

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Equatorial Guinea is nominally a multiparty constitutional republic. Since a military coup in 1979, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has dominated all branches of government in collaboration with his clan and political party, the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE), which he founded in 1991. In May 2013 the PDGE won a claimed 98.7 percent of seats in the bicameral legislature and 98.1 percent of city council seats throughout the country. The lopsided results and weak independent monitoring of electoral processes raised suspicions of systematic vote fraud. Foreign diplomatic observers noted numerous irregularities and the presence of military personnel at all voting stations. Civilian authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problems in the country were disregard for rule of law, including police use of excessive force and torture, denial of freedom of speech, and widespread official corruption.

Other human rights problems included the inability of citizens to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections, arbitrary and unlawful killings, abuse of detainees and prisoners, poor conditions in prisons and detention facilities, arbitrary arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention, lack of judicial independence, restrictions on rights to privacy and internal movement, and the use of internal exile against political opponents. The government denied freedom of assembly, press, and association and harassed and deported foreign residents without due process. The government restricted political parties and the activities of domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Violence and discrimination against women and children were problems, and trafficking in persons occurred. Societal discrimination against ethnic minorities and immigrants; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community; and persons with HIV/AIDS was a problem. Labor rights were restricted, and forced labor, including by children, occurred.

The government took few steps to prosecute or punish officials who committed abuses, whether in the security forces or elsewhere in the government, and impunity was a serious problem.

There were reports that Equatorial Guinean troops operating with multi-national forces in the Central African Republic in 2013 and 2014 sexually abused boys in a

camp for internally displaced persons. The government did not investigate or take action against alleged perpetrators.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. Security forces used excessive force, which resulted in several deaths during the Cup of African Nations soccer tournament, held between January 17 and February 8.

For example, during a house-to-house campaign in search of illegal immigrants, security forces reportedly killed two Malian citizens who attempted to flee. At year's end there were no reports the government investigated or punished alleged perpetrators.

b. Disappearance

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of politically motivated abductions.

Cipriano Nguema Mba, a former military officer who was abducted by Equatorial Guinean security forces while visiting Nigeria in late 2013 and illegally returned to the country, remained in prison, often in solitary confinement.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, but torture and excessive force by police occurred "routinely," according to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Police officers and military personnel used excessive force during traffic stops, house-to-house searches, and interrogations, sometimes to facilitate their own robberies and extortion. Detainees were beaten in police stations.

For example, in March police arrested Luis Nzo Ondo, a member of the opposition Republican Democratic Force (FDR), and beat him at the police station. Police subsequently transported Nzo Ondo to his home village, and although they did not file charges, restricted him from returning to Malabo, where his wife and five children lived.

Abuse in prisons also occurred. Italian businessman Roberto Berardi, who was released from prison in July, reported that he and prisoners in neighboring cells were regularly beaten.

Authorities harassed, intimidated, arbitrarily arrested, detained, and often deported foreigners--primarily irregular African immigrants--without due process.

Security forces sexually assaulted and beat women, including at checkpoints, and senior government officials were unwilling to take steps to address such violence.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in the country's three prisons and 12 police station jails were harsh and life threatening due to abuse, overcrowding, disease, inadequate food, and lack of medical care.

Physical Conditions: There were approximately 500 adult inmates, 5 percent of whom were women. Six inmates were incarcerated due to mental illness. There was no information available on the number of juvenile detainees.

Men, women, and minors had separate sleeping quarters and bathrooms but shared a common area for meals. Unlike in the previous year, pretrial and convicted prisoners were housed separately, although they shared a common area. Two juvenile detention centers were built during the year but held no inmates at year's end.

Authorities generally permitted families of prisoners to visit on weekends, but political prisoners and others often were kept in solitary confinement for lengthy periods and not allowed to see their families.

Lawyers and others who visited prisons and jails reported serious abuses, including beatings.

Prison cells were overcrowded, dirty, and lacked mattresses. Inmates rarely had access to exercise. Diseases including malaria, typhoid, and HIV/AIDS were serious problems. Authorities provided sporadic medical care to a limited number of prisoners and detainees and also basic meals, but the food was generally insufficient and of poor quality. It was unknown whether ventilation or lighting was adequate.

According to the Ministry of Justice, three inmates died during the year--two from malaria and one from HIV/AIDS.

Civilian prisons were located on military installations and manned by the Ministries of Justice and National Security, with military personnel handling security around the prison and civilians working and providing security within the prisons.

Conditions in jails and detention centers were harsh. Authorities beat foreigners and citizens on their hands and feet, and there was no medical care. Police station jails were frequently overcrowded, particularly when police conducted sweeps for irregular migrants. In the Guantanamo Detention Center, located inside the Ministry of Interior compound, authorities held men, women, and children together. Water from rain and overflowing toilets often soaked into the bedding of detainees. Up to 30 detainees shared one toilet facility that lacked toilet paper and a functioning door. Rodent infestations were common. Jails did not provide food, but authorities generally allowed families and friends to bring meals twice daily, although police did not always deliver food to detainees. Visitors had to pay guards small bribes to see detainees and drop off food. Students arrested for protesting the cut in university stipends complained that they were not given sufficient food or water (see section 2.b.).

Administration: Unlike in previous years, the Ministry of Justice registered cases and tracked prisoners. Authorities assigned a prosecutor to regularly visit prisons and track the status of the inmates' cases. The Department of Human Rights made annual visits to view conditions and direct the release of prisoners being held without charge.

Authorities often granted provisional liberty to nonviolent juvenile offenders, who they subsequently monitored. Courts did not use alternatives to sentencing.

A local judge served as full-time ombudsman to monitor the status of inmates and hear complaints about sentencing, but authorities generally did not permit prisoners and detainees to submit complaints or request investigations. Apart from political prisoners, most prisoners had reasonable access to visitors and were permitted religious observance. South African businessman Daniel Janse van Rensburg, however, was allowed only two calls to his family while incarcerated from December 2013 to September 2015.

