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Freedom Of The Press - Equatorial Guinea (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 27
Political Environment: 36
Economic Environment: 27
Total Score: 90

The 30-year-old regime of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo continued to control Equatorial Guinea's media with a heavy hand in 2010. Freedoms of expression and of the press are legally guaranteed, but these rights were ignored in practice. As in past years, the government relied on its extensive powers under the Law on the Press, Publishing, and Audiovisual Media to severely restrict press freedom, making the country one of the world's most censored media environments. Although journalists in recent years have been permitted to voice mild or vague criticism of government institutions, criticism of the president, his family, other high-ranking officials, and the security forces was not tolerated. Almost all local coverage was orchestrated or tightly controlled by the government, and there were no laws guaranteeing freedom of information. Local journalists and private publications were required to register with the government through a prohibitively complex and bureaucratic process. Following widespread criticism from human rights and media advocates, prominent African leaders, and scientists and health professionals, UNESCO announced in October 2010 that it was indefinitely suspending its \$3 million Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, which was set up in 2008; the controversial prize had sparked a global backlash due to Nguema's abysmal record on human rights and economic transparency.

Local journalists were subject to systematic surveillance and frequently practiced self-censorship. In February 2010, a journalist with the state-run radio in the mainland city of Bata, Pedro Luis Esono, was detained for three days after he reported on-air the alleged discovery of seven bodies at a city dump. In April, Samuel Obiang Mbana, a local stringer for Agence France-Presse (AFP) and the Gabon-based Africa No. 1 radio, was detained by police for several hours after he attempted to cover arrivals for a regional summit in central Africa. Mbana, one of a tiny number of Equatoguinean journalists who have worked for foreign media, was arrested by presidential security agents at the Malabo International Airport and accused of working without proper accreditation—an accusation which he denied, according to Reporters Without Borders. Mbana's predecessor correspondent for AFP, Rodrigo Angue Nguema, was a frequent target of government ire, and was held for four months in Black Beach Prison in 2009 in connection with defamation charges brought by the head of the national airline, Ceiba. Foreign journalists were not able to report freely, and at times were denied visas.

The most influential medium is radio, but all domestic radio and television stations were operated by the government or members of the president's family. Applications to open

private radio stations have been pending for several years but remained unapproved. The Roman Catholic Church applied to establish a radio station in 2007, but the government had not granted authorization by the end of 2010. At the same time, uncensored satellite broadcasts were increasingly available to those who could afford the service. The government operated at least two newspapers, while a handful were published by nominally independent figures or members of the tiny political opposition. The country has little of the infrastructure necessary for independent media to operate, such as printing presses and newspaper retailers, and the lack of a well developed local private sector hindered media outlets' ability to raise revenues through paid advertisements. Due to low literacy rates, international print media were generally unavailable in the rural areas.

The government did not restrict internet access, although the authorities were believed to monitor citizens' e-mails and internet use. According to the U.S. Department of State, the internet has replaced broadcast media as the primary medium for opposition views. According to International Telecommunication Union statistics for 2010, an estimated 6 percent of the population accessed the internet.