, given my interest in African music; I saw a rare opportunity to get a glimpse into a notoriously despotic regime.

Former foreign secretary Michael Ancram had been scheduled to lead the delegation, Wales told me, but was unable to make it. So there were just three backbench Tory MPs – none of whom appeared to have done too much research on Equatorial Guinea before sinking into their business-class seats on the flight out – together with two cultural representatives. The aim was clear: to persuade us this was a good place for business, arts and possibly even tourism.

The rain hammered down as we headed off for our first meeting. It was chaired by Ángel Serafín Seriche Dougan, a dapper fellow who is president of the parliament. Before this he was prime minister until he was forced out amid allegations of corruption – no mean feat in Equatorial Guinea. We sat in a row on his right while senior politicians from his country sat three abreast on sofas to his left. The watches on display were impressive.

“We are here to find out about Equatorial Guinea and take back our impressions,” said Nadine Dorries, the former nurse best known for her anti-abortion campaigning, heading the group in Lord Ancram’s absence. “We are incredibly honoured to be the first parliamentary delegation in your country.”

There followed a polite discussion about the “dynamic democracy” of Equatorial Guinea. Mr Dougan said they held free elections with “all the transparency possible”, discussed the freedoms given to opposition parties and explained how they were reforming their constitution along British lines. “We will have two houses, so better to attend to the people. We are learning from you – you may say we do not go fast enough, but we are good pupils.” He added that the two sets of parliamentarians shared common interests. “From 1996 we have had oil and have been trying to develop the country. We try to use the resources with all possible transparency to develop the country for the welfare of the country.”

Laudable aims. If only they were true. Freedom House, the respected US think tank, places Equatorial Guinea alongside Burma, North Korea and Somalia on its list of the world’s worst regimes, a ruthless one-party state where elections are stolen, opponents jailed and state coffers looted, control of daily life is all-pervasive and the government is accused of grotesque human rights abuses, including torture and extrajudicial killings.

Britain’s representatives responded with the following three questions as the illusory discourse continued: could the opposition raise issues to be debated in parliament? Could they apply for debates? And best of all, whether democratic reform was driven by politicians or the people. This came from Caroline Nokes, MP for Romsey and Southampton North and former chief executive of the National Pony Society.

Then the cream-suited Yalland chipped in: “One of the misconceptions of Equatorial Guinea is that you don’t have a functioning democracy, but you obviously do with state funding and functioning political parties. One of the other major misconceptions is over civil liberties and human rights.”

Dougan said he knew it was a big job for his guests to change the views of people in Europe and show them that not everything in Equatorial Guinea was negative. “You will leave as our first ambassadors,” he concluded with a smile. Little wonder – cameras had been rolling and clicking constantly, ensuring excellent footage for state-controlled broadcasters. Official reports were hailing the arrival of an all-party group of 10 British MPs.

Despite the naivety of their questions, the MPs begun to twig that all was not as it appeared. Dorries confided she had noticed one of the female politicians had a Hermès handbag costing about £15,000. “What sort of parliamentarian has a bag like that? It’s the little things you notice that cause the alarm.”

The answer was obvious, given the precedent set by the president. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo seized power in 1979 from his uncle, a man who claimed to be a sorcerer, collected human skulls and was such a tyrant that one-third of the population fled his murderous rule. Since then Obiang has created a brutal one-party state that revolves around his family. He is lauded on state radio as a god in “permanent contact with the Almighty” who can “decide to kill without anyone calling him to account and without going to hell”; this has not, however, stopped him claiming to be a Catholic and being invited to the Vatican by successive popes.

Few outsiders cared much about events in this Spanish-speaking backwater until the discovery of oil. Then western energy giants moved in and the first family joined the global rich list. Obiang, blaming foreigners for bringing corruption to his country, told people he needed to run the national treasury to prevent others falling into temptation. The fantastic scale of his subsequent larceny became apparent when American inquiries into a collapsed bank discovered that Obiang controlled $700m in deposits there alone.

The most notorious member of the clan is Teodorín, the favourite son and presumed heir. His official salary as minister of agriculture and forestry is about £5,000 a month, but in just three years he spent twice as much as the state's annual education budget on luxury goods. He was caught trying to buy a £234m super yacht earlier this year – and last month was reported to have lost a briefcase in Swaziland with £250,000 inside. "He's an unstable, reckless idiot," commented one US intelligence official.

Little wonder Estanislao Don Malavo, the minister of work and social security, told us: "We used to be very poor. Then God answered our prayers – we discovered oil."