Independent Monitoring: The International Committee of the Red Cross had limited access to prisons, even with extensive advance notice. In June the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) requested permission to visit youths in prison but did not receive an answer. The government allowed UNICEF to visit the new youth rehabilitation centers in Centro Sur and Riaba, but those centers were not operational by year's end.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but security forces arrested and detained persons arbitrarily. Authorities held detainees incommunicado, denied them access to lawyers, and jailed them for long periods without charge. Some perpetrators of arbitrary arrests and other abuses were tried by military courts and received prison sentences or were dismissed from their posts.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Police generally are responsible for maintaining law and order in the cities, while gendarmes are responsible for security outside cities and for special events. Both entities report to the minister of national security. Military personnel, who report to the minister of defense, also fulfill police functions in border areas, sensitive sites, and high-traffic areas. Additional police elements are in the Ministries of Interior (border and traffic police), Finance (customs police), and Justice (investigative/prosecuting police). Presidential security officials also exercise police functions at or near presidential facilities.

Police, gendarmes, and military personnel were ineffective and corrupt, and impunity was a problem. Security force members, who often were inebriated on the job, extorted money from citizens and foreigners at police checkpoints and routine traffic stops. The government did not maintain effective internal or external mechanisms to investigate security force abuses.

There is no government body that examines security force killings to evaluate whether they occurred in the line of duty or were otherwise justifiable.

The Department of Human Rights held awareness training for police and gendarmes on trafficking in persons. The training emphasized humane treatment of immigrants and called for an end to their extortion.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The constitution requires arrest warrants unless a suspect is caught in the act, but security force members frequently arrested persons in violation of the warrant requirement. A detainee has the right to a judicial determination of the legality of detention within 72 hours of arrest, excluding weekends and holidays, but detentions were often longer, sometimes lasting several months. A prosecutor was assigned to each jail to work closely with police and the Justice Ministry to reduce such delays, but authorities generally held detainees without charge until investigations were completed. NGOs indicated the majority of detainees were not charged and that judges typically failed to issue a writ of habeas corpus within the legal time limit of 36 hours.

For example, during the Cup of African Nations soccer tournament, violence broke out at one of the matches, and youths vandalized the surroundings when they departed the stadium. Riot police arrested approximately 150 persons, including minors, and held them for eight days without charge.

Some foreigners complained they were detained and subsequently deported without being informed of the charges against them. Although a bail system existed, it was rarely used. The bar association supplied public defenders to those who could not afford private counsel but only at the time they were charged. Detainees, particularly political detainees, occasionally were denied access to lawyers.

The law provides for family visits and prohibits incommunicado detention, but these provisions were not always respected and sometimes depended on the discretion of local police chiefs.

Arbitrary Arrest: The government arbitrarily arrested irregular immigrants, opposition members, businesspersons, and others. Many detainees complained about bribes required for their release from detention.

Police raids continued on immigrant communities, who make up 17 percent, or more than 200,000, of the country's 1.2 million people. Reliable sources reported many legal as well as irregular immigrants were abused, extorted, or detained during such raids. Police occasionally used excessive force to detain and deport immigrants. Many embassies in the country criticized the government for its harassment, abuse, extortion, and detention of foreign nationals and for not renewing residence and work permits in a timely manner, making foreign nationals

vulnerable to such abuse. Unlike in previous years, authorities did not require deportees to pay for transportation to their country of citizenship.

In September authorities released Daniel Janse van Rensburg, a South African businessman who was arrested in 2013 as a result of a business dispute involving a member of the president's family (see section 1.c.).

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a problem, and many of those incarcerated were pretrial detainees. Inefficient judicial procedures, corruption, lack of monitoring, and inadequate staffing contributed to the problem.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution does not provide for an independent judiciary, in that the president is designated the "First Magistrate of the Nation" and chair of the Judicial Council responsible for appointing new judges and magistrates. On May 20, President Obiang dissolved the entire judiciary by presidential decree, leaving the country with no judiciary for two weeks. Judges in sensitive cases often consulted with the Office of the President before issuing a ruling. Judges sometimes decided cases on political grounds; others sought bribes. Authorities did not always respect court orders, and many persons turned to the parliament for enforcement of civil judgments on matters such as employment, land, and personal injury disputes. These cases were regularly televised, and parliament had a full docket.

The military justice system, based entirely on the system in effect in Spain when Equatorial Guinea gained its independence in 1968, provided defendants with fewer procedural safeguards than in the criminal court system. The code of military justice states that persons who disobey a military authority or who are alleged to have committed an offense considered a "crime against the state" should be judged by a military tribunal, regardless of whether the defendant is civilian or military. A defendant may be tried without being present, and the defense does not have the right to cross-examine an accuser. Such proceedings were not public, and defendants had no right of appeal to a higher court.

In rural areas tribal elders adjudicated civil claims and minor criminal matters in traditional courts. These adjudications were conducted according to customary law and did not afford the same rights and privileges as the formal system. Persons dissatisfied with traditional judgments could appeal to the civil court system.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair hearing in court, but an independent judiciary generally did not enforce this right. The law provides for the presumption of innocence, and defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of charges against them and to have adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. The courts did not respect these rights. Defendants have the right to a public trial without undue delay, and most trials for ordinary crimes were public. Defendants do not have the right to free interpretation. The law does not provide for trial by jury. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials but rarely were able to consult promptly with attorneys unless they could afford private counsel. A defendant who cannot afford a lawyer is entitled to ask the government to appoint one, but only after first appearing in court, which generally did not occur within the mandated 72 hours. The bar association assigned counsel to represent indigent defendants. The law provides for defendants to confront and question witnesses and present their own witnesses and evidence. Courts seldom enforced this right. Defendants do not have the ability to access government-held evidence. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt. The accused has the right to appeal. The law extends these rights equally to all citizens, but authorities did not respect the law.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

At year's end there were four known political prisoners: Cipriano Nguema Mba, Timoteo Asumu Abaga, Ticiano Obama, and Antonio Nkoni. Although not charged with any crime, political leaders Guillermo Nguema Ela and Luis Nzo Ondo were forcibly transported from Malabo to the mainland and were restricted from leaving their hometowns. Political prisoners did not receive the protections accorded them under the law. Although not generally singled out for poor treatment, they were placed in solitary confinement more frequently than were other prisoners. The government often denied international organizations access to facilities where political prisoners were held.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Courts ruled on civil cases submitted to them, some of which involved human rights complaints. Plaintiffs could not appeal decisions to an international regional court. Civil matters also were often settled out of court, and in some cases tribal elders adjudicated local disputes.

