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The Rise of Kleptocracy

AUTOCRATS VERSUS ACTIVISTS IN AFRICA

Brett L. Carter

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The Central African region is experiencing a crisis greater than any since the “third wave” of democratization reached Africa nearly three decades ago. In the Republic of Congo, President Denis Sassou-Nguesso confronts a debt-to-GDP ratio approaching 120 percent and a humanitarian crisis in Pool, the region that lies around Brazzaville, the national capital. In Gabon, President Ali Ben Bongo faces a domestic opposition that refuses to accept the fraudulent August 2016 presidential election, as well as a diaspora that has been shining a spotlight on his government’s violence in the election’s wake. In Cameroon, President Paul Biya’s violent response to calls for political reform in the English-speaking region of the country is fostering demands for secession. In Chad, President Idriss Déby has suspended elections until further notice, rousing the ire of civil society groups. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), President Joseph Kabila has set an election for December 2018, with pressure building on him to step down rather than run for a third term. And in the small West African country of Togo, President Faure Gnassingbé confronts an opposition newly energized by massive protests that swept the nation in August and September 2017.

The falling world price of oil (a commodity on whose export the region heavily depends), clear violations of democratic norms, and the positive example provided by neighbors such as the Gambia, where a dictator was peacefully turned out of power in early 2017, have all played a role in driving events. In order fully to grasp what is happening, however, one must understand how the struggle for political reform is being waged across the region.

This essay makes three central points. First, as Western governments

have become more willing over the years to impose sanctions in response to human-rights abuses, the region's autocrats are anxious to inoculate themselves from Western pressure. They do so, in part, by using their financial resources to compel policy makers abroad to ignore persistent human-rights abuses. Second, citizens and diaspora communities are responding by turning to international judicial institutions to apply pressure on Central Africa's autocrats. Third, these autocrats have responded by fine-tuning the tools of modern autocracy. These include professional "image-laundering" campaigns, an attempt to remove Africa from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and recourse to private financial institutions that enable more sophisticated money laundering.

Today, many of Africa's autocrats have enough disposable income (even after paying for domestic quiescence) to create powerful constituencies abroad. These constituencies, in turn, have vested financial interests in the survival of autocratic regimes. Scholars have long sought to understand how external forces—often international creditors, but also transnational NGOs using "name-and-shame" campaigns—constrain the domestic autonomy of the world's autocrats. As Central Africa's autocrats attempt to loosen those constraints, citizens and diaspora communities have turned to international courts in hopes of imposing new constraints. The struggle over political reform in Central Africa has gone global.

The origins of massive, state-sanctioned corruption in Central Africa lie about a half-century ago, in the years following decolonization. French president Charles de Gaulle, eager to rebuild an economy that had been devastated by World War II, sought to give France a major energy industry. To do this, he created a pair of companies, one of which would focus on the Middle East and North Africa while the other dealt with sub-Saharan Africa. That second company, *Essence et Lubrifiants de France* (or *Elf*) was "under full state control to support [de Gaulle's] African policies. *Elf* was . . . a parallel diplomacy to control certain African states, above all at the key moment of decolonization. Opaque operations were organized to keep certain countries stable."¹

The system's centerpiece was Gabon. This tiny, thinly populated country located where the Equator meets Africa's west coast was one of the continent's first major oil producers. Until 1960, it had been a French colony. The arrangement was simple: When Omar Bongo became president in 1967, he sold Gabon's crude oil to *Elf* at well below market prices, and then transferred a share of oil revenue from Gabonese coffers back to France to fund Gaullist election campaigns.² In return, the French government made Bongo one of the richest men in the world. For every barrel of crude oil that Gabon sold to *Elf*, the company received 57 percent of the proceeds, the Gabonese state treasury received 25 percent, and Bongo himself received 18 percent.³

