
Equatorial Guinea's committed journalists have largely left the country due to government pressure and low wages, many promising to return only after the regime falls.



EQUATORIAL GUINEA

As in years past, Equatorial Guinea remains one of the most strident anti-free-press environments in the world. President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo's regime continues to spend lavishly to bolster the country's international image, including holding the African Union's 2011 summit and the Africa Cup of Nations, with Gabon, in 2012. Further insulting the human-rights community, Obiang eventually succeeded in endowing a UNESCO-sponsored prize in his name (although later dropped due to international protest in favor of "Equatorial Guinea") and in hosting a human-rights conference backed by the US-based Leon Sullivan Foundation. Despite these public-relations coups, domestic freedoms continued to languish.

The MSI panel assembled in September 2012 for the first time in a nearly secret proceeding in Bata, the second city—not in Malabo, the capital, where all meetings are subject to prior authorization.

The panel agreed that little progress has been made for media development in Equatorial Guinea. Despite the legal norms that guarantee freedom of speech, the political environment does not enforce these laws. Access to information is strictly divided between the mainstream state media and those attempting to provide independent views. Obiang's regime severely prosecutes journalists when they do not follow the instructions of the state, government, and ruling party, to the detriment of professional standards and ethics. Prosecutions are also undertaken in defamation cases.

Equatorial Guinea has two major media outlets either directly or indirectly controlled by the regime, which serve as the public's main information sources. The national radio and television stations are far from respectful of media standards and ethics. Their journalists are civil servants, subject to immediate dismissal for noncompliance with their censors. Ostensibly private outlets also aggrandize the government and president, as required by the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio, which permits publishers close to the regime only. Five such outlets are not subsidized regularly by the government but appear to receive ad hoc financing for their favorable coverage and public servitude. There are no domestic media outlets that contradict the government line in Equatorial Guinea.

Equatorial Guinea's committed journalists have largely left the country due to government pressure and low wages, many promising to return only after the regime falls. Obiang has ruled the country since deposing his own uncle in 1979. A press worthy of the name does not exist in Equatorial Guinea—rather, it is a propaganda instrument of the government.

Due to the oppressive political environment, panelists for Equatorial Guinea agreed to participate only on condition of anonymity.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA AT A GLANCE

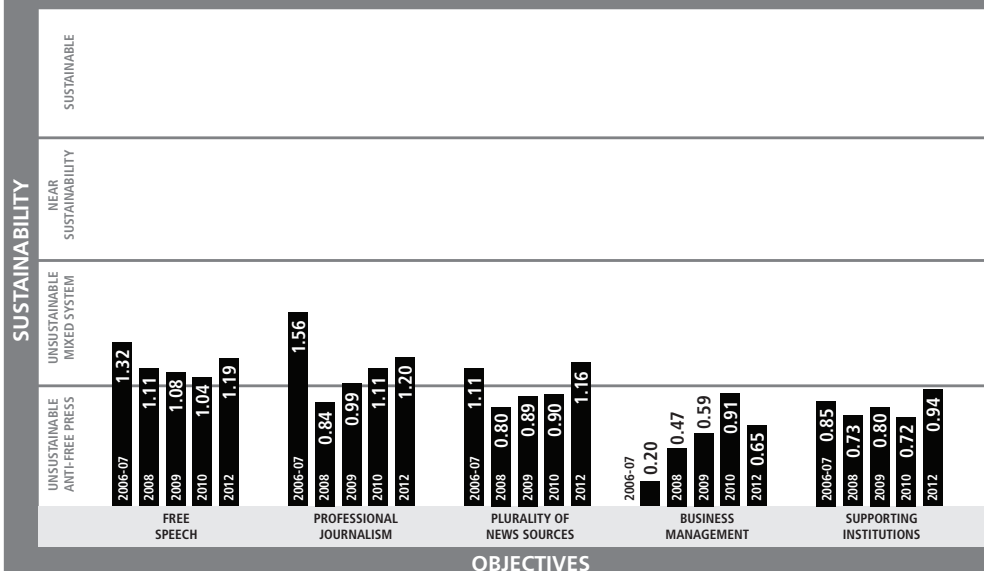
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 665,991 (July 2012 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 (2011-Atlas):** \$10.474 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **GNI per capita (2011-PPP):** \$24,110 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > **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 Stations: 2 national stations; Television Stations: 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:** N/A
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 14,400 (2009 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: 1.19

The MSI panel acknowledged the existence of legal and social norms guaranteeing the freedom of speech. They also admitted that these constitutional and legal norms are not applied in any way, shape, or form. And for good reason: the political environment is not conducive to the implementation of these laws. One panelist from a private weekly explained that the government “prefers to manipulate information to suit its needs.”

On May 3, 2012, World Press Freedom Day, President Obiang unflinchingly boasted that no journalist was in jail in his country. The panel noted that there are no independent media in the country and that strict self-censorship on the country’s important news issues keeps private-media correspondents out of prison. Their colleagues working in the state media are all civil servants obeying the orders of the current government.

