

Equatorial Guinea Perspectives on the United States: The Significance of American Missionary Activities and Internal Equatoguinean Politics (Expanded Version)

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Nation Profile

Alternate Names	Republic of Equatorial Guinea; Spanish Guinea (former)
Area	28,051 sq km
Capital	Malabo
GDP (real growth rate)	20% (2002 est.)
Population	510,473 (July 2003 est.)
Population Growth Rate	2.44% (2003 est.)
Government Type	Republic
Colonial Rule/Dependencies	Spain
Date Founded	12 October 1968
Suffrage	18 years of age; universal adult
Literacy Rates (male & female)	<i>Male: 93.3%, female: 78.4%</i> (2003 est.)
Life Expectancy at Birth (male & female)	<i>Male: 52.63 years, female: 56.93 years</i> (2003 est.)
Religions (as % of population)	Nominally Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic, pagan practices
Major Languages	Spanish (official), French (official), pidgin English, Fang, Bubi, Ibo
Media Providers	Radio: AM 0, FM 3, shortwave 5 (2002) Television: 1 (2002) Internet Service Providers: 1 (2002)
Internet Users (as % of population)	0.18% (2002)

Equatorial Guinea–U.S. Relations

Balance of Trade with the U.S. (millions of U.S. dollars)	567.1 (2003)
Immigration to the U.S.	8 (2002)
Students in the U.S.	94 (2002/3)
Tourist Visits to the U.S.	Not applicable
Major Trading Partners	Export: U.S. 33.3%, Spain 25.5%, China 14.2%, Canada 12.7% (2003 est.) Import: U.S. 31%, UK 16.2%, France 15.2%, Cote d'Ivoire 12.1%, Spain 8.2% (2003 est.)

Equatorial Guinea is a small country in western Central Africa, consisting of three physically separate major territories and a number of tiny islands. The major territories are Rio Muni, which is on the continent sandwiched between Cameroon and Gabon, and the insular territories of Bioko (formally Fernando Po) in the Bight of Biafra and Annobon, which is about 357 kilometers off the coast and just south of the equator. The tiny islands are Corisco, Belobi, Mbane, Conga, Cocotiers, and Elobey, all located off the coast of Rio Muni. Equatorial Guinea is the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa. It gained independence from Spain on 12 October 1968. Since independence, the country's politics has been dominated by the Esangui clan, from the Mongomo district on the mainland.

Equatorial Guinea is among Africa's top oil-producing nations and for that reason has become a major commercial partner of the United States. This small country, with just over a half-million people, is currently the fourth-largest recipient of U.S. foreign direct investment in sub-Saharan Africa, surpassed only by the much larger countries of Nigeria, South Africa, and Angola.

Relations with the United States

The current relationship between Equatorial Guinea and the United States is generally cordial. The Equatoguinean authorities view the United States favorably, primarily because the United States is Equatorial Guinea's largest source of foreign direct investment. As a result of this favorable disposition toward the United States and in the interest of attracting more investment, Equatorial Guinea currently allows U.S. passport holders visa-free entry into Equatorial Guinea. Ordinary Equatoguineans and those in exile largely perceive the United States as operating out of national self-interest and not in the interests of ordinary Equatoguineans. They wish the United States would exert more pressure on Equatorial Guinea to democratize and have greater respect for human rights.

Equatorial Guinea officially became a Spanish colony in 1778 following a treaty reached between Spain and Portugal, in which Portugal transferred control of Equatorial Guinea to Spain in exchange for South Brazil. U.S. presence in Equatorial Guinea in the 19th century was minimal and localized. The United States' economic involvement in Equatorial Guinea began in 1859, when it received permission from Spain to develop a coal deposit for steamers in Playa Carboneras. The United States remained the colony's second-most important trading partner until its independence. The development of the Playa Carboneras coal deposit in 1859 was localized in scope, and did not have a significant impact of creating widespread perception or views about the U.S. among the Equatoguinean people. Equatorial Guinea experienced more interaction with colony-seeking European countries such as Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany in the 19th century. The earliest involvement of Americans with Equatorial Guinea came in the form of missionary work. From about 1850 to 1968, U.S. Presbyterian missionaries regularly visited the country, particularly Rio Benito and the tiny island of Corisco

However, the few American missionaries who worked in some areas of Equatorial Guinea had some significant impacts in the 19th century. Equatorial Guinea remained a Spanish colony until 1959, when it was redesignated as the Spanish province of the Gulf of Guinea, with political status similar to provinces in Spain. Upon its independence in 1968, Equatorial Guinea began to receive overtures of friendship from many competing Communist and Western countries.

Equatorial Guinea officially established diplomatic relations with the United States on 21 November 1968. After the departure of the United States' first ambassador to Equatorial Guinea, however, Washington sent only deputy ambassadors to the country.