These proceeds paid for, among other things, a vast portfolio of French real estate that included at least 33 properties, with three man-

sions in Paris alone and a villa on the Riviera.⁴ Underpinning the system were the French Intercontinental Bank (FIBA), created in 1975 to make paying African presidents easier, and a French military base in Libreville that featured a tunnel linking it to Bongo's presidential palace.⁵

The system was created by the French right, but the left soon joined. President François Mitterrand of the Socialist Party (PS), elected in 1981 after 25 years of Gaullist rule, vowed a new era of transparency. Bongo responded with a threat: "Do you want me to give my oil to the Americans?"⁶ Mitterrand relented, leaving the Elf system intact. Soon Central Africa's autocrats were sluicing campaign funds to the PS as well as the Gaullists. "Am I of the right, the left, or the center?" Bongo once mused. "No, I have friends everywhere."⁷ Before he died in 2009, Bongo had effectively captured the entire French political class.

This system persists. In 2011, Robert Bourgi revealed that he had been the bagman linking former French president Jacques Chirac and his lieutenant, former premier Dominique de Villepin, with Central Africa's autocrats. Between 1997 and 2005, Bourgi claimed, he had delivered some US\$20 million, roughly half of which had gone to Chirac's 2002 reelection campaign. "There was never less than 5 million francs," but the amount per suitcase "could go up to 15 million."⁸ Jean-François Probst, another Chirac aide, later said that Nicolas Sarkozy continued the practice during his own presidency (2007–12), reportedly receiving a billion CFA (Central African) francs from Bongo in 2007.⁹ In July 2015, Sarkozy reportedly collected about 100,000 euros for giving a single speech in Brazzaville.¹⁰

Allegations of financial improprieties plagued the campaign period leading up to the 2017 French presidential election. Prime Minister Manuel Valls was the frontrunner for the Socialist nomination until March 2016, when the French press revealed that Denis Sassou-Nguesso had been funding a chamber orchestra run by Valls's wife. Jean-Yves Ollivier, suspected of trafficking illicit diamonds in Central Africa,¹¹ was the reported money conduit; in 2015, Valls made Ollivier a member of the French Legion of Honor.¹² In March 2017, Marine Le Pen of the right-wing National Front (FN) visited Chad's President Idriss Déby just weeks before the election. The trip's timing—as well as Le Pen's remarks—raised suspicions. By her own account, she told Déby that she was a "defender of state sovereignty."¹³ In Central Africa, "sovereignty" has become code for letting autocrats do what they want domestically without concern for human rights. Many observers regarded Le Pen's comment as a fundraising pitch.

In 2011, Bourgi was quite clear about what Central Africa's autocrats received for their campaign contributions: "France would close its eyes to certain excesses of power in Africa."¹⁴ This was evident in October 2015, when French president François Hollande (like Mitterrand, a Socialist) lent his support to Sassou-Nguesso's efforts to hold a constitutional referendum designed to let him to stay in office for a third term.¹⁵

Central Africa's autocrats have exploited their financial resources to cap-

ture politicians elsewhere. In 2014, Sassou-Nguesso's government owed Brazil \$280 million,¹⁶ implying a debt-service burden high enough to constrain the Congolese president's ability to buy domestic support. Eager for relief, Sassou-Nguesso's government seems to have relied on procurement contracts that it had been extending to Asperbras, a Brazilian firm with close ties to former presidents Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. Sassou-Nguesso's debt-relief bill, wrote reporter José Casado, passed the Brazilian Congress "in record time and without debate in the Senate."¹⁷

Sassou-Nguesso had been giving such contracts to Asperbras since 2012. That year, the company began work on the Maloukou Industrial and Commercial Zone, a project worth \$500 million. It also won a \$200 million contract from Sassou-Nguesso's government for "geological mapping and mining prospecting." In 2013, Asperbras was contracted to drill four-thousand wells across the Republic of Congo. In 2014, the French weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* reported that these well-drilling contracts cost Congo five to seven times more than comparable work in the (much drier) Sahel. To support these cost-inflated projects, the company created Asperbras Congo, a subsidiary that was fronted by a sports agent and convicted tax evader named José Veiga.¹⁸

