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The International Response to the Arab Spring

by Benjamin Ward

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Equatorial Guinea remains mired in corruption, poverty, and repression under President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been in power since 1979. Vast oil revenues fund lavish lifestyles for the small elite surrounding the president, while most of the population lives in poverty. The government regularly engages in torture and arbitrary detention. Journalists, civil society groups, and members of the political opposition face heavy government repression.

President Obiang, who became Africa's longest-serving ruler with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, continued seeking to enhance his international standing. In 2011 he assumed the one-year rotating presidency of the African Union but failed to persuade the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to award a long-stalled prize in his name.

Despite some positive steps, including the release of 22 political prisoners, overall human rights conditions remained poor and, in some respects, worsened as freedoms were clamped down on ahead of the AU summit President Obiang hosted in June. Constitutional changes proposed in March were not open to debate and seemed designed to transfer power from the president to his eldest son. Obiang and his family remained ensnared in multiple foreign corruption investigations, which gathered momentum during the year.

Fulfillment of key socio-economic rights, such as the right to education and basic healthcare, remained poor, despite significant oil revenues and the country's small population, which make Equatorial Guinea's per capita gross domestic product at approximately US\$30,000 according to UN figures among the highest in the world, and the highest in Africa.

Although the country saw notable progress in reducing rates of maternal and child mortality, these rates still remained high. For example, 2010 UN and World Bank statistics indicate that nearly one in every eight child dies before his or her fifth birthday. A reduction of the high incidence of malaria resulted from a prevention campaign largely funded by Western oil companies.

The quality of education remained poor in Equatorial Guinea. According to UNESCO figures, nearly one-quarter of primary students repeat a grade. The government acknowledged problems in its education system in October when a workshop on girls' education identified barriers to learning, including inadequate facilities, a high student-to-teacher ratio, low teacher quality, and poor nutrition. Although the country ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa the Maputo Protocol in June, there is no indication that it will be implemented vigorously.

The government increased social spending levels but prioritized public investments in projects that have little benefit for the poor, such as a lavish \$830 million resort complex built for the AU summit.

Ongoing legal challenges in France, Spain, and the United States, as well as a complaint before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, allege misuse of Equatorial Guinea's oil funds. In connection with their investigation, in September French police seized 11 luxury cars belonging to President Obiangs eldest son and minister of agriculture and forestry known by the nickname Teodorn from outside his Paris residence. Also in September a French court ruled against President Obiangs claims of defamation against the French NGO CCFD-Terre Solidaire for its 2009 report on the ill-gotten gains of the president and other public officials. In October US authorities filed legal claims against Teodorns US assets including a Malibu mansion, luxury vehicle, and valuable collectables alleging they were illegally purchased with the proceeds of corruption.

Equatorial Guinea is notorious for its lack of press freedom. Freedom of expression was curtailed even further in 2011. Journalists from state-owned media outlets are not permitted to criticize the government. The few private media outlets that exist are generally owned by persons close to President Obiang; self-censorship is common. Foreign news is available to those with access to satellite broadcasts and the internet, which is a small minority of the population; others have access only to limited foreign radio programming.

In February the government ordered the staff of state radio and TV not to cover the pro-democracy Arab Spring movements. In March the host of a French-language state radio program was removed after he referred briefly to Libya on air. In an official statement denying claims of censorship, the government said he was sacked for his lack of rigor and professionalism.

The government is also intolerant of critical views from abroad. It denies visas and uses surveillance, harassment, and detention to hamper independent foreign journalists. In March 2011 the government informed Reporters Without Borders that it would not grant a visa to carry out a fact-finding visit as long as the offensive references to our President continue to appear on your website. Some foreign journalists reported being detained and forced to delete photographs before and during the AU summit. In one incident, security agents detained and interrogated journalists from the German television network ZDF and deleted some of their footage, including images of poverty.

In February novelist, blogger, and editor Juan Toms vila Laurel began a hunger strike calling for democratic reforms. He soon left for Spain, claiming that he was harassed.

In March the government banned demonstrations and blocked an opposition party from staging a rally. Activists from another opposition party were prevented from staging a Labor Day protest in May.

