

# Equatorial Guinea

**Population:** 500,000

**Capital:** Malabo

**Political Rights:** 7

**Civil Liberties:** 6

**Status:** Not Free

## Overview:

**Equatorial Guinea signed an oil production agreement with China in February 2006, continuing to reap huge profits from its natural resources even as the majority of its citizens remained mired in poverty. President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo maintained his broad powers over the country's political institutions as well as the national oil industry.**

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Equatorial Guinea achieved independence from Spain in 1968. It has since been one of the world's most tightly closed and repressive societies. Current President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo seized power in 1979 by deposing and murdering his uncle, Francisco Macias Nguema. Demands from donor countries for democratic reforms forced Obiang to legalize a multiparty system in 1992, though he and his clique continued to control political power. The 1996 presidential election, won by Obiang, was marred by official intimidation, a near total boycott by the political opposition, and very low voter turnout. The ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) won 75 of 80 seats in similarly flawed parliamentary elections in 1999. Many opposition candidates were arrested or confined to their villages prior to the polls.

Four opposition challengers withdrew from the December 2002 presidential election, citing irregularities. Obiang won a third seven-year term with 99.5 percent of the vote. Following the election, the government announced the formation of a "government of national unity" that brought members of eight small parties into the cabinet. Despite reshuffles in 2004 and 2006, key cabinet positions continue to be held by presidential relatives and loyalists.

The PDGE won 68 of 100 seats in the April 2004 parliamentary elections, with allied parties taking 30. The opposition Convergence Party for Social Democracy (CPDS), which complained of numerous irregularities and voter intimidation, won the remaining two seats.

In June 2005, Obiang granted amnesty to six Armenian pilots who had been among 22 people convicted in November 2004 for alleged involvement in a coup plot discovered in March 2004. Under intense international pressure,

Obiang in June 2006 freed several of the South African citizens in the group as part of a larger release of 41 political prisoners. Amnesty International had expressed concern over the likely use of torture in extracting confessions from the coup plot defendants, particularly in the case of a German suspect who died in custody. Many of the alleged plotters, some of whom were tried in Zimbabwe, had ties to the defunct mercenary firm Executive Outcomes, founded by apartheid-era South African military officers.

The Equatorial Guinean government accused Severo Moto, an opposition figure living in exile in Spain; South African financier and oil broker Eli Calil; and Sir Mark Thatcher, son of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, of being behind the scheme to oust Obiang in 2004. Tried in a South African court, Thatcher testified as part of a plea bargain that he had unwittingly helped to bankroll the coup attempt. Moto and eight members of his “government in exile” were tried in absentia and convicted of treason. A separate group of Equatorial Guineans accused of trying to topple Obiang in October 2004 received sentences of up to 30 years in prison in September 2005. According to Amnesty International, all but two of the defendants who appeared in court said they had been tortured. Of the six defendants tried in absentia, three were allegedly held incommunicado in Equatorial Guinea after being abducted from Nigeria and Benin.

Equatorial Guinea is Africa’s third-largest oil producer, and per capita gross domestic product is among the highest in the world. U.S. direct investment in Equatorial Guinea stands at more than \$10 billion, nearly all of it energy-related, and represents the fourth-highest level of U.S. direct investment in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States closed its embassy in the country in 1995, but reopened it in 2003. In 2006, the United States named its first resident ambassador to Equatorial Guinea in more than a decade. Other countries vie for Equatorial Guinea’s oil, including China, which signed an oil production agreement there in February 2006 and is providing training to the local military forces.

Despite the country’s oil wealth, there have been few improvements in the standard of living. Equatorial Guinea’s economy is now 20 times larger than it was in the mid 1990s, but school enrollment and literacy rates continue to be very low. Over 50 percent of the population lacks access to clean water. According to the World Bank, life expectancy decreased between 2000 and 2004. The majority of the country’s impoverished citizens depend on subsistence agriculture. Equatorial Guinea ranked 120 out of 177 countries on the UN Development Program’s 2006 Human Development Index.