On two other occasions, Sassou-Nguesso has sought to secure debt relief by influencing policy makers abroad. In 2004, his country had the world's highest per capita debt, so he sought relief from the IMF and World Bank under their Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Between 2006 and 2010, Sassou-Nguesso allowed quarterly audits of the state oil company and fired his son, Denis Christel, as head of oil marketing. The president also reportedly persuaded the IMF's country director for Congo, Yaya Moussa, who oversaw debt-relief talks until 2009, to falsify oil-revenue data.¹⁹ In 2011, two years after Moussa resigned and a year after debt relief was granted, he resurfaced as founder and CEO of Kontinent LLC, which markets Congolese oil. In 2013, Moussa became a director of the Banque Africaine pour l'Industrie et Commerce (BAIC). His fellow directors included Veiga and Jean-Philippe Amvame Ndong, the head of another known Sassou-Nguesso front company.²⁰

Currently, Sassou-Nguesso is facing yet another financial crisis. Although Congo's debt was forgiven in 2010, by mid-2017 the country's debt-to-GDP ratio had risen to roughly 120 percent, well above the 77 percent that Sassou-Nguesso had acknowledged during a March 2017 IMF visit.²¹ As of April 2017, Congo was also technically in default to major oil traders.²² Out of cash and again in need of IMF help, Sassou-Nguesso engaged Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the French Socialist politician who had once been France's finance minister and later headed the IMF.²³

Central Africa's autocrats also routinely try to influence U.S. policy makers, often by hiring Washington, D.C., lobbyists. The Foreign Agents' Registration Act (FARA) requires foreign agents to disclose their activities on behalf of foreign governments: every dollar they receive, every call they make or email they send, every meeting they ar-

range, and every political campaign to which they contribute. As a result, there is a great deal of data about foreign influence in D.C.

The FARA-mandated lobbying disclosures show that Sassou-Nguesso turns to lobbyists when he faces political crises at home.²⁴ The first of these came in 1990, as he was losing power. There was another around Congo's 2002 presidential election, and then came his government's debt troubles and resulting campaign for HIPC relief between 2006 and 2010. One of this campaign's major goals was to render Congolese affairs as opaque as possible to "vulture funds"—private-equity firms that buy distressed sovereign debt in secondary markets, then sue governments to pay it back. Such funds use private investigators to uncover corruption as a strategy to make defaulting governments more likely to pay up. By uncovering evidence of Sassou-Nguesso's massive graft, these private-equity firms jeopardized his campaign for debt relief.

In 2008 alone—at the midpoint of his campaign—Sassou-Nguesso spent nearly \$4 million to advance his debt-relief bid. He hired four lobbying firms: the Livingston Group, Trout Cacheris, Chlopak Leonard Schechter and Associates (now known as CLS Strategies), and the Loeffler Group. According to the Sunlight Foundation, lobbyists for Congo "met with members of Congress, their staff, and executive branch officials about 1500 times."²⁵ The lobbying effort helped to secure the June 2009 reintroduction in Congress of a bill, the "Stop VULTURE Funds Act" (H.R. 2932).²⁶ This bill, in its own words, vowed to prevent equity firms from "speculating in and profiteering from defaulted sovereign debt at the expense of both the impoverished citizens of the poor nations and the taxpayers of the world who have participated in international debt relief." Put less pejoratively, the bill would have deprived U.S. citizens of the ability to seek debt repayment in courts.

Sassou-Nguesso's lobbyists never secured passage of the bill. Yet the effort cost the Congolese autocrat little. The nearly \$4 million he spent in 2008 represented a mere fraction of the amount of oil revenue that went missing from the Congolese treasury each year during the early 2000s.²⁷

The Diasporas Weigh In

Reflecting the magnitude of the ongoing challenges that autocrats face, the list of political prisoners in Central Africa is growing. In Congo, Sassou-Nguesso's two chief opponents in the March 2016 presidential election remain in prison, as do several prominent journalists. In Cameroon, Biya imprisoned dozens of English-speaking activists. In 2017, Gabonese security services used tear gas against students, teachers, oil-company employees, and opposition activists, and they jailed dozens of citizens.