The government sometimes failed, for political reasons, to comply with domestic court decisions pertaining to human rights, including political rights. For example, despite a 2012 court ruling that Daniel Dario Ayecaba was the rightful president of the opposition Popular Union (UP), the government continued to recognize a breakaway faction that joined a coalition with the ruling party as the legitimate UP party.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit such actions, but the government often did not respect these prohibitions. Search warrants are required unless the crime is in progress or for reasons of national security. Nevertheless, security force members entered homes and arrested alleged criminals, foreign nationals, and others, often without required warrants, confiscating property and demanding bribes with impunity. Break-ins were widely attributed to military, national security, and police personnel.

Government informers reportedly monitored opposition members, NGOs, and journalists, including through internet and telephone surveillance. The government blocked employment of known members of opposition parties.

In recent years families made large down payments to the government to obtain affordable social housing. When completed, such homes were not released to many of the families who had made down payments, nor were their funds returned. The government instead provided the most desirable housing to families with strong political connections. Some families who made deposits were offered alternative housing, and others still awaited housing, with no means to reclaim their deposits or information on when or whether they might be granted a home.

Individuals may hold title to land, but the state has full power of eminent domain, which it exercised in the interests of development, often with little or no compensation to the land titleholders. Unlike in the previous year, the government did not destroy homes and businesses for failure to comply with appearance requirements that were imposed inconsistently and on extremely short notice.

Unlike in previous years, authorities did not detain family members for alleged offenses committed by other relatives.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and press, the law grants authorities extensive powers to restrict media activities, and the government limited these rights. Defamation is criminalized, and the government restricted journalistic activity by exercising its right to official prepublication censorship. The country's media remained weak and under government influence or control. Persons close to the president owned the few private media outlets that existed. Most journalists practiced self-censorship. Those who did not were subjected to government surveillance and threats.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: Individuals generally chose not to criticize the president, his family, other high-ranking officials, or security forces due to fear of reprisal. The government attempted to impede criticism by continuing to monitor the activities of opposition members, journalists, and others.

In mid-January authorities arrested without charge three men for either distributing or possessing pamphlets calling for a public boycott of the Cup of African Nations soccer tournament being hosted by the country. One of the three men, Celestino Okenve, claimed he was held in solitary confinement for an extended period and denied medical attention. Although his family brought food to the prison, Okenve alleged there were days when he received no food. On January 20, all three men were released as a result of international pressure.

Press and Media Freedoms: The country had one marginally independent newspaper that published sporadically. Print media outlets were extremely limited. Starting a periodical or newspaper was a complicated process governed by an ambiguous law and impeded by government bureaucracy. In addition accreditation was cumbersome for both local and foreign journalists, who must register with the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio. International newspapers or news magazines occasionally could be found in limited quantities in grocery stores and hotels in major cities, but they sold out quickly and were generally unavailable in rural areas.

International news agencies did not have correspondents or regular stringers present in the country. Visiting journalists for foreign media outlets and some independent local journalists could not operate freely, and there were reports government agents followed and observed both groups.

For example, in February the government did not permit a Spanish television crew, visiting to report on the African Cup of Nations soccer tournament, to travel to the Oyala area where the new capitol was under construction.

The government owned the only national radio and television broadcast system, RTVGE. The president's eldest son, Second Vice President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, owned the only private broadcast media, Television Asonga and Asonga Radio. Journalists for these entities were not allowed to report freely, and those who filmed March student protests at the National University of Equatorial Guinea were fired.

Requests by political parties to establish private radio stations were denied or remained perpetually pending. The government allowed a Catholic religious organization to open a radio station, however, and a Muslim weekly program was broadcast free on national radio. In October and without notice or explanation, the minister of information, press, and radio cancelled the weekly paid evangelical and Presbyterian broadcasts. Satellite broadcasts were widely available, including the French language Africa24 television channel, which the government partially owned.

Foreign radio transmissions broadcast from neighboring countries, including Radio France International and the BBC, were broadcast uncensored in some areas of the country.

Violence and Harassment: Security forces detained, intimidated, and harassed journalists. The government took no steps to preserve the safety and independence of media or to prosecute individuals who harassed journalists.

In March authorities arrested journalist Samuel Obiang for filming protests at the National University of Equatorial Guinea. They subsequently destroyed Obiang's recordings and damaged his equipment.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law gives the government considerable authority to restrict publication through official prepublication censorship. The law also establishes criminal, civil, and administrative penalties for violation of its provisions, particularly of the 19 publishing principles in Article 2 of the Law on the Press, Publishing, and Audiovisual Media. The country's only independent newspaper practiced self-censorship and did not openly criticize the government or the president.

The only publishing facility available to newspapers was located at the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio, where officials censored printed materials.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel is a criminal offense. In July authorities arrested a journalist for criticizing a parliamentarian for representing a community in which she did not reside. When police threatened to have the journalist charged with libel, he paid a fine and entered into an agreement to pay substantial damages to the parliamentarian.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content. For example, although social media and critical websites were available in January and February during the Cup of African Nations soccer tournament, in March the government blocked WhatsApp, Facebook, Diario Rombe, and Radio Macuto to prevent communication during the student protests. The websites remained blocked for several months, and some remained so at year's end.

The government also blocked access to websites maintained by domestic political opposition and exile groups. Users attempting to access these sites were redirected to the government's official press website or received a message that the website did not exist. The internet was the primary way opposition views were expressed and disseminated, and the most overt criticism of the government came from the country's diaspora. According to the International Telecommunication Union, 18.86 percent of the country's inhabitants used the internet in 2014.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Members of opposition political parties, faculty members, and students complained of government interference in the hiring of teachers, the employment of unqualified teachers, and official pressure on teachers to give passing grades to failing students with political connections. Teachers with political connections but no experience or accreditation were employed and reportedly seldom appeared at the classes they were assigned to teach. Most professors reportedly practiced self-censorship.

