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*Often criticized for human-rights violations, the government displays little tolerance for the barely breathing political opposition.*



# EQUATORIAL GUINEA

A small country of just over 500,000 inhabitants, Equatorial Guinea is the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa. Dubbed “Africa’s Kuwait” after the discovery of oil in the 1990s, it is the third largest oil-producing country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite the oil wealth, Equatorial Guinea is a closed country with an extremely poor population, and the corruption rate is said to be among the highest on the continent (Transparency International ranked it 168 out of 180 countries worldwide in 2009). Often criticized for human-rights violations, the government displays little tolerance for the barely breathing political opposition. The country has been ruled with an iron fist by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema for thirty years, since he overthrew his uncle in a coup in 1979—and although he was recently reelected, the international community and the opposition raised questions about the legitimacy of the election. Reporter sans Frontières (RSF) noted, “President Obiang Nguema was reelected at the end of 2009 with 96.7 percent of the votes in polling that many international media, including the Spanish daily *El País*, were prevented from covering.”<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the authorities have denounced several plots seeking, in their view, to overthrow the regime in this former Spanish colony. On the night of February 16–17, 2009, sleeping residents of the capital, Malago, awoke to gunfire. By morning, the capital returned to calm—but the confrontations left many dead and injured. The government blamed the violence on “terrorist rebels” from the Niger Delta, but the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, which is behind many attacks on the Nigerian oilfields, immediately denied responsibility. The true circumstances surrounding the attack were shielded from the public and the media—an example of the government’s will to control all information in the country.

This is the third consecutive year that the MSI was not able to convene an expert panel in Malabo to research the media sustainability in Equatorial Guinea. This is not only due to the journalists’ reluctance to participate in a public meeting that could be “frowned upon,” but because the authorities in this closed country have forbidden any kind of meeting—of political parties, or of civil society, or especially journalists—without obtaining the authorization of the Minister of Information and going through a bureaucratic procedure. In the face of this difficulty, only about 10 journalists accepted to complete, individually and discreetly, the IREX questionnaire.

<sup>1</sup> “Predators of Press Freedom - Teodoro Obiang Nguema - Equatorial Guinea President.” *2010 World Press Freedom Index*. Reporters sans Frontières, [http://en.rsff.org/spip.php?page=predateur&id\\_article=37196](http://en.rsff.org/spip.php?page=predateur&id_article=37196)

# EQUATORIAL GUINEA AT A GLANCE

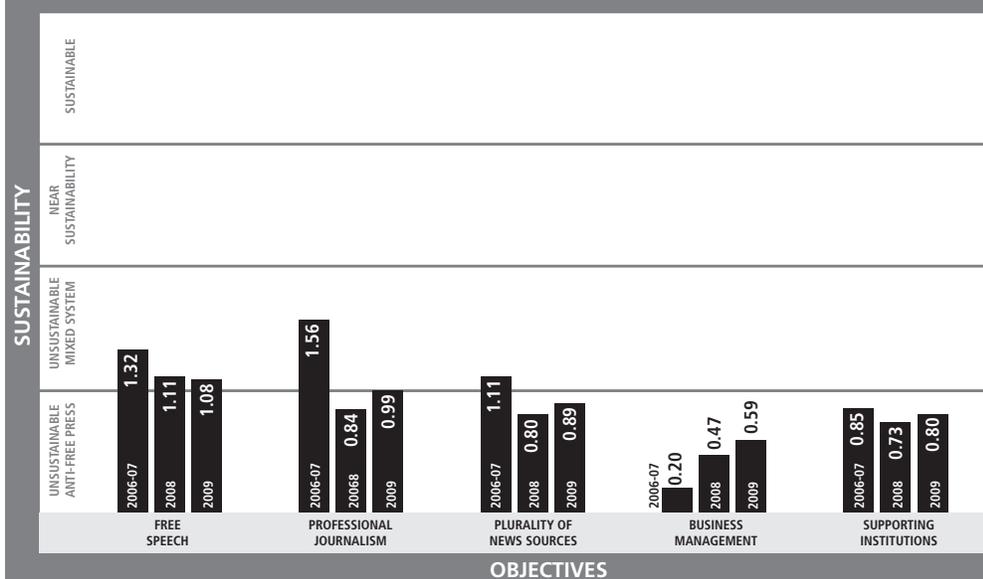
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 633,441 (July 2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Malabo
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Fang 85.7%, Bubi 6.5%, Mdowne 3.6%, Annobon 1.6%, Bujeba 1.1%, other 1.4% (1994 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions:** nominally Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic, pagan practices (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Spanish 67.6% (official), other 32.4% (includes French (official), Fang, Bubi) (1994 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$8.398 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$19,350 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 87% (male 93.4%, female 80.5%) (2000 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (since August 3, 1979)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 4 daily newspapers; Radio: 2 national stations; Television: 1 state-run station
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Ebano* (state-owned) *La Opinion* (private) *La Nacion* (private)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top two radio stations: Radio Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (state-run), Radio Asonga (private, owned by the president's son)
- > **News agencies:** None
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 12,000 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: EQUATORIAL GUINEA



### Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

### Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

### Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

### Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 1.08

Although the panelists acknowledged the existence of legislation guaranteeing the freedom of speech, they noted that the authorities tend to politicize the press and prevent the enforcement of legal provisions upholding the freedom of speech. The 1992 constitution, amended by Constitutional Law Number 1/1995, guarantees “the freedom of speech, thought, ideas, and opinions.” However, in reality the press is a tool of the government. Law Number 13/1992, concerning the press and printing, regulates all aspects of the practice of journalism—and it is an exact replica of the Spanish press law issued by the dictator Francisco Franco in the 1960s. As last year’s MSI noted, this law is not fit for a democracy.

Furthermore, aspects of the code that should protect journalists are not enforced—and the authorities themselves are often the offenders. According to one panelist, journalists are slowly gaining their freedom of speech, but they still avoid speaking their mind for fear of government reprisals. Another summarized the key challenges in this objective: “Speech is not really free; journalists are afraid to tell the truth. Only pro-governmental political information is easily available. Slander is punishable under criminal law, and journalists go to prison. Often, journalists who tell the truth are threatened.”

#### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

##### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

*Regarding broadcast licensing procedures, all broadcast outlets have ties to the government, and the Ministry of Information serves as the media regulator—leaving few options for truly independent outlets to break into the market.*

Regarding broadcast licensing procedures, all broadcast outlets have ties to the government, and the Ministry of Information serves as the media regulator—leaving few options for truly independent outlets to break into the market. In its 2009 human-rights report on Equatorial Guinea, the U.S. Department of State noted, “Starting a new periodical requires a complicated process governed by an ambiguous law and was often inhibited by government bureaucracy.”

One panelist noted, “Journalists only enjoy very limited protection. In fact, the government often takes action against them,” while another expressed regret that journalists are not protected. The limited existing legislation is not enforced.

At the time of this study, the memory of the June 17, 2009, arrest of the sole foreign press correspondent in Equatorial Guinea, Rodrigo Angüe Nguema, weighed heavily on the panelists. In April 2009, Nguema released a news piece on Agence France-Presse (AFP) claiming that the director of Ceiba national airline, the Gambian native Mamadou Jaye, had fled the country after embezzling XAF 3,500 million (nearly \$8 million). The news turned out to be false; a source had provided faulty information. Nguema acknowledged his mistake, and international media released the Ceiba director’s denial notice. Nevertheless, the airline director filed a lawsuit for slander against Nguema, and he was sent to the notorious Black Beach prison.

Nguema’s arrest serves as a prime example illustrating the relentless energy of the Guinean authorities in oppressing journalists in a country that appears impervious to the freedom of the press. One panelist commented, “Journalists are imprisoned by politicians who do not want the press to do its job. They [politicians] ask us to be political activists and hide the truth from the population.”

Regarding the availability of public information, the panelists said that only information favorable to the ruling party is available.

The government immediately refutes news concerning Equatorial Guinea broadcast by international radio

*Regarding the balance of entertainment and news, one panelist confirmed that while there is a wide array of entertainment programming to choose from, news programs are lacking.*

stations. The media do not relay the news appearing in the international press, such as by Reuters, AFP, etc., as they would be held responsible for this content.

Given this climate for the media, it is not surprising that in 2009, RSF ranked Equatorial Guinea 158th out of 175 countries in its press freedom index.<sup>2</sup>

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.99

Although forced to work in an uncertain environment, some Equatorial Guinean journalists do wish to live by the rules of the trade. Noted one panelist, "There are multiple reasons for which journalists cannot—or it is hard to make them—meet professional quality standards, such as low salaries, the politicization of the media, etc. We are forced to follow the authorities' orders, as they do not want the press to show the actual reality. So we must hold back, so that we won't be investigated."

#### JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

##### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

<sup>2</sup> *World Press Freedom Index 2009—The Rankings*. Reporters sans Frontières. [http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement\\_en.pdf](http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement_en.pdf) (Accessed October 16, 2010)

As pointed out in last year's MSI, most journalists and media professionals in Equatorial Guinea are qualified; the older journalists were trained in Spain over three decades ago, while the next generation is being trained in Cuba or China. All journalists are public servants, governed by a public servant and state administration agent law.

Regarding professional ethics, Law Number 13/1992, concerning the press and printing (mentioned above), includes an ethical and moral code for journalists, publishers, managing editors, publication managers, and general managers. However, the repressive environment prevents journalists from upholding basic ethical principles, such as reporting truthfully.

Self-censorship is pervasive; journalists encounter a great deal of political pressure and cannot work freely. The status of freedom of the press is no better in Bata, the country's second-largest city; there, as in Malabo, journalists are held back from reporting what they feel they should in favor of reporting what politicians want to hear. The constant harassment of media professionals is antithetical to freedom, independence, and safety of their working conditions.

The panelists agreed that salaries for journalists are low, and that is the reason why they turn to politicians to be able to make ends meet. Journalists avoid telling the truth for fear of losing their jobs. Public-media journalists are paid according to the civil servant system; last year's MSI reported that this ranges from XAF 100,000 to XAF 250,000 (\$225 to \$560) monthly for a manager.

Regarding the balance of entertainment and news, one panelist confirmed that while there is a wide array of entertainment programming to choose from, news programs are lacking. As for technical resources for journalists, one panelist reported that the technical equipment journalists must use is more or less adequate, but journalists still lack the resources they need to fulfill their mission.

As last year's MSI noted as well, reporting on specialized topics is extremely thin, and investigative reporting is nonexistent.

## OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

### Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.89

Clearly, the political situation in Equatorial Guinea impedes media pluralism; there are few private publications in the country. The existing media are simply propaganda agents for the political authorities. News is politicized and censored by politicians, particularly in the popular media outside of

the capital. It cannot be said that a broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media.

There are not many news sources for the public. The existing news sources are either created or controlled by politicians and offer citizens only the government's viewpoint. The state-run media, Radio Télévision de Guinée Équatoriale, includes television and radio stations in Malabo and Bata. There is also Asonga radio-television, which is described as private but in fact is owned by the president's son.

As for print media, there are only a few regular publications. *Ebano* is the official state biweekly publication; there is also the state-owned monthly, *La Gaceta*. There are a couple of nongovernmental papers as well, but they have little freedom and are supported politically and financially by the ruling regime. One panelist said, "The independent press is out of place in this country; it cannot function as it should. By asking the media to produce favorable content, the government interferes with their credibility." Another observer gave some credit to the public media, which try to keep the public informed, but their hands are tied on many issues because the political authorities control the news they release.

The BBC reported that Radio France Internationale and Gabon-based Africa No. 1 are available on FM in Malabo.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, citizens find it difficult to access foreign news sources. In addition to the government's unwillingness to allow such access, the high levels of poverty also create a barrier to access.

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

<sup>3</sup> BBC Country Profile: Equatorial Guinea. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/1023151.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1023151.stm) (Accessed October 16, 2010)

*The state-run media, Radio Télévision de Guinée Équatoriale, includes television and radio stations in Malabo and Bata. There is also Asonga radio-television, which is described as private but in fact is owned by the president's son.*

State media do not reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, or serve the public interest, as the election season revealed starkly. RSF noted, "Closely controlled by the government, the state media have sung the president's praises and have taken care to pay little attention to the opposition's activities. Nguema is expected to get close to 100 percent of the vote, which is about the same as the share of media coverage he has been getting."<sup>4</sup>

No domestic news agencies operate in the country.

Since broadcasting is directly or closely controlled by the government, one cannot say that independent broadcasters produce their own news content. Similarly, while ownership of the media is more or less transparent given the government's heavy involvement, it also represents a near monopoly of ownership to the detriment of the plurality of content and opinions represented.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

#### Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.59

Although some independent media may be economically independent, they must still be politically dependent. Otherwise, the government starts to make threats or simply closes down the inconvenient media. "Without basic resources and substantial income from advertising, the private media can be neither independent nor well-managed," noted one panelist. As noted in last year's MSI, regulatory burdens and economic hardships mean that a truly independent media outlet would be unlikely to survive.