As state repression has made domestic opposition costlier, Central Africans living outside the region have become central to the struggle for political reform. The Gabonese diaspora in Paris has been protesting every Saturday since 3 September 2016, just after the 27 August 2016

presidential-election results were announced and President Ali Bongo (Omar Bongo's son) launched an assault on opposition headquarters in a bid to crush citizens' protests over obvious electoral fraud. The Gabonese diaspora also protests visits by Bongo aides to Paris and New York, hoping to draw attention to human-rights violations. The Congolese diaspora in Paris, led by Andréa Ngombet's SassouFit Collective—SassouFit is a phonetic play on *ça suffit* ("that's enough")—launched a social-media campaign to block the IMF bailout in 2017. In Washington, a diaspora group called the Cameroon American Council has worked with members of Congress to request a State Department inquiry into whether U.S. support for the Biya government violates the Leahy Law, which prohibits military aid to known human-rights violators.

These campaigns have shifted the balance of power between Central Africa's autocrats and their citizens. Again, the Gabonese diaspora has been prominent. Their weekly protests in Paris attracted the attention of the European Parliament. Led by Jo Leinen, a member from Germany, the European Parliament has passed resolutions calling for "consultations" under the Cotonou Agreement, an accord between the EU and developing countries passed in 2000 that in part "aims to safeguard and promote human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law . . . through political dialogue." The European Council last invoked the Cotonou Agreement in December 2015 in response to state repression in Burundi; Brussels cut financial aid to President Pierre Nkurunziza's government just four months later. Leinen has called for eventual sanctions against Bongo and senior regime officials. "Ali Bongo is not a legitimate president, and . . . it's unacceptable for us to do nothing."²⁸

Over the past decade, diaspora activists have opted to take the fight for reform to institutions far harder for autocrats to control: foreign courts of law. Their efforts began in March 2007, when Paris-based NGOs filed a criminal complaint against five then-presidents: Bongo and Sassou-Nguesso, plus Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaoré, Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang, and Angola's José Eduardo dos Santos. The complaint alleged that their assets in France were grossly incompatible with their official salaries, and hence must have been obtained with laundered money. Known as the *biens mal acquis* (ill-gotten gains) affair, it soon focused on Bongo, Obiang, and Sassou-Nguesso.

All three have tried repeatedly to block the proceedings. Each has privately petitioned successive French presidents, all of whom demurred in the face of media attention. In June 2017, French prosecutors brought President Obiang's son Teodorin to trial. The verdict was announced on 27 October 2017. It was three years in jail and a fine of 30 million euros, both suspended, and so they will only be enforced if Teodorin is found to have reoffended. French prosecutors will likely turn next to the Sassou-Nguesso family. Several of the latter's relatives—including a nephew and a daughter—have already been indicted and a range of assets seized.²⁹

Legal proceedings adverse to the autocrats and those close to them have also taken place in the United States, Canada, Italy, Portugal, and Switzerland. In late 2016, presidential nephew Wilfrid Nguesso was barred from Canadian residency after the Federal Court of Canada ruled that he likely belonged to a “criminal organization.”³⁰ Earlier that year, in June, First Lady Antoinette Sassou-Nguesso was served with a subpoena in Washington, compelling her to give a deposition in the Commisimpex affair, a legal dispute over an unpaid government debt from the 1980s. In 2015, two U.S. federal courts had ruled that the Sassou-Nguesso government owes Commisimpex more than \$1 billion. Sassou-Nguesso’s finance minister was served with a subpoena related to the case in October 2016.³¹