For example, a university professor who was removed from his post in 2010 for publicly raising transparency concerns at a 2010 event in Washington, D.C., had not been reinstated by year's end.

Cultural events required coordination with the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio, the Department of Culture and Tourism, or both. The resulting bureaucratic delay was a disincentive for prospective organizers, who often did not know the criteria under which proposals were judged or their chances for approval.

On August 25, the government closed the Cultural Center of Rebola, which an ethnic minority group operated, for promoting music and other productions critical of the ruling party. The closing of the center triggered a peaceful protest. Security forces reacted with tear gas and arrested nine youths, who were released after five days following international pressure. Police subsequently arrested young demonstrators protesting the closure and detained them without charge for five days (see section 5).

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and law provide for the right of assembly, but regulatory provisions effectively undermined this right, and the government routinely restricted freedom of assembly. Although the government formally abolished permit requirements for political party meetings within party buildings, it requires prior permission for public events, such as meetings in other venues or marches, and frequently denied these permit requests.

For example, in April authorities prevented a leading opposition party from holding a meeting outside its premises. In November authorities prevented another opposition party from holding a rally.

By contrast, authorities pressured citizens to attend progovernment party rallies. For example, during the PDGE's summer 2015 national tour led by President Obiang, authorities directed citizens to attend rallies and register as party members to avoid adverse consequences. When the tour reached Malabo, authorities closed all places of employment for the day and told residents to gather at the stadium for President Obiang's speech.

Security forces arbitrarily arrested demonstrators. For example, in March police and soldiers dispersed more than 200 students who were protesting a stipend reduction at the National University. More than 50 students were arrested and directed to apologize to the president.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provide for freedom of association, but the government severely restricted this right. All political parties, labor unions, and other associations must register with the government, but the registration process was costly, burdensome, opaque, and slow. During the year the government reduced funding for civil society organizations and distributed remaining funds among a few mostly progovernment organizations close to the president's inner circle. Grant funding decisions continued to be arbitrary and nontransparent.

In July the government denied registration to the Sons and Daughters of Ebebeyin Association, and the minister and deputy minister of interior prohibited the organization from meeting or conducting any activities. One of the founding members lost his place of business when PDGE leadership directed his landlord to evict him.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties along ethnic lines, and several political parties remained banned, including the Progress Party of Equatorial Guinea. At year's end only one labor organization was believed to be registered; the registry was inaccessible due to a change in leadership at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security.

In January a nonregistered association of taxi drivers protested proposed toll hikes. Unlike in the past, the government did not attempt to restrain the taxi drivers or suppress their comments but rather met driver demands and substantially reduced the toll hike that taxis would pay under the new law.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

Although the law provides for freedom of internal movement and repatriation, the government occasionally restricted these rights.

In-country Movement: Police at roadblocks routinely checked travelers and engaged in petty extortion. Frequent roundups of irregular immigrants and others

also occurred at roadblocks. The government claimed roadblocks impeded illegal immigration, mercenary activities, and attempted coups.

Exile: The law prohibits forced internal or external exile. Some members of banned political parties returned from exile during the year, but many remained in self-imposed exile. Opposition party political leaders Guillermo Nguema Ela and Luis Nzo Ondo remained in internal exile at year's end on the mainland, unable to join their families in Malabo (see section 3).

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, but the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the right to choose their government through free and fair elections based on universal and equal suffrage, but the government severely limited this right.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The government held legislative and municipal elections in May 2013. The PDGE won 98.7 percent of seats in the House of Deputies and the newly created Senate. The opposition Convergence for Social Democracy (CPDS) won a single seat in each chamber. The PDGE also won 98.1 percent of city council seats throughout the country. The lopsided results and weak independent monitoring of the electoral process raised suspicions of systematic fraud. The CPDS disputed the results publicly and filed a formal complaint with the National Electoral Commission, but the government did not address its objections.

The few international election observers present were able to cover only a small percentage of the polling stations. The government refused election assistance offered by the EU. Election observers noted the following irregularities at some polling stations: failure to respect the secrecy of the vote, the absence of ballots printed to enable voting for an opposition party, unsealed ballot boxes, incomplete voting result summaries, lack of posting of voting results as required by law, and ruling party propaganda around and in the polling stations. Authorities deployed soldiers to all polling stations, and there were reports that they intimidated voters.

Opposition parties questioned the legitimacy of the voter registration process, and voter registries were not made public in advance of the election. No independent and impartial body existed to oversee the electoral process or consider election-related complaints. The National Electoral Commission has the responsibility to provide for the fairness of elections and to handle postelection grievances, but the commission comprised mostly members of the ruling party, including the minister of interior, who headed the commission. The government restricted opposition parties' access to media and delayed the provision of constitutionally mandated campaign funding during the campaign.

Voters took three party-slate ballots into the voting booth and chose only one to deposit in the voting urn outside. The two unused ballots were discarded on the voting booth floor. This system required each voter to cast all votes in the municipal and legislative races for candidates of a single party. As a result there was increased pressure on voters to demonstrate loyalty to the ruling party by voting for PDGE candidates exclusively. Furthermore, this system of voting made it impossible to track all ballots printed to safeguard against multiple voting.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The PDGE ruled through a complex network of family, clan, and ethnic relationships. Public sector employees were pressured to join the PDGE. The party's near monopoly on power, funding, and access to national media hampered the country's opposition parties--the CPDS, UP, Popular Action for Equatorial Guinea, and Citizens for the Innovation of Equatorial Guinea (C.I.).

For example, during the year the PDGE conducted a national campaign with extensive media coverage in preparation for the 2016 elections. Opposition parties, however, had no access to media during this period, contravening the National Pact of 1993, the regulating framework for political parties that stipulates access to media and political financing and that provides for opposition political parties to have free weekly national radio and TV spots.

