

The Dangerous Life of a Human Rights Defender in Equatorial Guinea

By Kaitlyn Calogero

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) are arguably more at risk in Equatorial Guinea than most other countries. The fight to protect human rights might just be the most dangerous fight, especially in Equatorial Guinea. The issues and struggles associated with being an HRD is intertwined with so many other social, economic, and political factors. Many other elements need to be taken into account. There is a paradox that lies in this space, between being an advocate for human rights, and then facing the possibility of that same person being stripped of their own rights. This paradox is ever-present in Equatorial Guinea, and those that try their best to protect human rights end up facing their own dangers.

In Equatorial Guinea, political oppression and having the status of being an “unfree” country looms in the background for HRDs. The country’s current president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, has ruled since 1979.¹ Since Mbasogo’s presidency, any political opposition or threats to his reign have been struck down dramatically, as the country is filled with corruption. In 2016, protests to Mbasogo’s re-election were quickly combated with violence, torture, and imprisonment. There is no room for a multiple-party system in Equatorial Guinea as of right now. If someone does not agree with the President, they have no forum to voice this; if they do voice it, they face major consequences, fearing for their own rights. There have been some measures, however, to try and combat and prevent corruption in Equatorial Guinea. At the moment, these all seem to have been empty promises. The country promised to create, enact, and enforce anticorruption measures in order to secure a loan from the International Monetary Fund, which would have aided the country as a whole immensely. However, to this date there still have

not been any anticorruption measures in place that would secure such a loan. Not only does this leave Equatorial Guinea's population defenseless, it leaves the entire country's political system at odds with other countries on an international scale.

Besides this political suppression, there are other major human rights violations within the country. Most notably, Equatorial Guinea does not have any National Human Rights Institutions. Another important aspect of these human rights violations, however, is the virtually non-existent freedom of the press. Despite having constitutional protections, freedom of press is heavily restricted in Equatorial Guinea. There have been instances of prevented internet access, and the laws that are meant to protect individuals are regularly not enforced. More specifically, in 2017, eleven people were arrested for having a press conference that expressed opposing views of that of the president. Equatorial Guinea has cultivated a deep-seated fear within its population, making this country a place where people largely do not have freedom of press or speech.

These political issues in Equatorial Guinea bleed into the work of HRDs within the country. HRDs are regularly threatened and harassed in this country, and they are arbitrarily arrested when advocating for human rights. For instance, in 2018, Alfredo Okenve, the leader of the Center for Development Studies and Initiatives, was attacked and previously told to shut down the organization's work. There is a general culture of "anti-activism" in Equatorial Guinea that leads HRDs to be silenced in a myriad of ways.

The most prominent example of the dangers a Human Rights Defender faces in Equatorial Guinea is with one particular HRD, referred to in this blog as "HRD 1." HRD 1 was forced to leave Equatorial Guinea for his own safety. HRD 1 now lives in Spain in order to be able to live freely and safe from any dangers. HRD 1's work in the field of human rights led to

his kidnapping and his life being threatened by state security personnel. After repeated harassment and threats, HRD 1 had no choice but to flee, ending up safely in Spain. However, HRD 1's ex-wife and children still live in Equatorial Guinea, leading him to fear for them. So, even though HRD 1 is no longer in Equatorial Guinea, he still remains silent and refuses to speak out on the climate in the country out of fear that his family would be harmed as a result. HRD 1's attempts at defending human rights in Equatorial Guinea has led him halfway across the globe, with an inability to be with his children or speak out on what he believes. HRD 1 is just one of many people across the world who risk their lives, and arguably their family's lives, for the betterment of society. Sometimes that desire to defend human rights manifests itself in different ways, and sometimes it can do more personal harm than good. However, this is a very real and current right many individuals face across the globe. As HRD 1 said: "The risks to HRDs in Equatorial Guinea are multiple, constant and real. Repression occurs on a small scale and is recurrent."²

Although there are a number of recommendations that can be made for Equatorial Guinea in terms of human rights defenders and overall human rights development, there needs to be real, true structural change at first. In order for HRDs to have a fighting chance in Equatorial Guinea, there needs to be political change first. Affirmative laws could be made, and harmful laws could be repealed, but before that, there needs to be a more permanent, structural change in the political system. Now, I am not sure what the best way to accomplish that would be, but there needs to be major political change in order for human rights defenders and organizations to be able to protect the rights of others within the country. The change needs to start at the top in some type of manner, or else there will not be any change. The past forty years have shown that people who speak out will be silenced one way or another. So, either a large enough group of

people need to speak out and create an organized change in the country, or, per the recommendations, there needs to be a third-party mechanism to prevent corruption.³

Equatorial Guinea is facing a major humanitarian crisis right now. Citizens do not have the ability to voice their opinions- when they do, they have to fear facing major repercussions that can harm them and those around them. Change needs to happen within the country, and in order to do that, there needs to be structural change. More time and effort needs to be put into how exactly to accomplish this and to improve on work done in the human rights field in Equatorial Guinea. There needs to be a way to resolve this without having HRDs have to face the repercussions as individuals. There needs to be a more concerted, organized effort that prevents individual liability on the end of Human Rights Defenders in Equatorial Guinea.

¹ West Africa Frontline Grassroots Environmental and Human Rights Defender (HRD) Baseline Report, Green Advocates International, Liberia, West Africa, February 2021. [This blog is based primarily on the findings of the Green Advocates International report.](#)

² *See id.*

³ *See id.*