

“Turning the Page” in Equatorial Guinea needs more Deeds and Less Speeches

(Washington, DC, July 19, 2010) - The latest five-point reform package announced in a speech by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema in South Africa on June 28 purported to outline major improvements for the country and followed several comparable statements delivered in Equatorial Guinea. This package should be seen as the Obiang regime’s response to the termination of its candidate status in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in April and as a tacit recognition that a harsh spotlight will continue to be put on its record of corruption and repression unless it can acknowledge the need for change.

Promises of reform must address the fundamental changes that are necessary to improve the governance of the country, including ending impunity for human rights violations, building respect for the rule of law, and enabling the people of Equatorial Guinea to hold their leaders accountable. Moreover, immediate steps must be taken to open space for the emergence of a civil society independent of government control and to allow access for international human rights NGOs, in addition to the ICRC, to be allowed into the country to monitor developments. Without these steps, any reform will lack the credibility to be taken seriously by the people of Equatorial Guinea, let alone the international community.

“If the government of Equatorial Guinea expects such commitments to reform to be taken seriously, it must build confidence by opening up greater space for civil society to participate in and contribute to an inclusive process,” said Bennett Freeman, Chair of the Board of EG Justice and former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. “President Obiang’s speech will be dismissed as a cynical ploy unless it is followed soon by an action plan demonstrating how these reforms are to be developed and implemented, with a real role for civil society.”

The Obiang regime has a long history of unfulfilled promises. In 1997, following major oil discoveries in Equatorial Guinea, the government convened the First National Economic Conference to present a mid-range (1997-2001) economic development strategy. Then in 2007, the government held the Second National Economic Conference, in which it announced “Horizon 2020,” a new agenda to—in its own words—“promote the harmonious development of the nation and ... ensure the rational and efficient use of oil revenues” by the year 2020. Now the Equatoguinean government has recycled similar promises from those previous national conferences and pledges to advance an agenda over the next decade that it has neglected over the last three.

For this reform program to be credible, the government of Equatorial Guinea needs to substitute substantive changes for cosmetic promises. Among other changes, it must establish a capable, non-political anti-corruption agency that can diminish the massive official corruption that has already siphoned off the country’s new oil revenues to enrich the elite. It must allow individuals from civil society greater independence to participate in the multi-stakeholder process necessary to achieve compliance with the EITI, the essential first step towards bringing transparency, and ultimately accountability, for the management of that vast new oil wealth. It must enable the existence of functioning, competent, and independent parliament, judiciary, and administrative systems. It also must demonstrate its ability to allow the emergence of a strong civil society supported by an independent media. These essential requirements must be guaranteed through constitutional and legal frameworks which empower the people of Equatorial Guinea, rather than serving only the political elites. Constitutional and legal protections should be confirmed by actions inside the country, such as the release of all



political prisoners; stopping the rampant use of torture, arbitrary arrests, and unfair elections; and ending the harassment of civil society activists.

Such fundamental changes cannot be achieved in a matter of weeks or months. But concrete steps must be taken in the coming weeks and months to demonstrate commitment and credibility. The government should have the commitment and self-confidence to welcome international bodies and experts to help build the capacity necessary to develop and implement these kinds of reforms.

“That the Obiang regime says it is now ready to turn the page in Equatorial Guinea, after thirty-one years in power, could be the basis for cautious optimism” said Tutu Alicante, the Executive Director of EG Justice. “If there is serious political will to change, then the regime should demonstrate its commitment by creating legitimate institutions and structures that give ordinary Equatoguineans the ability to truly hold their leaders accountable. Promises to ‘turn the page’ will be more credible when the persistent repression of civil society and dissenting voices ends and when everyone—including the political elite—accused of corruption and human rights violations can be held accountable to the rule of law.”

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