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CPLP and Equatorial Guinea: Chronicle of a foretold membership?

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As the next summit of heads of state and government of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), to be held in Maputo in July 2012, approaches, the political pressure to admit Equatorial Guinea as a full member is starting to increase. Malabo's bid to join the CPLP was among the topics discussed between Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos and Portuguese Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho during the latter's visit to Luanda on 17 November 2011. During the press conference held together with Passos Coelho, José Eduardo dos Santos emphasized that Equatorial Guinea has taken serious steps towards joining the CPLP, and added that, as a consequence, he believed that Portugal "will not fail to make the necessary diligence to ensure that this aspiration of the state of Equatorial Guinea can finally be achieved".¹ A few days later, on 24 November, the President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, paid an official visit to Angola. Obiang confirmed later on that he discussed with the Angolan President Malabo's bid to join the CPLP, and added that "in the next summit, possibly, Equatorial Guinea will become a member country".² Obiang's visit to Luanda triggered a wave of supporting statements

from different Lusophone countries. On 26 November, the Prime Minister of Cape Verde, José Maria Neves, and the Prime Minister of Guinea-Bissau, Carlos Gomes Júnior, both made it clear that they hoped that Equatorial Guinea could join the CPLP in July 2012, although they were careful enough to add that the membership was not yet guaranteed.³ On 5 December, in Brasília, the Angolan Foreign Minister, George Chicoti, met with his Brazilian counterpart, Antônio Patriota, and among the topics discussed was Malabo's future membership of the CPLP. In the joint press conference with Patriota, Chicoti said they thought that Equatorial Guinea "has implemented some of the requirements that the previous [CPLP] summit recommended". Thus, it would be welcome if, "in the near future, Equatorial Guinea could become part of the CPLP".⁴

It appears, however, that the next CPLP summit in Maputo could experience the same disagreements and inaction that occurred in Luanda in 2010. Since it was formed in 1996, the Luanda summit was the first time that the CPLP has been on the verge of a serious political crisis. Portugal was the only member state against the immediate mem-

1 "José Eduardo dos Santos advoga memorando para Guiné-Bissau" (*Angop*, 17 November 2011).

2 Alexandre Neto, "A Guiné Equatorial irá aderir à CPLP" (*VOA News*, 25 November 2011).

3 "Cabo Verde e Guiné-Bissau esperam haver condições para adesão da Guiné Equatorial em 2012" (*Lusa*, 26 November 2011).

4 "Ministro de Angola deseja integração da Guiné Equatorial "nos próximos tempos"" (*Lusa*, 5 December 2011).



bership of the Equatorial Guinea. The Portuguese President, Aníbal Cavaco Silva, argued that the CPLP could not ignore its statutory provisions, namely the fact that the CPLP was a multilateral institution of “Portuguese-speaking” countries.⁵ Article 6 of the CPLP charter says that membership requires the adoption of Portuguese as an official language, and imposes unanimity as a criterion to admit new members to the Community. Indeed, the then-Portuguese Foreign Minister, Luís Amado, emphasized that the decision had to be unanimous.⁶ In the end, the CPLP limited itself to open membership negotiations in accordance with the statutes, and the Angolan presidency of the CPLP, as well as the Executive Secretary, Domingos Simões Pereira, were mandated to develop a program – a roadmap – to support the reforms required in order for Equatorial Guinea to fully comply with the CPLP statutory provisions, particularly with regard to the adoption and effective use of the Portuguese language. Moreover, it was also agreed that in July 2012, Angola would have to submit an evaluation report on the progress made by Malabo.⁷ Just six months before the Maputo summit, it is obvious to anyone that Equatorial Guinea is far away from an “effective use of the Portuguese language”. Therefore, even if the evaluation report chooses to highlight the few examples available in order to emphasize the progress made by Malabo, the truth is that Equatorial Guinea is still far away from complying with the CPLP statutory provisions. Moreover, the roadmap does not limit itself to the adoption of the Portuguese language. Still, regardless of the content of the evaluation report that will be submitted before the Maputo summit, its conclusions are not binding. As a consequence, the decision will always be political. In July 2010, it became obvious that Portugal thought that the accession would take some time. Luís Amado