Foreign nationals who launder money for Central Africa’s autocrats have also been taken to court. In February 2016, Portuguese authorities arrested José Veiga of Asperbras Congo and charged him with money laundering. In July 2016, José Mauricio Caldeira, Asperbras’s finance director, was arrested in Argentina and extradited to Portugal.³² In November 2016, Roberto Colnaghi, Asperbras’s CEO, was arrested in Portugal for public corruption.³³ In January 2017, Philippe Chironi was convicted of laundering some 83 million euros between 2006 and 2011 on behalf of the Sassou-Nguesso family via San Marino’s Banque Commerciale.³⁴ Most recently, in September 2017, the U.S. government announced that it planned to file charges against Joseph Szlavik, Bongo’s lobbyist, as part of a longstanding money-laundering probe.³⁵

The French judicial system is now prosecuting Central African autocrats for activities that the French political class long fostered. With these and other high-profile court cases, media scrutiny has made the autocrats virtual pariahs in Europe and North America and rendered them more vulnerable to international sanctions. Collecting aid and debt relief has become harder for these autocrats. So has making allies among other African heads of state, who help to chart African Union (AU) policy and occasionally rubber-stamp obviously fraudulent elections. In response, Central Africa’s autocrats have begun investing heavily in propaganda beyond their own nations’ borders in hopes of laundering their damaged personal reputations.

Again, Sassou-Nguesso is a leader. The weekly *Forbes Afrique* has emerged as a mainstay publication for Africa’s emerging upper middle class, especially its technology entrepreneurs. The magazine is also among Sassou-Nguesso’s chief political instruments. Founded in 2011 by Lucien Ebata, who has been implicated in Sassou-Nguesso’s money-laundering apparatus,³⁶ *Forbes Afrique* has been exceptionally kind to Sassou-Nguesso. Its first issue led with this: “Congo-Brazzaville: The New Era. . . . [Since 1997, Sassou Nguesso] has worked tirelessly to bring back hope for life to 3.5 million compatriots.”³⁷

Forbes Afrique routinely holds conferences in Brazzaville that are briefly attended by leading French politicians in exchange for honoraria as high as 100,000 euros.³⁸ *Forbes Afrique* is not alone, and perhaps

not even the most influential. In 2016, the multilingual news service Euronews expanded to the African continent via its subsidiary, Africanews. A partner was needed, and Sassou-Nguesso eagerly sought the role, promising to build the service a headquarters in Brazzaville.³⁹

Like *Forbes Afrique*, Africanews provides favorable coverage to Sassou-Nguesso, if only by omission: It has been virtually silent about the atrocities that Sassou-Nguesso's military has committed in the Pool region since April 2016.⁴⁰ Other Central African autocrats control major pan-African news outlets. Biya and Obiang, for instance, jointly own Africa 24.

Jeune Afrique, the most prominent current-affairs magazine in French-speaking Africa, has long had a reputation for selling favorable political coverage to Central African autocrats. The magazine carefully guards its finances, but in 2005 a leaked document revealed which governments pay for positive coverage. The list included Bongo, Obiang, and Rwandan President Paul Kagame.⁴¹ Sassou-Nguesso maintains a close relationship with *Jeune Afrique* as well. The wife of its editorial director, François Soudan, is a longtime friend and, since 2015, has been Sassou-Nguesso's tourism minister. *Jeune Afrique* routinely publishes puff pieces, such as this headline from June 2017: "How Denis Sassou Nguesso Became a Notable [Village Elder] at 10 Years Old."⁴²

Sassou-Nguesso also has ties to the most influential French daily newspapers. His domestic-propaganda apparatus is operated by Jean-Paul Pigasse, a Frenchman who in 2002 was implicated in Sassou-Nguesso's money-laundering operation.⁴³ Pigasse ostensibly owns the company that publishes *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*, Sassou-Nguesso's propaganda newspaper. Pigasse's nephew is Matthieu Pigasse, the banker who purchased two of France's leading newspapers, *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in 2013. Some in Central Africa suspect that part of the capital for the purchase may have come from Congo.⁴⁴

Paid lobbyists are a key part of African autocrats' image-laundering campaigns. In October 2015, with the 2016 presidential election less than a year away, Bongo signed a \$1.38 million lobbying contract with the Atlanta-based Bryan Cave law firm to burnish his reputation.⁴⁵ One of Bongo's favorite tactics has been to depict himself before Western audiences as a champion of conservationism and environmental protections.