World Bank programs were cut off in 1993 because of corruption and mismanagement. The government has since attempted to negotiate a “shadow” fiscal management program with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Equatorial Guinea declared its intent to implement the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in September 2004, but has made

slow progress to date. According to the IMF, the government still holds offshore treasury accounts worth \$718 million.

Equatorial Guinea maintains a security agreement with Sao Tome and Principe aimed at guaranteeing the safety of offshore oil rigs, as well as controlling clandestine immigration and drug trafficking, and guaranteeing the security of maritime and air traffic.

The United Nations since 2004 has served as mediator in a dispute between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon over exploration rights in the potentially oil-rich Corisco Bay Islands. The Equatorial Guinean government briefly accused Gabon of providing assistance to the October 2004 coup plotters.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Equatorial Guinea is not an electoral democracy, and the country has never held a credible election. President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, whose current seven-year term will end in 2009, holds broad powers and limits public participation in the policy-making process. The 100 members of the unicameral House of People's Representatives are elected to five-year terms but wield little power, and 98 of these seats are held by the ruling PDGE and allied parties. There are 13 registered political parties in Equatorial Guinea, 6 of which are aligned with the PDGE. The activities of the remaining parties, in particular the CPDS, are closely monitored by the government. Despite Obiang's iron grip on the country, members of his Mongomo clan compete with each other for political influence and financial gain.

Equatorial Guinea is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Obiang and members of his inner circle and ethnic group have reaped huge personal profits from the growing oil industry. Equatorial Guinea ranked 151 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, but the government restricts this right in practice. The 1992 press law authorizes government censorship of all publications, and nearly all print and broadcast media are state run and tightly controlled. A few private newspapers and underground pamphlets are published irregularly. Criticism of the country's leadership is not tolerated, and self-censorship is widespread. Publications that irk the government are banned from the newsstands without explanation. In June 2005, authorities seized 200 copies of the country's sole opposition newspaper, *La Verdad*. Equatorial Guinea has one internet provider affiliated with the government telephone monopoly, and there have been unconfirmed reports that the government monitors citizens using the internet.

The constitution guarantees religious freedom, and government respect for freedom of individual religious practice has generally improved. The

government does not restrict academic freedom, though faculty practice self-censorship.

Freedom of association and assembly is restricted. Authorization must be obtained for any gathering of 10 or more people for purposes deemed political. There are no effective domestic human rights organizations, 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.

Though the constitution provides for the right to organize unions, only the Small Farmers Syndicate has legal recognition. The government has refused to register the Equatorial Guinea Trade Union, whose members carry out their activities in secret. Foreign oil firms have attempted unsuccessfully to reduce government control over the local industry's hiring process.

The judiciary is not independent, and laws on search and seizure—as well as detention—are routinely ignored. Amnesty International and the International Bar Association allege that the trials for the two separate groups of alleged 2004 coup plotters were marked by flagrant human rights abuses, including torture and forced confessions. Civil cases rarely go to trial, and a military tribunal handles cases tied to national security. Prison conditions, especially in the notorious Black Beach prison, are often life-threatening for inmates.

Obiang's Mongomo clan of the majority Fang ethnic group monopolizes political and economic power to the exclusion of other groups. Differences between the Fang and the Bubi are a major source of political tension and often erupt into violence. Fang vigilante groups abuse Bubi citizens with impunity.

All citizens are required to obtain permission to travel abroad from the local police commissioner, and some members of opposition parties have been denied this permission. Those who do travel abroad are sometimes subjected to interrogation upon their return.

Constitutional and legal guarantees of equality for women are largely ignored, and violence against women is widespread. Traditional practices including primogeniture and polygamy discriminate against women. Most women lack educational opportunities and the ability to participate in the formal economy or government. Abortion is permitted to preserve the physical health of the mother, but only with spousal or parental authorization.