The national television channel is 100 percent government-funded and receives advertising from private companies, especially the telecommunication and oil multinationals. As noted in last year's MSI, *La Gaceta* and *Ceiba* (with a heavy entertainment focus) have a Ministry of Information-sanctioned monopoly on print media advertising.

<sup>4</sup> "President dominates state media election coverage, opposition invisible." Reporters sans Frontières website, November 27, 2009. <http://en.rsf.org/equatorial-guinea-president-dominates-state-media-27-11-2009,35102.html> (Accessed October 16, 2010)

*“Without basic resources and substantial income from advertising, the private media can be neither independent nor well-managed,” noted one panelist.*

#### INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

##### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

An edition of *La Gaceta*, for example, often includes two to 10 advertising pages out of a total of 30 pages.

The panelists agreed that the government does not provide the private media with any kind of official public aid. However, that does not prevent the media, which is owned by powerful politicians, from living off political money and receiving a lot of advertising. However, despite the lack of government subsidies, the government influence on the public and private media and journalists continues to be significant.

As reported in previous MSI studies, market research is not used, broadcast ratings are not prepared, and circulation figures are not verified independently.

#### OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

#### Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.80

Equatorial Guinea has no associations dedicated to protecting journalists. There is a journalists' association, called the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea (known by its French acronym ASOPGE). But according to the panelists, it does nothing to help journalists or enhance the sector's professionalism. A politicized body, it is not capable of

upholding the journalists' interests; it cares only about self-promotion.

According to the panelists, the reason these organizations fail to protect their members' freedom of speech is that they wish to stay clear of any trouble they might have with the government. Furthermore, the panelists charged, activists working for the existing associations are busy with self-promotion, to the detriment of the profession. In fact, ASOPGE is essentially tasked with controlling the press and ensuring that journalists who become members of another association lose their membership, and consequently their jobs. For that reason, journalists can only participate in activities concerning the press that are organized or approved by the Ministry of Information.

Previous MSI panels explained that early in its history, ASOPGE, which was first created in 2000, operated as a true association for the protection of journalists and media professionals. However, after a couple of years, the government declared that the association “behaved like a parallel government” (in the words of Alfonso Nsue Mokuy, vice-minister of information at the time). Faced with ongoing threats from the government, the former chair, Pedro Nolasco Ndong Obama Nkara, fled the country and sought refuge in Spain.

NGOs do not help fill the void of supporting institutions, either. Rather than upholding the freedom of speech and protecting the interests of journalists, they protect their own interests. The U.S. State Department's 2009 human-rights report on Equatorial Guinea noted, “The law restricts NGO activity, and the few existing domestic human-rights NGOs focus on development issues involving social and economic rights, such as health and elder care.” This report continued

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

##### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

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to explain that while the law does not forbid NGOs from working on human rights issues, the government maintains an unfriendly posture toward domestic and international NGOs working in or reporting on the country—with burdensome restrictions and registration requirements. As a result, the report concluded, there are very few international human rights NGOs in the country.

There is no retraining program, school, or training center for journalists. As reported in last year's MSI, the National University of Equatorial Guinea teaches communications in its School for Social Sciences, but in general, the curriculum does not cover what would be considered journalism.

## List of Panel Participants

**Octavio Ancelmo Ondo Nguema**, journalist, Radio Asonga, Malabo

**Amador Botey Rioko**, journalist, Guinean Press Association, Malabo

**Jose Antonio Ndong**, journalist, Ebano Gaceta, Malabo

**Pedro Obiang Edu**, journalist, Radio Asonga, Malabo

**Manuel Nze Nsogo**, journalist, *L'Opinion*, Malabo

**Honorio Obama Ndong**, journalist, National Radio, Malabo

**Maribel Mangue Ondo**, journalist, Radio Bata, Bata

**Ernesto Micha Ondo**, journalist, Radio Bata, Bata

**Frank Nze**, show host, Radio Bata, Bata

**David Mba**, journalist, National Radio, Malabo

**Feliza Oyona**, correspondent, Radio Asonga, Bata

**Juan Pedro Mendene Mba**, National Radio, Malabo

## Moderator

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