Like others we met, he repeated a mantra fed by their advisers that the world had the wrong impression of Equatorial Guinea. Certainly it is easy to be seduced by the capitals's crumbling colonial buildings, the tropical-gothic cathedral and the fancy new restaurants filled with expats – although the streets seem noticeably more subdued, the people more wary, than in other parts of Africa. "People think that when you come here you will be shot at the airport," said Malavo. "Our mistake was that we did not do anything to portray a more positive image."

The regime is spending huge sums on public relations, although this has not stopped criminal investigations in America and France. Obiang's first attempt to whitewash his image on the global stage came three years ago with the £2m sponsorship of a United Nations science prize, which caused such a furore with human rights groups it was never awarded. Now he is president of the African Union and adopting what one aide called more subtle approaches.

Hence our trip – and its highlight of a promised meeting with Obiang. So with the sun finally shining, we were whisked on the presidential jet over to Bata, the second city. An even bigger motorcade collected us at the airport, security men in reflector shades jumping out and opening doors as our cars slowed down. Waiting at the hotel, we watched a minister guzzling champagne at the bar before being told we must meet the prime minister, Ignacio Milam Tang, first.

Tang sat strangely rigid throughout our meeting, with his back ramrod straight and hands clasped tightly together. The only movement came from his legs, which shook uncontrollably. He was clearly extraordinarily nervous as he explained their goal to develop the country "not just internally but morally in building a better society".

Dorries opened with her now-familiar recitation about how honoured the delegation was to be there. "We are here to dispel some of the myths about Equatorial Guinea and also with humility to offer you help to avoid the mistakes we have made."

Then came a bizarre question-and-answer session. Dorries, for instance, asked if Sipopo hospital would be open for everyone, to which the PM replied that it was new so people were unaware of it – this in a country where one in seven children dies before the age of five. Steve

Baker, the earnest third member of the delegation with a fixation on free markets, asked about tax rates, to which the PM replied he did not know the exact figures “since I’m not in charge of finance”.

After Tang said he did not know how to reply to my question on why he thought the country’s reputation was so bad, Dorries conferred with Baker and finally raised the issue of repression. “We keep hearing that you don’t recognise your image. But that answer does not help us to help you,” she said. “It is particularly the question of human rights.”

Tang replied that some governments tried to impose views that were not suitable because of cultural differences, before adding they were victims of stories emanating from the previous regime. As the meeting ended, he dropped his bombshell: the president was not in town, so he could no longer meet us.

Dorries, clearly irked, demanded another question “if we are not going to meet your president”, and asked which of their cultural values were at odds with those of their critics. Tang looked uneasy, said he didn’t know, then added that their “African values” could never meet “your values in Europe”.

The mood became glacial. Baker and the ambassador to Britain joined in, the latter saying tribalism made democracy difficult, before concluding: “We can’t have people coming from Europe and telling us what to do without understanding Africa and the African way of doing things.”

Dorries, who spent a year working in Zambia when she was younger, replied that the problem was “unacceptable diktats” from governments. “All African countries have tribes, but not all African countries have a reputation like Equatorial Guinea.”

Tang responded that they were not the only African country with a bad reputation. “People have tried to learn the truth of cultures before making accusations. Concerning what you say about diktats of government, let me say again: Equatorial Guinea is trying its best to be a country ruled by law. We are trying to do our best.” He closed the meeting by thanking his visitors for their sincerity.

Outside in the corridor, the mood was tense. “I need a cup of tea, I need a cup of tea,” said Nokes. “No one has offered me a drink. How can this country be developed?”

By the time I returned to the hotel after another meeting, the party was polishing off pizzas and wine. Dorries ended the meal by telling Wales they were not being shown a proper picture of the country and would not write a “whitewash” report; he replied that they had been rude to their hosts and did not understand Africa. A furious row broke out.

Just at that moment, the mayor of Bata and governor of the state turned up for another official dinner. Needless to say, it turned out to be excruciating.

We never met Obiang. Nor did we get our promised trip to Black Beach, briefly home to Simon Mann and the most notorious prison in Africa, with its reputation for systematic savagery and torture. This was less surprising, despite all the claims that its infamy belonged in the past.

But I did meet Gerardo Angüe Mangue, who knows the prison all too well. A leading member of the Progress Party, he received a phone call in March 2008 urging him to get home quickly. When he got there, four policemen handcuffed him and beat him up outside the house, then threw him into a tiny cell at Black Beach. He was accused with fellow party leaders of scheming to overthrow Obiang.

