

Equatorial Guinea

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	6
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

An apparent coup attempt against President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo involving suspected foreign mercenaries was derailed in March 2004 with the arrests of 19 men in Equatorial Guinea and 70 others in Zimbabwe. A government crackdown on foreigners ensued, and hundreds of immigrants, mostly West Africans, were deported or fled. Obiang's ruling Democratic Party and its allies won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections in April that were criticized by the opposition and foreign observers as seriously flawed.

Equatorial Guinea achieved independence in 1968 following 190 years of Spanish rule. It has since been one of the world's most tightly closed and repressive societies. Obiang seized power in 1979 by deposing and murdering his uncle, Francisco Macias Nguema. Demands from donor countries for democratic reforms prompted Obiang to proclaim a new "era of pluralism" in January 1992. Political parties were legalized and multiparty elections announced, but in practice, Obiang and his clique wield all power. Obiang won the 1996 presidential election, which was marred by official intimidation, a near total boycott by the political opposition, and very low voter turnout. In the 1999 parliamentary elections, which were tainted by intimidation and fraud, the ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) won 75 of 80 seats. Many opposition candidates were arrested or confined to their villages prior to the polls.

The four main opposition challengers withdrew from the December 2002 presidential election, citing irregularities. The candidates said soldiers, police, and electoral officials were present at polling stations and were opening ballot envelopes after votes were cast. Obiang was declared the winner of his third 7-year term with 99.5 percent of the vote. Following the election, the administration of Equatorial Guinea announced the formation of a "government of national unity" that brought members of eight small parties, all considered close to the PDGE, into the cabinet. Despite an extensive reshuffle in 2004, key cabinet positions continue to be held by presidential relatives and loyalists.

The expansion of parliament to 100 seats in 2004 did little to break the dominance of the PDGE. Parliamentary elections in April were swept by a coalition headed by the PDGE, which captured 68 of the 100 seats. The party's allies won another 30 seats. The opposition Convergence for Social Democracy, which complained of numerous irregularities and voter intimidation by the ruling party, won the remaining 2 seats.

The trial of 19 suspected coup plotters began in August 2004 in the capital, with a separate trial for 70 others underway in Zimbabwe, where authorities had detained a group of men in March allegedly en route to Equatorial Guinea. Amnesty International has expressed concern over the likely use of torture in extracting confessions from the defendants in Malabo, particularly in the case of a German suspect who died in custody. Many of the accused plotters, who hail from various African and European nations, have ties to the defunct mercenary firm Executive Outcomes, founded by apartheid-era South African military officers. The Equatorial Guinea government has accused Severo Moto, an opposition figure living in exile in Spain, South African financier and oil broker Eli Calil, and Mark Thatcher, son of former British Prime

Minister Margaret Thatcher, of being behind the scheme to oust Obiang. Hundreds of West Africans left or were expelled from the country in late March as the government rounded up foreigners in the wake of the coup attempt, jailing many for alleged visa violations.

Equatorial Guinea is the continent's third-largest oil producer and boasts one of the highest figures for per capita gross domestic product in Africa. The expanding oil sector has led to more jobs, but the lives of most people have yet to change. U.S. oil companies have invested at least \$5 billion in Equatorial Guinea since the mid-1990s. Although Obiang has declared the disposition of the country's oil revenues a "state secret," a U.S. Senate investigation found in July 2004 that at least \$35 million has been siphoned from accounts in a Washington, D.C., bank by Obiang, his family, and senior officials of his regime. A presidential decree issued in February ordered all civil servants and members of the armed forces to declare their assets to a national public ethics commission, but failed to specify whether the order included Obiang.

A long-running dispute with Gabon over exploration rights in the potentially oil-rich Corisco islands was temporarily resolved in 2004 with an agreement that the two countries would conduct joint exploration pending a UN-brokered mediation process.

Thanks to surging oil revenues, Equatorial Guinea currently has the world's fastest expanding economy, and the IMF predicts further growth of 45.1 percent in 2005. However, few benefits have trickled down to the population. Equatorial Guinea ranked 109th out of 177 countries on the UN Human Development Index in 2004.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Equatorial Guinea's citizens are unable to change their government through peaceful, democratic means. The 1999 and 2004 parliamentary and 1996 and 2002 presidential elections have not been credible. Obiang wields broad decree-making powers and effectively bars public participation in the policy-making process. After his overwhelming electoral victory of 2002, most opposition parties joined a coalition with the ruling party, although several remain officially banned or operate in exile.

Equatorial Guinea was not ranked by Transparency International in its 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index. However, charges of corruption and human rights violations by Equatorial Guinea's government led the United States to close its embassy in Malabo in 1995, although this was reopened in 2002 as U.S. interest in the region grew.

Press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, but the government restricts these rights in practice. Nearly all print and broadcast media are state run and tightly controlled. The 1992 press law authorizes government censorship of all publications. Mild criticism of infrastructure and public institutions is allowed, but nothing disparaging about the president or security forces is tolerated. Publications that irk the government are banned from the newsstands without explanation.

Foreign publications have become more widely available in recent years. The shortwave programs of Radio France Internationale and Radio Exterior (the international shortwave service from Spain) can be heard. A few small independent newspapers publish occasionally, but they exercise self-censorship, and all journalists must be registered. Journalists, political leaders, and association heads have complained of increasing difficulties in accessing the Internet. They charge that illegal wiretapping has increased and that the country's sole Internet service provider allegedly monitors e-mail traffic closely.

The constitution guarantees religious freedom, and government respect for freedom of individual religious practice has generally improved. About 80 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

Freedom of association and assembly is restricted. Authorization must be obtained for any gathering of 10 or more people for purposes the government deems political. There are no effective domestic human rights organizations in the country, and the few international nongovernmental organizations operating in Equatorial Guinea are prohibited from promoting or defending human rights. Dozens of opposition activists remain in prison.

Steps have been taken to reform the labor sector. The country's first labor union, the Small Farmers Syndicate, received legal recognition in 2000 and is independent. The government has ratified all International Labor Organization conventions. However, there are many legal steps required prior to collective bargaining.

The judiciary is not independent, and laws on search and seizure—as well as detention—are routinely ignored by security forces, which act with impunity. Unlawful arrests remain commonplace, and government security forces routinely use torture and excessive force. Civil cases rarely go to trial. A military tribunal handles cases tied to national security. Prison conditions are extremely harsh.

Monopoly political power by the president's Mongomo clan of the majority Fang ethnic group persists. Differences between the Fang and the Bubi are a major source of political tension that often has erupted into violence. Fang vigilante groups have been allowed to abuse Bubi citizens with impunity.

Constitutional and legal protections of equality for women are largely ignored. Traditional practices discriminate against women, and few women have educational opportunities or participate in the formal (business) economy or government. Violence against women is reportedly widespread.