Political parties could receive both private and public funding but were not required to disclose the amount of private funding. In advance of the 2016 presidential elections, only the PDGE received public funding, and the amount was not publicly disclosed.

A packet of five new laws governing the political process was passed, an outcome of the 2014 National Political Dialogue. One law establishes an independent

National Electoral Commission, which had not been constituted by year's end despite presidential elections scheduled for 2016. New political parties were encouraged to apply for registration as a result of the dialogue, and the Center-Right Union and C.I. were registered.

The government subjected opposition members to arbitrary arrest and harassment.

For example, in mid-March authorities in Malabo detained Guillermo Nguema Ela, leader of the opposition FDR party, forcibly transported him to his home village near the mainland city of Mongomo, and directed him not to leave the village indefinitely. Authorities arrested FDR member Luis Nzo Ondo several days later while he was distributing information denouncing Nguema Ela's confinement. Authorities jailed Nzo Ondo overnight and forcibly transferred him to the Mongomo area, directing him not to leave. Although no charges were filed, both Nguema Ela and Nzo Ondo remained in internal exile.

During the year judicial officials investigated highly publicized allegations that CPDS leader Andres Esono Ondo was involved in an implausible plot to pay 150,000 euros to transport a Guinean man suffering from Ebola to Equatorial Guinea to spread the Ebola virus. During the investigation Esono Ondo was restricted from travelling outside Malabo.

Opposition members reported discrimination in hiring, job retention, and obtaining scholarships and business licenses. They also claimed the government pressured foreign companies not to hire opposition members. Businesses that employed citizens with ties to families, individuals, parties, or groups out of favor with the government reportedly were forced to dismiss those employees or face reprisals.

Registered opposition parties faced restrictions on freedom of speech, association, and assembly. For example, supporters who attended opposition political party campaign rallies were singled out for police interrogation and harassment. Some political parties that existed before the 1992 law establishing procedures to register political parties remained banned, allegedly for "supporting terrorism."

Civil servants were easily removed for political reasons and without due process. In June both the executive and judicial branches were restructured, with party affiliation a key factor in obtaining government employment. The ruling party conducted a nationwide campaign, and government employees were required to support them to keep their positions.

The president exercised strong powers as head of state, commander of the armed forces, head of the judiciary, and founder and head of the ruling party. The government generally restricted leadership positions in government to select PDGE members or members of a coalition of loyal parties that campaigned and voted with the PDGE.

In 2011 the government conducted and won a referendum to alter the constitution significantly. The amended constitution concentrates power in the hands of the president and allows President Obiang, who has ruled since 1979, to serve two more seven-year terms. (One of the amendments cancels the presidential age limit of 75 and institutes presidential term limits of two consecutive seven-year mandates, to become effective with the 2016 presidential election, when Obiang will be age 74.) Other amendments establish a senate, an Anticorruption Tribunal (all of whose members are appointed by the president), and a human rights ombudsman, nominated by parliament and ratified by the president. Neither the tribunal nor the human rights ombudsman was operational by year's end, although the ombudsman had been sworn in. The amendments also create the post of vice president. Following the referendum the president created a second vice presidential position in charge of defense and national security, a position not provided for in the constitution. In a move widely viewed as a further attempt to consolidate power, the president appointed his eldest son, Obiang Mangué, to the post.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Women occupied 10 of 75 Senate seats (including that of the Senate president) and 18 of 100 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Three of the 25 cabinet members were women, one of the 13 delegate ministers was a woman, three of eight vice-ministers were women, and six of 37 secretaries of state were women. In May the president dissolved the entire judicial branch. The newly appointed Supreme Court continued to be an all-male institution.

The government did not overtly limit minority participation in politics, but members of the Fang ethnic group occupied the top ranks. The group, estimated to constitute 80 percent of the population, continued to exercise dominant political and economic power.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

While the law provides severe criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials engaged in corrupt

practices with impunity. Corruption at all levels of government was a severe problem, as the president publicly acknowledged. Numerous foreign investigations continued into high-level corruption tied to the country's natural resource wealth. The attorney general's Anticorruption Tribunal, however, did not report initiating any investigations during the year.

According to Freedom House, the budget process was "opaque." The Open Budget Survey for 2012 gave the country a score of zero, the lowest possible result.

Although the country was delisted from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2010, the government took steps required to renew its EITI candidacy. During the year the government established a National Commission, including independently elected civil society members, to oversee EITI implementation. In August 2014 the president issued a public statement of the country's intention to implement EITI and appointed a senior individual to lead the implementation of EITI.

Corruption: During the year President Obiang dismissed all presidentially appointed members of the government in an effort to reduce corruption; he made new appointments and urged an end to corrupt practices. Nevertheless, the president and members of his inner circle continued to amass personal fortunes from the revenues associated with oil exports.

In January a member of parliament was found guilty in a foreign court for bulk cash smuggling. Media reported bulk cash smuggling by high-level members of the government, including an attempt to send containers of cash to Sao Tome and Principe. There were no reports of any official investigations.

A foreign government continued to pursue seizure of real and personal property of Obiang Mangué, the president's eldest son and second vice president, as the result of a 2010 investigation into suspected concealment and laundering abroad of embezzled public funds. In an October 2014 settlement with a foreign government, Obiang Mangué was forced to sell a \$30 million mansion, a Ferrari automobile, and various items of Michael Jackson memorabilia. The settlement required that an estimated \$20 million of the proceeds be given to a charitable organization for the benefit of the country's citizens and the forfeiture of \$10.3 million to the foreign government.

During the year police officers and military personnel increased neighborhood sweeps and checkpoint and traffic stops to demand bribes, primarily from foreigners. Authorities seldom investigated such incidents, and the government had no mechanism to denounce police misconduct. Individuals feared filing complaints, especially foreigners whose applications for residence and work permits remained pending. In June the president swore in an ombudsman to take such complaints, but the Office of the Ombudsman was not operational at year's end.

Financial Disclosure: The constitution and law require public officials to declare their assets to the National Commission on Public Ethics, although no declarations were made public. There are no formal procedures to control submission of asset disclosures and no penalties for noncompliance. To date no public officials have been required to submit asset disclosures. The law precludes government officials from conducting business, but most ministers conducted businesses they conflated with their government responsibilities.