For two months, he was kept in shackles. Police would regularly fetch him, bind his hands and feet and then suspend him from a pole threaded through his arms. In his tidy house, he demonstrated the crouching position he was forced into, his body screaming in agony as candles were lit under his face so the smoke choked him. Sometimes cold water was poured over him. “Many people died under this torture,” he said. “I thought often I would die also.”

The only sustenance was bread and water, while a bucket in the corner served as a toilet. Beatings were commonplace. After a few weeks he was moved to a cell with five other people, and the food improved with chicken necks and wings. For a year he was held incommunicado, then his wife, family and friends were allowed to visit if they paid the guards. Sometimes, they too were beaten.

Mangue, 50, told me women and children were among the inmates. A Lebanese man owing money to members of the country’s elite died after police refused his girlfriend’s pleadings to give him insulin for his diabetes, while a Nigerian died under torture. The prison was cleaned up before Red Cross visits, but most inmates were too scared to talk openly, he said.

He was freed in June after a presidential amnesty, although he was warned he would go straight back to Black Beach if he resumed political activity. So why was he talking openly to me? “It is simple,” he said. “After you have been in Black Beach you have nothing to lose.”

Another dissident offered to show me an alternative view of Equatorial Guinea. He smiled when he saw me emerge from a car with presidential licence plates, then asked if I was sure I wanted to join him since the last foreign journalists in Malabo had been detained by secret police then deported.

We wandered around Campo Yaoundé, a community of 25,000 people in the midst of the capital. The bustling streets were so muddy it was hard to walk without slipping. Soukous and hip-hop pounded out of bars as young children walked around hawking clothes. A man offered to show me his shack, made from planks of wood with a corrugated iron roof. Inside were two rooms for the four people living there, with buckets of water stored by the door and intermittent power. Many houses had far more people crammed in.

“Welcome to my home,” he said with a rueful smile. “Maybe half the people in Malabo live like this. Not just the unemployed but teachers, engineers, even economists. It’s a long way from Sipopo, isn’t it?” There were a handful of books on his shelves bought in Spain. “We must be the only country in the world where there are no bookshops,” he said when I mentioned them. Despite tough circumstances, he offered to share his dinner of rice and stew with me.

After leaving, the dissident gave me an example of how the regime offered illusions of change while retaining control. “The opposition socialist party used to be unable to sell its papers. Now they can sell them openly in the street,” he said. “But anyone buying a paper is followed by plainclothes police and then questioned, harassed and intimidated.”

He pointed to a striking yellow building in the distance, saying it was a new private school owned by the first lady. Then he showed me another yellow building; this one was more like a ramshackle shed, with wooden props that looked like they were stopping it collapsing into the mud. It was the local school, but there were no books, so the 100 pupils learned by rote.

A teacher told me schools used to make a little money by selling uniforms to parents. Last year, however, Obiang's family opened a textile factory and insisted all schools bought uniforms from there, increasing their wealth a tiny bit more and further undermining a poorly resourced education system.

This is the real face of the family ruling the wealthiest country in sub-Saharan Africa: ruthless, heartless and obscenely greedy. While the president stuffs his bank accounts and his spendthrift son fritters away a fortune on flash cars, more than half his people lack access to safe water, child survival rates are reportedly falling and numbers of children receiving primary education dropping. Obiang, meanwhile, concentrates on polishing his tarnished image; one of the visiting MPs was offered £20,000 to lure out colleagues.

The MP rejected the offer. Regardless, I could not help but wonder about such ventures after my unusual glimpse into the world of the parliamentary freebie. The British politicians returned home after a strange trip for which they made few preparations, asked few penetrating questions, sometimes patronised their hosts and never left their purpose-built bubble. Yet to give them credit, they had ventured into the unknown and ultimately refused to buckle down and whitewash the regime as expected.

In our meeting with the president of parliament, I asked the whereabouts of Plácido Micó, the lone voice of genuine opposition in parliament. “We asked him to be here,” Dougan replied. “He is not around. Maybe he is out of the country.”

He wasn't, of course. Micó snorted with derision when I mentioned this before telling me of how he was barred from the media, his meetings were broken up by thugs, his members sacked from their jobs. He has been arrested a dozen times and endured spells in Black Beach.

I asked Micó what he would have told Britain's MPs. “My message is that the people of Equatorial Guinea are suffering one of the worst dictatorships. People here need help. Look at the interests of the people suffering, not of the oil companies and multinationals.

“In the past 10 years most of the foreign people who come here are more interested in oil and to get commercial advantages than the lack of human rights and democracy,” he said. “People here could have a very good life with the oil and gas. Instead it all goes to Mr Obiang and his family.”