In 2009, Obiang hired the D.C.-based Qorvis Communications/MSL-Group to conduct an extensive public-relations campaign. For a \$60,000 monthly retainer, Qorvis issued press releases trumpeting Obiang's economic and human-rights records, and staged interviews with Obiang lieutenants that it then posted on YouTube as if they were legitimate news programs. In one, a Qorvis employee asks Equatorial Guinea's ambassador to the United States what advice he would give other African countries about how to foster democracy and economic growth.⁴⁶

Paid advocates for Central African dictators have drawn at least one trusted D.C. think tank, the Atlantic Council, into their image-laundering

efforts. Two of Bongo's frequent advocates—Madison Avenue public-relations operative Richard Attias and D.C. lobbyist Joseph Szlavik—have also been donors to the Atlantic Council. In 2015, according to the Council's own annual report for that year (which lists donations in ranges), the total that the two (taken together) gave was not less than \$55,000 and could have been as high as \$109,998.⁴⁷ In 2016, the Council nominated Bongo for its "Global Citizen Award," a shocking move given his implication in the *biens mal acquis* affair and his government's widespread reputation as one of the most corrupt in Africa. (In fact, he could not attend the Council's New York awards gala owing to the strife that had broken out in his capital following the fraudulent 2016 presidential election.) The Council later claimed that it had "received no contribution from any corporate or individual funder with investments or interests in Gabon in relationship to this award nomination or any work we do on Gabon."⁴⁸

It is hard to see how that statement can be squared with the donations that the Atlantic Council has taken from Szlavik, a registered Bongo lobbyist, and Attias, who has been paid by the Bongo government to organize a PR event in Libreville. The Atlantic Council has been implicated in other image-laundering campaigns as well. In 2012, the Council held a conference that the *New Republic* described as "essentially a love poem" to the authoritarian president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.⁴⁹ And in June 2016, Bronwyn Bruton, the deputy director of the Council's Africa Center, wrote a *New York Times* column in which she acknowledged the "frightful" human-rights situation in Eritrea, but knocked a UN report on abuses in the country as "shoddy."⁵⁰ Bruton's article did not include a disclosure that the Atlantic Council accepts money from Nevsun Resources, the Canadian mining firm implicated in Eritrea's forced-labor scandal.⁵¹

To go with their reputation laundering, Central Africa's autocrats have also sought to weaken international legal institutions that might pose a threat to them. The main target has been the ICC. However flawed it may be, there is strong evidence that the ICC has constrained human-rights violations in Africa. The ICC is also currently investigating the Bongo government for its attack on opposition headquarters following the August 2016 presidential election. The autocrats would love to withdraw their countries from the ICC, but doing so (or even talking about doing so) would seal their international-pariah status.

What to do, then? The autocrats' preferred workaround was to try to get the African Union as a whole to pull out of the ICC all at once. A unified withdrawal, the autocrats calculated, would let them take cover behind Africa's democracies. The autocrats prepared the ground as best they could, striving to create the impression that African citizens were demanding withdrawal. In November 2016, Sassou-Nguesso even staged a youth march in Brazzaville, which *Jeune Afrique* and *Africanews* dutifully reported.⁵² In January 2017, a vote on the matter was taken in closed session at the AU's summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

But there was no agreement on anything beyond a nonbinding call to withdraw from the ICC, which left the autocrats with their underlying problem unsolved.⁵³ The ICC and its jurisdiction remain threats.