Public Access to Information: The law does not provide for general public access to government information, although it requires the government to turn over unclassified information about its activities to news agencies and other media outlets if requests are deemed legitimate. Citizens and noncitizens, including those employed by foreign media, generally were unable to access government information. A lack of organized recordkeeping, archiving, and public libraries also limited access to government information. Copies of the country's laws were obtainable only at the Public Records Office, but fees were high, and many laws were unavailable there too.

There is no mandatory disclosure of procurement information, and no bids were announced or awards made publicly available. There was no registry of companies banned from participating in the procurement process, and there was no public access to the financial records of state-owned companies, such as the GEPetrol oil company, SONAGAS gas company, or the SEGESA electricity company.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The law restricts NGO activity, and the few domestic NGOs focused on development issues such as health, women's empowerment, and elder care. Although the law includes human rights among the areas in which NGOs may

operate, no local NGO reported publicly on the abuse of civil, political, or other human rights by the government or on official corruption.

International NGOs focused on human rights, including Amnesty International, Freedom House, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), conducted visits; however, during the year the ICRC closed its office and moved its staff and equipment to neighboring Cameroon.

The government was suspicious of human rights activities, claiming human rights concerns were largely prompted by antigovernment exile groups and hostile foreign NGOs. Government officials used major media outlets to discredit civil society actors, categorizing them as critics of the government. The few local activists who sought to address human rights risked intimidation, harassment, and other reprisals.

For example, in August the minister of interior forced the management team of the Cultural Center of Rebola to resign for supporting musicians and other artists who advocated for human rights or criticized the government (see section 2.a.).

NGOs faced difficulties in registering (see section 2.b.).

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: Members of international human rights NGOs and the African Development Bank continued to report difficulties obtaining visas to visit the country.

Government Human Rights Bodies: Citizens have the right to file a petition with the Commission on Human Rights, which is part of the House of Deputies' Committee for Complaints and Petitions. A government-funded Center for Human Rights and Democracy held human rights awareness campaigns. A National Commission on Children's Rights was created as a result of UNICEF's engagement. These human rights bodies were not fully operational, independent, adequately resourced, or effective. The interministerial commission on trafficking in persons remained inactive.

Government officials responsible for human rights functioned more to defend the government from accusations than to investigate human rights complaints or compile statistics on such issues.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on tribe, ethnicity, sex, religion, social group, and political opinion. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, and sex. The government did not enforce the laws effectively.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal and punishable by 12 to 20 years' imprisonment and additional fines. The law does not address spousal rape. The government did not enforce the law effectively, in part due to reluctance of victims and their families to report rape. Even when victims reported rape, police and judicial officials were reluctant to act, particularly if perpetrators were politically connected. Nevertheless, authorities prosecuted some cases during the year, although statistics were unavailable.

Domestic violence is illegal but culturally accepted in some societal groups. Depending on severity and circumstances, the penalty for assault ranges from one to 20 years' imprisonment. According to the African Development Bank, 63 percent of women in the country reported being victims of domestic violence. Local NGOs reported the problem was widespread. Victims were reluctant to report cases, and the government did not enforce the law effectively. Police and the judiciary were reluctant to prosecute domestic violence cases, and no statistics were publicly available on prosecutions, convictions, or punishments during the year. Authorities treated domestic violence as a private matter to be resolved in the home. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Gender Equality mediated some domestic disputes but had no enforcement powers.

In coordination with international organizations and a local NGO, the government conducted public awareness campaigns on domestic violence around International Women's Day in March. On occasion police organized workshops on family violence. Government-controlled media refused to broadcast public service announcements produced by a local NGO about domestic violence. In December 2014 the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Local Corporations chaired a seminar on gender violence organized by an NGO focused on women's rights, which addressed gender violence, early pregnancies, and sexual harassment. The NGO held a similar seminar on Annobon Island at the end of February.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Although not widespread, levirate marriage, the practice by which a man may be required to marry his brother's widow, resulted in discrimination against women and girls.

Sexual Harassment: No law prohibits sexual harassment, and NGOs reported it was a problem, although the extent of the problem was unknown. There were no government efforts to address sexual harassment.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children; manage their reproductive health; and have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. Contraceptives were distributed free of charge.

The maternal mortality rate continued to decline due to government and private sector efforts to reduce malaria and improve care in hospitals, according to government officials and international observers. According to the UN Population Fund, in 2013 the maternal mortality rate was 290 per 100,000 live births; 8.9 percent of those deaths were attributed to HIV/AIDS. Some prenatal and obstetric care was free in government clinics, but the availability and quality of care varied greatly and was limited primarily to Malabo and Bata, the two main cities.

Discrimination: While the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the country applies the Spanish civil code as it was when Equatorial Guinea adopted it upon gaining its independence in 1968. The code discriminates against women in matters of nationality, real and personal property, and inheritance. According to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the prevalence of negative stereotypes and adverse cultural norms and customs resulted in discrimination against women. Lack of legislation regulating traditional marriages and other aspects of family law also permitted discrimination against women, particularly with respect to polygyny, inheritance, and child custody.

The culture was conservative and maintained a societal bias against women. Custom confined women in rural areas largely to traditional roles. There was less overt discrimination in urban areas, although women sometimes experienced discrimination in access to employment and credit and did not always receive equal pay for similar work (see section 7.d.).

The government provided courses, seminars, conferences, and media programs to sensitize the population and government agencies to the needs and rights of women. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Gender Equality held events around

International Women's Day to raise public awareness of these rights. The ministry also provided technical assistance and financial support to rural women.

