

Equatorial Guinea: Visiting Leaders Should Press for Rights - Country's Citizens Denied Free, Fair Elections
By Human Rights Watch
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PRESS RELEASE (Washington, D.C.) Latin American and African officials participating in a cross-regional meeting in Equatorial Guinea should press their host, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasago, to undertake serious human rights and democratic reforms ahead of planned parliamentary elections in May, 2013. President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, among other officials, is anticipated to attend the Africa-South America Summit scheduled for February 20-23.

President Obiang is the world's longest-ruling head of state. He has claimed at least 95 percent of the vote in the five presidential elections since he seized power in 1979 - elections marred by irregularities, intimidation, and voter fraud. His ruling party and its allies control 99 of the country's 100 seats in parliament. Constitutional changes approved in November 2011 strengthened the president's already considerable powers. Under the revised constitution, the country is to create a bicameral parliament by adding a 75-member Senate. Obiang will directly appoint 15 of its members. Elections to name the remaining legislators and fill municipal posts have been called for May 26.

"Foreign dignitaries should challenge President Obiang on his dismal human rights record and democratic credentials," said Tutu Alicante, executive director of EG Justice, a nongovernmental group that promotes human rights and good governance in Equatorial Guinea. "With legislative elections coming up, major reforms are needed to ensure the right to a free and fair vote."

The ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) maintains a monopoly over the country's political life. The country's most recent vote, a November 2011 referendum on the constitutional amendments, was discredited by reports of voting fraud, harassment of opposition supporters, and intimidation of voters. In recent election cycles, Equatorial Guinea's National Electoral Commission, which oversees voting, has been headed by Obiang's interior minister, a top ruling party official who currently is also deputy prime minister.

The country's beleaguered political opposition is pressured through various means, including arbitrary arrest. Since November 2011, the government has detained at least four high-profile opposition members. One leading opposition figure, who is also a medical doctor and human rights activist, spent four months behind bars in 2012 on politically motivated charges.

EG Justice and Human Rights Watch called on foreign officials attending the Africa-South America summit to press the Obiang government to establish an independent electoral body to ensure that all electoral processes are free, fair, and accountable. They also said the government should uphold political freedoms by respecting the right of opposition members to travel freely, to hold meetings, to express their views, and to have access to the media without discrimination. The government should also allow independent electoral observers unfettered access to election sites.

Under the new constitution, Obiang can hand-pick his vice president, who will automatically succeed him if Obiang retires, dies in office, or is incapacitated. In May, Obiang named his eldest son, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue (known as "Teodorín"), second vice president - a position not outlined in the new constitution - in what was widely seen as an interim step to handing over the reins of power. Teodorín is currently subject to multiple foreign corruption investigations and an international arrest warrant issued against him by France on money laundering charges.

Equatorial Guinea frequently hosts prominent events at its recently constructed \$830 million Sipopo luxury conference center and resort outside the capital, Malabo, to present a positive image of both the president and the country.

"If President Obiang wants to improve his international standing and reputation, he should first improve his human rights record," Alicante said. "Repression of the political opposition and leadership by succession are hardly the hallmarks of a statesman."

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