The government imposes restrictive conditions on the registration and operation of NGOs, and the country has no legally registered independent human rights groups. As reported by EG Justice, a US-based NGO, a local organization was told its registration application would not be approved until it removed the reference to human rights.

The few local activists who seek to address human rights related issues are vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and reprisals. In July authorities demanded that a local organization Centro de Estudios e Iniciativas para el Desarrollo (CEID) halt a series of civil society training seminars it had been conducting. The head of CEID, Alfredo Okenve Ndo, had previously been removed from two posts at the National University after critiquing the governments transparency record at a May 2010 event in Washington, DC.

After more than a year of unsuccessfully seeking permission to hold an event in Malabo to discuss follow-up to the governments commitments under its UN Universal Periodic Review, CEID and other local organizations moved the meeting to Madrid.

The ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) maintains a monopoly over political life and the government continued its harsh repression of political rights and civil liberties during the year.

In March, in the wake of the Arab Spring events, President Obiang announced that he would introduce constitutional reforms. Far from signaling a democratic opening, however, the process was conducted in a heavy-handed manner. In October the president set a November 13 date for a national referendum to approve the changes, which had not been open to debate and were not shared with political parties until the day before the campaign opened. Instead, various government bodies rubber-stamped proposals that increase the near-absolute powers of the presidency. Although the changes create some new institutions, including an audit body, these are controlled by the president. The proposals also provide for the creation of a vice-presidential post filled at his discretion. Observers consider the creation of a vice-presidency a further move to position his son, Teodorn, to replace him. Teodorn was named to head the national election campaign to promote the referendum. A year earlier he was made the vice-president of the ruling party.

Most political parties are aligned with PDGE; members of the only two political parties that maintain independence the Convergence for Social Democracy (CPDS) and the People's Union (UP) are pressured through various means, including arbitrary arrest and harassment. For example, in November police arrested and held for three days a prominent CPDS figure and civil society activist, Marcial Abaga Barril, on a dubious pretext.

The opposition is also hampered by the ruling partys virtual monopoly on power, funding, and access to national media. Both beleaguered parties were further weakened during the year by internal splits. At least one CPDS leader left the party for a government post.

There is no independent judiciary in Equatorial Guinea. The government commonly conducts arbitrary arrests and denies detainees due process, for example by holding them indefinitely without telling them the charges against them. Basic fair trial standards are disregarded. Torture remains a serious problem despite a national law prohibiting it. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which resumed prison visits in the country in 2009 after a one-year suspension, opened an office in Equatorial Guinea in 2011.

Political activists and others were detained in the lead-up to the AU summit. In May security forces detained more than 100 young people and some political opponents in Bata. Migrants were also rounded up between April and June. According to Amnesty International, many of them were reportedly ill-treated. The organization also received reports of road blocks and arbitrary searches by

security forces.

In June President Obiang released 22 political prisoners on his 69th birthday. The release was consistent with past patterns of amnesties on special occasions. Those remaining in custody included relatives and associates of escaped prisonersone a former military officerwho have been held without charge for over a year in apparent retribution for the October 2010 escape. Among those being held was a child under the age of two and his mother.

As AU chair, President Obiang gained a prominent platform during the year. He traveled widely in that capacity, including to the G-20 summit of world leaders in France, and also sought new or improved bilateral ties. Equatorial Guinea is slated to co-host the African Cup of Nations soccer (football) tournament in early 2012.

UNESCO resisted President Obiangs efforts to reinstate a long-stalled prize in his name. He secured an AU resolution that forced the issue back onto UNESCOs agenda but UNESCO diplomats deferred any decision until May 2012.

The US is Equatorial Guinea's main trading partner and US companies dominate the country's oil sector. Although some US diplomats have defended President Obiang in press interviews and leaked cables, the US government took steps to hold Equatorial Guinea to global standards, notably maintaining a strong stance at UNESCO against the Obiang prize.

Spain, the former colonial power, generally has declined to apply pressure on Equatorial Guinea regarding human rights issues. However, the Spanish government opposed the UNESCO prize, as did the European Union.

Germany opened an embassy in the country during the year. Following the deportation of German journalists in June, the German Foreign Ministry summoned the Equatorial Guinean ambassador in Berlin.

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