Both the civil code and traditional law favor men over women in real and personal property rights and inheritance. Under traditional law, women become members of the husband's family and do not have any rights to inheritance. Primogeniture applied to traditional inheritance with the oldest male child receiving the inheritance.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived from one's parents. The Ministry of Health requires parents to register all births, and failure to register a child may result in denial of public services. Nevertheless, most citizens were unaware of the importance of birth registration. Birth registration was low, and the mechanisms for birth registration very limited. Civil registry officials were poorly trained and often took bribes to accelerate the issuance of certificates and falsify information. In rural areas most of the registry offices did not have computers and relied on manual registration. Certificate issuance could take from one day to a few weeks depending on the amount paid for the process. On average the official cost per certificate, either for initial issuance or for reissuance, was 8,000 CFA francs (\$14). Bribes ranged from 5,000 CFA (\$9) to 30,000 CFA (\$52). UNICEF, in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, held a workshop in July on birth registration procedures and trained civil registry officials.

Education: Education is tuition-free and compulsory until age 13, although all students are required to pay for textbooks and other materials. The overwhelming majority of children attended school through the primary grades. Boys generally completed an additional seven years of secondary school or attended a program of vocational study after primary education. Domestic work and childbearing limited secondary education attendance for many girls in rural areas.

Child Abuse: Abuse of minors is illegal, but the government did not enforce the law effectively, and child abuse occurred. Physical punishment was a culturally accepted method of discipline.

Early and Forced Marriage: There is no minimum age for marriage. Forced marriage occurred, especially in rural areas, although no statistics were available. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Gender Equality operated programs to deter child marriage but did not address forced marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Child prostitution is illegal, but underage girls engaged in prostitution, particularly in urban centers such as Malabo and Bata, where oil and construction industries created demand for cheap labor and commercial sexual exploitation. The commercial sexual exploitation of children is punishable by fines and imprisonment. These laws were generally not enforced. The law does not address child pornography. The minimum age for sexual consent is 18.

Soldiers participating in the multi-national force in the Central African Republic were reported to have sexually exploited children. In April abuses committed between December 2013 and June 2014 by members of the French, Chadian, and Equatorial Guinean multi-national forces were made public, implicating them in allegations of sexual abuse of boys in the internally displaced camp near the M'Poko airport in the Central African Republic capital, Bangui. Although the government of France reportedly opened an investigation, the governments of neither Chad nor Equatorial Guinea, both of which had committed to investigating those allegations, had issued progress reports, findings, or conclusions by year's end, and no soldiers had been held accountable.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community was small, and there were no known reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not provide persons with disabilities any protection from discrimination in employment, education, or the provision of other state services, nor does it mandate access to buildings or transportation for persons with disabilities (see section 7.d.). Inaccessible public buildings and schools were an

obstacle for persons with disabilities, and some newly constructed government buildings lacked such access.

Children with disabilities attended primary, secondary, and higher education, although no accommodations were made for their disabilities. The local Red Cross, with financial support from the government, managed a school for deaf children in Malabo. A privately run school for deaf children affiliated with a foreign religious group operated in Bata.

Two privately funded mental health clinics offered limited services in Bata. A private mental health facility, funded primarily by the Ministry of Health, operated in Malabo.

During the year an Office of Disabilities and the Elderly was created within the Department of Human Rights. The national social security program provides assistance to disabled workers, and the national health-care system provided some wheelchairs and promoted government employment for persons with physical disabilities. The first lady, through her personal civil society organization, also provided wheelchairs and assistance to persons with disabilities. In May a seminar of the National Organization of the Blind of Equatorial Guinea focused on improving conditions of the visually impaired, including increasing employment opportunities.

There were no legal restrictions on the right of persons to vote or participate in civic affairs based on their disability, but lack of access posed a barrier to full participation.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Societal discrimination, harassment by security forces, and political marginalization of minorities were problems (see section 7.d.).

The predominant ethnic group, Fang, continued to dominate political and economic power. Foreigners were often victimized. Irregular immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Mali, Benin, Togo, Gabon, and other African countries represented a significant and growing portion of the labor force. Officials routinely stopped foreigners at checkpoints, asked them to provide documentation, and often abused and extorted them. The government delayed its renewal of residence and work permits, leaving immigrants vulnerable to such abuse.

In public speeches President Obiang frequently referred to foreigners as a security threat and warned of a new period of colonialism. Reports of drunken security forces harassing and extorting foreigners at gunpoint increased, including a recent incident directed at foreign medical professionals and their families, whom they accused of being colonialists.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

There are no laws criminalizing same-sex sexual conduct, but societal stigmatization and discrimination against the LGBTI community were problems, and the government made no effort to combat it. There are no specific legal impediments to LGBTI organizations, but none existed at year's end, due mainly to societal stigma. The official government position was that no LGBTI persons were present in the country and that such sexual orientation or gender identity was abnormal. Observers believed such stigma prevented the reporting of incidents of abuse.

For example, in November 2014, when a military man saw a woman whom he liked holding hands with another woman, he shot and killed her on the street. Fearing government reluctance to punish the perpetrator, the victim's family decided against filing charges, and no action was taken.

Unlike in previous years, there were no publicized incidents of official discrimination against LGBTI persons. In 2014 government media forced LGBTI persons to stand in front of the camera and explain their "wrong actions."

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Despite frequent public statements and radio campaigns advocating nondiscrimination, persons with HIV/AIDS were stigmatized, and many individuals kept their illness hidden. In the 2012 Demographic and Health Survey, 38 percent of women and 42 percent of men surveyed reported holding discriminatory attitudes towards persons with HIV. The government appointed a minister responsible for HIV/AIDS, provided free HIV/AIDS testing and treatment, and supported public information campaigns to increase awareness of health risks, availability of testing, and the importance of practicing safe sex.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides workers the right to establish unions, affiliate with unions of their choice, and bargain collectively. The law also allows unions to conduct activities without interference. The law requires a union to have at least 50 members from a workplace to register, effectively blocking union formation.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not respected. The Union Organization of Small Farmers was the only legal operational labor union. Authorities continued to refuse to recognize other unions, including the Workers Union of Equatorial Guinea, Independent Service Union, Teachers' Trade Union Association, and Rural Workers Organization.

The law broadly acknowledged the right to engage in strikes, but there is no implementing legislation defining legitimate grounds for striking. No law requires the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity, although such dismissal may fall under wrongful termination. Unions generally were not allowed to organize. There have been no legal strikes in the country since independence.