The CPLP member states – and especially Angola and Brazil – wish to strengthen their bilateral economic relations with Equatorial Guinea, and benefit from its oil and gas wealth, as well as reinforce their geopolitical influence within the Gulf of Guinea. Unlike Angola and Brazil, Portugal’s political and economic bilateral interests are of little relevance. However, Portugal will have to try to find a balance that embraces the interests and beliefs of domestic and external players.

compared Equatorial Guinea’s accession to the CPLP to the Croatian and Turkish accession processes to the European Union (EU).⁸ In other words, as it happens with EU membership negotiations, Malabo’s accession process could take a decade. With the Portuguese exception, however, no one among the Lusophone countries is willing to take that long, even if, in order to do so, the CPLP statutory provisions have to be lightly interpreted. While visiting Luanda, on 17 November, the Portuguese Prime Minister, Pedro Passos Coelho, said that Portugal was “open to consider the enlargement of the CPLP, to those who demonstrate sharing” its objectives and principles.⁹ On 5 December, the Portuguese Deputy Minister and Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, Miguel Relvas, referring to the accession of Equatorial Guinea to the CPLP, said in Maputo that “we have always been able to open ourselves to others. We never closed ourselves to others”.¹⁰ These statements are vague and allow the Portuguese government to accept or refuse Malabo’s full membership in the forthcoming Maputo summit. It remains to be seen, though, how President Cavaco Silva – one of the staunchest opponents in the previous summit of Malabo’s immediate full membership – evaluates the progress made by Equatorial Guinea since July 2010. The content of the evaluation report – although not binding – might play a crucial role. If it is structured mainly in order to highlight the progress made by Equatorial Guinea and to devalue the lack of compliance with some of the goals set, then it will be more difficult to stand against Malabo’s immediate membership. If not, Portugal might have some political breathing room. Either way, it all boils down to one simple question: from the Portuguese point of view, is it worthwhile to clash with Angola and Brazil, in particular, because of Malabo’s accession to the CPLP? The CPLP member states – and especially Angola and Brazil – wish to strengthen their bilateral economic rela-

5 “Cavaco: entrada da Guiné Equatorial na CPLP deve obedecer a estatutos” (*Lusa*, 17 July 2010).

6 “Amado vê aproximação da Guiné Equatorial à CPLP com “naturalidade”” (*Lusa*, 22 July 2010).

7 “VIII Conferência de Chefes de Estado e de Governo da Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa” (Luanda, 23 de Julho de 2010).

8 “Guiné Equatorial não vai ser aceite como estado membro da CPLP” (*i*, 23 July 2010).

9 “Relação Portugal-Angola é “uma aposta estratégica”” (Government of Portugal, 17 November 2011).

10 “Miguel Relvas defende que CPLP deve estar “aberta a todos”” (*Lusa*, 12 December 2011).



tions with Equatorial Guinea, and benefit from its oil and gas wealth,¹¹ as well as reinforce their geopolitical influence within the Gulf of Guinea. Unlike Angola and Brazil, Portugal's political and economic bilateral interests are of little relevance.¹² However, Portugal will have to try to find a balance that embraces the interests and beliefs of domestic and external players. The possibility of Malabo becoming an annoying factor of friction in diplomatic relations with Angola and Brazil – in the forthcoming Maputo summit, as well as in other summits later on, and the perception that what is at stake does not justify it – could lead Portugal to cave in to political pressure and accept Equatorial Guinea's immediate full membership. "It is not difficult for the government to declare [Portuguese] an official language, but I do not know if it makes much sense to simply declare it official if nobody speaks it", the Equatorial Guinean Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Pastor Micha Ondó Bile,

stated in January 2009 while visiting Lisbon. Indeed, as was pointed out by Gerhard Seibert, "the imposition of the Portuguese as third official language by the Obiang regime does not make Equatorial Guinea a truly Portuguese-speaking country".¹³ Aware of this stumbling block, it is possible that in the forthcoming Maputo summit CPLP member states will adopt an informal rather than substantive evaluation rubric, allowing Malabo to achieve its long sought goal.

11 See Gerhard Seibert, "Equatorial Guinea's External Relations: São Tomé e Príncipe and the CPLP" (Paper delivered at the conference "Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the 40th Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain", Hofstra University, 2-4 April 2009).

12 Portuguese energy company Galp Energia has a 15% stake in the potential construction of a second natural gas liquefaction unit in Equatorial Guinea.

13 Seibert, "Equatorial Guinea's External Relations" (see footnote 11).

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