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.

A panelist who is a broadcast journalist noted, “Journalists are rigorously prosecuted for defamation, even if there is evidence backing up what they write.”

As for state radio and television, Radio-Television Equatorial Guinea (known by its French acronym RTVGE) operates directly under the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio. Its reports consist largely of praise for the actions of President Obiang, building his cult of personality, with one report even referring to the president as “God” of the country.¹

To ensure that the media work in the interests of those in power, licenses are granted to those who belong to the ruling party, most notably to the president’s son, Teodorin, who owns Radio Asonga, a nominally private broadcaster. Human-rights groups have attempted to force the U.S. government to take legal action against Teodorin, such as denying him visas and freezing his assets in the United States, based on the assumption that the leading family’s vast wealth was acquired through corruption. The market is heavily distorted by these insider schemes.

Media firms are liable to pay taxes once a year, though significant confusion exists on the amount of tax burden they face, particularly for newspapers. Tax rates may vary significantly from one outlet to another in a seemingly arbitrary or biased fashion.

Journalists are repressed directly through the courts. A panelist who is a broadcast journalist noted, “Journalists are rigorously prosecuted for defamation, even if there is evidence backing up what they write. The political environment encourages legal actions against media professionals to keep them quiet, so they do not address certain topics.”

Another panelist, representing print media, noted, “Defamation is still a problem, and journalists go to prison, and must pay fines and compensate plaintiffs.”

¹ Referenced in a CNN interview with Obiang in May 2012. <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1210/05/ampr.01.html>

Another panelist was even more incisive, noting, "Because of the pressure from the authorities, we cannot apply professional journalistic standards, as it is those same authorities who finance our media!"

As a result, the Obiang government successfully imposed a total media blackout of the popular uprisings that shook Arab countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the war in Libya and the coup in Mali. For his attempt to mention the Libyan crisis in his radio broadcast, journalist Juan Pedro Mendene was censored in the studio, cut off mid-broadcast by editorial staff, and then fired from the state station.

Equatorial Guinea's scores in indicator 4 improved marginally simply due to the absence of many high-profile crimes and offenses against journalists. Still, such incidents continue to occur. In November 2012, the authorities suspended the broadcast *Culture in the Home* for criticizing the parliament and president of the Supreme Court for incompetence.

On World Press Freedom Day the director general of state television refused to allow Samuel Obiang Mbana Mangué, one of the country's few remaining independent journalists and an AFP correspondent, to appear in a televised debate on the topic. The reason given: "He speaks evil."

Dispatches from international agencies such as AFP, Reuters, and AP are not authorized for rebroadcast by local media. Foreign journalists, working for reliable and credible media outlets, are often denied entry into Equatorial Guinea. Local agents are treated as state enemies by the Obiang government for maintaining journalistic integrity. Such local stringers are threatened regularly for supporting the unfavorable coverage of foreign outlets, on grounds as severe as treason. Harassment and reprisals may be exerted against them or their families.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 1.20

Professionalism in journalistic practice is severely lacking in Equatorial Guinea. Many stories in the media serve propagandistic, rather than professional, purposes. Journalists at pro-state local outlets are rarely trained in the trade and

have received their positions through family, personal, and political connections.

According to one panelist, questions of journalistic ethics and integrity are irrelevant because the journalists themselves have no opportunity to follow them willingly. "All journalists work according to the will of ministers, directors, and other politicians in Equatorial Guinea. Therefore, it is difficult to apply professional standards," he concluded.

Another panelist was even more incisive, noting, "Because of the pressure from the authorities, we cannot apply professional journalistic standards, as it is those same authorities who finance our media!" Few journalists risk challenging the official government line, as the dismissal of Mendene illustrated, which limits the potential for professional reporting.

As a consequence, added a third panelist from print publication in Bata, "Journalists cannot address sensitive topics, such as politics, corruption, misappropriation of public funds by those close to the regime or by the regime itself." Ethics and objectivity have been largely sacrificed for political expediency.

Quality broadcasts and articles on niche areas do not exist in Equatorial Guinea. Most niche topics, such as educational achievement, progress on HIV/AIDS, or regional issues, are omitted in the general press. International coverage suffers even further—notably, the press blackout of the Arab Spring and of the coup and insurgency in Mali.

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).

Not only do national journalists fall victim to this political control, but foreign journalists are also subject to their unhealthy stranglehold through the accreditation process. Foreign media outlets and their agents face daunting procedures, which often end in rejection of applications. The Equatorial Guinean government believes that “letting the foreign journalist work on Guinean soil is equivalent to selling the country to foreigners,” according to one panelist.

The panel did not cite equipment shortages or failures as a major concern. Most media outlets were seen as sufficiently equipped to serve their purpose, which is to disseminate pro-government messaging. Should greater editorial freedom be permitted, the technical limitations of reporting from the country’s interior, or of covering live events, may become more pressing.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 1.16

While state and non-state outlets exist domestically, the difference in news content among them is not significant.

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.