Employees of the Moroccan company Somagec held a work stoppage strike in July over several months of unpaid wages. Security forces were brought in, but there were no reports of violence. The strike resulted in workers being paid. Employees of the French Cultural Center also held a successful strike, resulting in salary increases.

Although labor law prohibits antiunion discrimination, the government placed practical obstacles before groups seeking to organize, such as not allowing groups to register legally. The government did not protect the right of unions to conduct their activities without interference. Most often those seeking to organize were co-opted into existing party structures by means of pressure and incentives.

Dismissed workers could appeal to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security through their regional delegate, but there was little trust in the fairness of the system. Citizens and foreigners with valid work permits have the right to appeal Ministry of Labor and Social Security decisions to a special standing committee of the House of Deputies established to hear citizen complaints regarding decisions by any government agency.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security conducted numerous workplace inspections to verify adherence to labor laws regarding pay, benefits, and working conditions. When violations were found, the government required some employers to correct the problem, pay fines, or pay reparations to the employees. These efforts were not adequate.

Forced labor, particularly forced child labor, occurred. Men and women from Cameroon, Benin, and other neighboring countries, as well as from the Dominican Republic and Cuba, were recruited for work, and some were subsequently subjected to forced labor. Often they were not compensated as agreed, and their passports were confiscated.

In one publicized case, a high-level member of the president's cabinet severely beat an employee of one of his private businesses when she demanded payment. He then returned her passport and forced her to leave the country. Another employer attracted foreign workers by falsely promising to provide them with employment contracts necessary for obtaining work permits. When workers resigned to take other, more secure jobs, the employer contacted the police to have their former employees deported, which would have occurred if the new employers had not intervened.

Companies in the construction sector, among others, held the passports of their foreign workers, a possible indication of forced labor.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits employment of children under age 18, except that minors between ages 16 and 18 may perform light work that does not interfere with their school attendance with the authorization of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. Minors are permitted to work only during the day, and their workday is limited to six hours, for which they are paid the equivalent of an eight-hour daytime work rate. The penalty for employing children under age 16 is a fine equal to 15 monthly minimal wages per minor, which is doubled for repeat infractions. Penalties are higher for minors under age 18 who perform night work or work in hazardous environments. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is

responsible for enforcing child labor laws, but inspectors focused mainly on the construction industry and not on child labor.

The law was not effectively enforced, and penalties were not sufficient to deter violations. Children were transported from nearby countries--primarily Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Togo, and Gabon--and forced to work as domestic workers, market laborers, ambulant vendors, launderers, and beggars. The government occasionally provided social services on an ad hoc basis to children found working in markets. Attention to school attendance generally focused more on citizen children than on their foreign peers.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination based on race, color, sex, political opinion, national origin, social status, or union affiliation. Labor laws do not prohibit discrimination based on age, language, or HIV-positive status. The government did not effectively enforce these laws and regulations. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and HIV-positive status (see section 6). Discrimination also occurred based on political affiliation (see section 3). Discrimination against foreign migrant workers occurred (see section 7.e.).

There is no agency responsible for the protection for those unable to work due to permanent or temporary illness or other health condition. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security did not effectively enforce the legal mandate to employ a specific percentage of persons with disabilities in companies with 50 employees or more.

The country continued to have a large gender gap in terms of access to education and employment opportunities. Rooted stereotypes and ethnic traditions continued to impede women's rights. There were greater employment opportunities for men than women. Women mostly worked in the informal sector and did not have access to benefits or social security.

Women were paid less than men for the same work, and the terms of their contracts often were not honored. Women rarely complained for fear of reprisals. The labor law was not effectively enforced, making women vulnerable in terms of benefits and salaries.

In December 2014 a civil society organization held a three-day workshop addressing gender violence and women's rights, including the right to equal pay and treatment. The parliament commemorated International Women's Day with a publicly reported discussion of ways to eliminate obstacles in the social structure to women's advancement in the workforce. The government included some strategies to promote the inclusion of women in its Millennium Development Goals work plan.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Gender Equality continued a program to promote self-employment among rural women. The first lady, on an ad hoc basis, donated funds to promote women-owned businesses.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly minimum wage for the private sector was last set in 2011. It varied by occupation from 129,035 CFA (\$224) monthly on the low end to 1,290,345 (\$2,240) on the high end. Pay rates in the hydrocarbon industry were set many times higher than comparable positions in other sectors. The law requires that citizens be paid at the same rate as foreigners and that domestic workers be paid not less than 60 percent of the national minimum wage. The government did not set a poverty line or publish estimates of poverty.

The standard work week is eight hours a day and 48 hours a week for daytime work, six hours a day and 36 hours a week for night work, and seven hours a day and 42 hours a week for mixed day and night work, with night work and mixed work paid the same as for an eight-hour day shift. Offshore workdays are a minimum of 12 hours, of which eight hours are regular work and four are counted as overtime. The workday includes one hour for meals and breaks. The law also requires paid leave for government holidays, annual leave, and bonuses of 15-days' pay, twice a year. Overtime is not mandatory except as provided by law or special agreement and is prohibited for pregnant workers. Overtime is allowed for night work except in special cases authorized by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. Premium pay is required for overtime and holidays. Women had six weeks pre- and post-maternity leave, which could be extended for medical reasons, and they were allowed two paid daily breaks of one hour each to breast feed.

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards provide for protection of workers from occupational hazards, but the government did not always effectively enforce these provisions. The law permits workers to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for enforcing minimum wage, workweek rules, and OSH standards. The ministry employed approximately 50 labor inspectors, which was insufficient to enforce the law effectively. The ministry does not publish the results of its OSH inspections.

Legal protections exist for employees who are injured or killed on the job and for those who were exposed to dangerous chemicals, but these protections were generally extended only to those in the formal sector. Protections in petroleum companies exceeded minimum international safety standards. The government seldom monitored workers in the informal sector.

Foreigners in the oil services and construction sectors, including migrants from other parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, were sometimes subjected to poor working conditions, and the passports of some workers were confiscated. Some workers were exposed to hazardous chemicals, had insufficient safety gear, and worked long hours.