Be the Bank

Central Africa's dictators have a long history as players in banking, dating from Elf's creation of the FIBA bank more than four decades ago. In recent years, the autocrats' engagement in international finance seems to have grown. In 2000, amid a French public-corruption scandal involving Elf, FIBA was effectively rebranded as the Gabonese and French International Bank (BGFI). Its senior leadership remained the same. In Brazzaville, BGFI even occupied the same building as the defunct FIBA.⁵⁴ BGFI has since grown into the largest financial-services firm in Central Africa, with assets in excess of \$4 billion as of December 2010. Headquartered, as FIBA had been, in Libreville, BGFI now has subsidiaries in Abidjan, Antananarivo, Brazzaville, Cotonou, Kinshasa, Malabo, and Paris. The Brazzaville, Kinshasa, and Libreville branches are effectively controlled, respectively, by Sassou-Nguesso, Kabila, and Bongo.

Doubts have arisen about the integrity of these banks. To give one example, the Swiss NGO Berne Declaration (now known as Public Eye) has reported on BGFI Brazzaville's role in what the NGO has called the "highly questionable business relationship" between a Swiss oil-trading concern called Philia and the Congolese state oil refinery, which was being run at the time (2013) by the president's son, Denis Christel Sassou-Nguesso. Philia, though based in Switzerland, is controlled by Jean-Philippe Amvame Ndong, who, along with Yaya Moussa and José Veiga, was a director of the BAIC in Cotonou.⁵⁵ In Brazzaville, BGFI is run by Jean-Dominique Okemba, a Sassou-Nguesso nephew who also heads the National Security Service, his uncle's domestic-surveillance agency. Congo's leading bank, in other words, is overseen by the country's top secret policeman.

The Kinshasa subsidiary of BGFI has only been around since 2010, but even in that short time it has been repeatedly implicated in Joseph Kabila's money-laundering operations. Kabila's younger sister, Gloria Mteyu, holds a 35 percent stake, while his adoptive brother, Francis Selemani Mtwale, is the bank's CEO. In 2016, a former BGFI Kinshasa employee named Jean-Jacques Lumumba turned over documents to the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*.⁵⁶ Based on these, the paper reported that the DRC central bank had deposited \$43 million in a BGFI account owned by a food-processing company chaired by Albert Yuma, who also heads the state mining company. The money was never repaid.⁵⁷ The story led DRC democracy activists and the Belgian foreign minister to demand an immediate investigation.⁵⁸

In 2017, Global Witness described Yuma as a "commercial front" for

Kabila. In 2015, Gécamines, the state mining company, instructed BGFI to withdraw \$8 million in cash, supposedly for “advance tax payments” to be sent to the DRC’s central bank. A Yuma associate seems to have withdrawn the funds, but it has proven impossible to verify whether they were ever actually deposited at the central bank. One “well-placed source” has called the transaction an “embezzlement operation.”⁵⁹ There have been other suggestions of financial improprieties, including when, in 2016, the government’s electoral commission paid BGFI \$2.4 million in “overdraft fees.”⁶⁰

The struggle for political reform in Central Africa has gone global. To push back against international constraints on what they can get away with at home, the region’s autocrats have sought to purchase policy makers abroad. Citizens and diaspora communities have answered with legal cases, for courts are far harder to capture. The resulting investigations, in turn, have led the autocrats to invest in image laundering, to look for ways to undermine international legal institutions, and to expand their involvement in private banking.

The implications of these changes are not well understood. Autocrats around the world spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on D.C. lobbyists, but it remains unclear whether this spending yields results. Though autocrats’ image-laundering campaigns are increasingly sophisticated, no one has yet determined how extensive they are, or what effects they have. The implications of the move by Central Africa’s autocrats into financial services are unclear as well.

Social scientists have long characterized autocratic politics as a struggle between rulers and ruled. It is. But the contest has now been internationalized. To fight back, the international community must understand how autocrats are reaching beyond their borders to influence politics globally.

NOTES

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