Another panelist from a print outlet in Bata blamed the governing party for refusing to liberalize the market and open access to new entrants. He was one of several panelists who specifically absolved journalists for the lack of diversity of information in the market.

As mentioned above, all content distributed by local outlets reflects the government line, and all private outlets are suborned to the state.

Satellite television remains the one true medium for obtaining free information, as the government has thus far not taken steps to limit access to satellite dishes. Several broadcasters address issues within Equatorial Guinea, but generally from a regional perspective. Access is restricted for many citizens because costs are prohibitive.

International radio stations, such as Radio France International, AFRICA N.1, and even BBC Africa, can be received in Malabo and provide one of the few outlets for independent news. However, these outlets are restricted to broadcasting on an FM band that does not reach far beyond the limits of Malabo, the capital, which has a population of about 500,000.

Others are expelled from the country outright; a German television reporting team was deported in 2011 for conducting an interview with an opponent of the regime. In the run-up to the recent elections, foreign correspondents were refused visas if their domestic correspondents, stringers, or outlets were seen as not having sufficiently covered President Obiang’s campaign.

Another panelist from a print outlet in Bata blamed the governing party for refusing to liberalize the market and open access to new entrants. He was one of several panelists who specifically absolved journalists for the lack of diversity of information in the market. “Financed 100 percent by the government, the state media outlets are

Little information is available on the size of state media budgets, and the lack of transparency leads to suspicions of misappropriations of funds.

managed as government enterprises that have no editorial independence,” said another panelist.

Even if the government did allow a freer editorial regime at the state outlets, the liberated journalists still would struggle to produce quality reporting that covered multiple social interests and domestic events on a variety of levels, due to their poor qualifications: state journalists received their positions largely through nepotism, not merit.

For the panelists, the development of the Internet and citizens’ ability to express themselves on blogs afford some hope for future freedom of information, even though there are very few Internet users. Satellite television remains unrestricted as well, though it is generally accessible only to the elite few who can afford it.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.65

The country’s state-run media enterprises rely on the government budget to subsidize their operations, which are essentially propaganda. Little information is available on the

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.

size of state media budgets, and the lack of transparency leads to suspicions of misappropriations of funds.

Privately owned outlets *La Opinion*, *El Tiempo*, and *La Nacion* appear irregularly. They do not own printing presses and generally lack finances. Circulation figures for all the papers, including the official state papers, are unknown.

Five private publications, owned by allies and family members of the Obiang regime but outside the government subsidy system, nonetheless receive funds to provide ad hoc publicity services for the government or certain members of the ruling clique.

Government advertising is diverted to these private publications that echo the positions of the government, leaving alternatives without revenue streams. The panelists noted that several publications have gone bankrupt over the past decade for lack of government-sponsored advertising to fund their operations. Their operational decisions and content relies neither on market research, nor on circulation or ratings statistics, which are not conducted in Equatorial Guinea.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Equatorial Guinea Objective Score: 0.94

NGOs advocating for press freedoms and professionalism do not exist, as they are not authorized under current law. Two associations for journalists exist on paper: the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea and the Association of Professional Journalists. The panelists reported that the associations do nothing in practice in the field and that they are headed by ruling-party activists. “The regime in

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.

place does not encourage any act that seeks to promote the freedom of speech or even of the press,” noted a panelist.

Short-term training is essentially non-existent, due to the absence of NGOs and the lack of interest by the state-run media in providing professional development. The National University of Equatorial Guinea does have a communications department, though it does not prepare journalists to practice the profession to decent standards. Given this situation, most locally trained Equatorial Guinean journalists have left the profession because of high risks, discouragement, and low wages.

With no independent regulator for media operations, nor any regulation for distributing government advertising to the private market, the few private outlets must fend for themselves. Access to printing presses requires authorization, in practice, from state officials who can vouch for the self-censorship credentials of the editorial staff supplying the copy.

Newspaper distribution is ad hoc and limited in the continental interior. Most radio and television stations are located in Malabo and Bata, and their signals do not cover much of the interior territories, though the population is sparse in those areas. Satellite dishes remain available to all who can afford them.

ICT infrastructure is better than in some countries on the continent, owing to Equatorial Guinea’s budget revenues from oil sales. Little wealth has trickled down to the common population, so ICT usage is limited to urban elite in Malabo, Bata, and other major towns.

List of Panel Participants

Due to the oppressive political environment, panelists for Equatorial Guinea agreed to participate only on condition of anonymity.

IN MEMORIAM: Nzé Nsogo



In late November, 2012, Manuel Nzé Nsogo, one of Equatorial Guinea’s best-known champions for human rights, suffered from a sudden illness and died very shortly thereafter. Nzé Nsogo had a long career in public service, serving as the president’s director of protocol and then in the foreign ministry. In 1998 and 1999, he founded the newspapers *La Opinión* and *El Tiempo*. He later became the head of the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea. Recently, he chaired the Network of Journalists of Equatorial Guinea against HIV/AIDS. Nzé Nsogo had also served as a *Media Sustainability Index* panelist.