From the mid-1800 to 1979

The Equatoguinean people's perceptions about the U.S. in the nineteenth century were determined largely by the activities of American Presbyterian Missionaries. American Presbyterian missionaries

started visiting Equatorial Guinea in the nineteenth century. While the missionaries' principal objective was to evangelize (Christianize) the Equatoguinean people, it is important to mention that they established schools in the country. According to Max Liniger-Goumaz, Presbyterian Missionary schools existed in Corisco and Rio Benito since the beginning of the 19th century. The Equatoguinean citizens of Corisco and Rio Benito were significantly impressed by the willingness of the missionaries to spend some time in the region, their willingness to help and their lifestyle (food and dressing). Even though many of the Equatoguineans who came into contact with the missionaries preferred to stick to their traditional religious practices and did not perceive education as anything very important, they held very favorable views about the missionaries. To impress the missionaries or reciprocate their goodness, some Equatoguineans openly practiced Christianity, even though they did not abandon their traditional religious practices. It is important, however, to mention that these perceptions were essentially limited to the regions in which the missionaries worked (Corisco and Rio Benito).

Relations during the Presidency of Francisco Macias Nguema

A few years after Equatorial Guinea's independence and the election of Francisco Macias Nguema as the first president, U.S.–Equatoguinean relations began to deteriorate. Macias Nguema began to flirt with several Communist countries, including the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. On many occasions he accused the United States of complicity in alleged plots to overthrow him.

The evidence does not show any change in the fundamental character of Equatoguineans' feelings/perspectives about the U.S. However, the post-Macias period was characterized by more intensive and widespread ill-feelings, frustration and bitterness over the United States' policy towards Equatorial Guinea. This qualitative change in feelings towards the US was caused by two factors. The first is the replacement of French and Spanish dominance/influence in Equatorial Guinea with U.S. dominance/influence. The second factor is the growing and rapidly spreading awareness of ordinary

Equatoguineans about the United State's role in promoting responsible governance in many countries around the world.

Meanwhile, an unfortunate incident in 1971 led to the closure of the U.S. embassy in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea's capital. Alfred Erdo, a U.S. diplomat in the country, reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown and murdered the U.S. ambassador's chief security officer, Donald Leahy, with a pair of scissors. After the closure of the embassy, U.S. diplomatic relations with Equatorial Guinea were conducted from the U.S. embassy in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

The deteriorating relationship between the two countries reached a crisis point in March 1976, when the Equatoguinean authorities severed relations with Washington by delivering a derogatory letter to two U.S. diplomats visiting Malabo, and declaring them unwelcome. Many observers thought that the acrimonious end in diplomatic relations would motivate the United States to end its silence over the grave human rights violations committed by the Macias Nguema regime. However, this did not happen, as the United States feared that such an action would drive Macias Nguema completely into the welcoming arms of the Soviet bloc. To complicate matters, Rio Muni was thought to have uranium deposits, which the United States did not want to fall into the hands of the Soviets. Under Macias Nguema, the Soviet bloc was already wielding a great deal of influence in the country.

Relations after the Overthrow of the Macias Nguema Regime

Relations between the United States and Equatorial Guinea remained limited until the overthrow of the Macias Nguema regime in a palace coup in 1979. The new Equatoguinean regime, led by Teodoro Obiang Nguema M'ba N'Zogo (a nephew of Macias Nguema), embarked on a mission to mend diplomatic relations with many of the countries that had been alienated by the Macias regime. Diplomatic relations between the United States and Equatorial Guinea were reestablished in 1981.

The evidence does not show any change in the fundamental character of Equatoguineans' feelings/perspectives about the U.S. However, the post-Macias period was characterized by more intensive and widespread ill-feelings, frustration and bitterness over the United States' policy towards Equatorial Guinea. The arrival in 1981 of the first post-Macias Nguema U.S. ambassador led to a vast improvement in U.S.–Equatoguinean relations. The U.S. authorities established a number of policy and program measures to cement the new relationship and to ensure the stability of the new regime, which showed encouraging signs of friendliness towards the West. In January, 1981, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) gave Equatorial Guinea a grant of one million U.S. dollars to revamp agriculture through assistance to agricultural cooperatives and a poultry farm. The United States also played a vital role in the April 1982 UNDP Conference for the Reconstruction of Equatorial Guinea held in Geneva, Switzerland. Relations have remained quite friendly, until the United States again closed its embassy in Malabo in 1995, citing economic reasons. In 2003, the United States reopened a limited diplomatic mission in Malabo in response to numerous appeals by the Equatoguinean president and the increasing presence of U.S. oil companies in the country, but the U.S. ambassador in Yaoundé continued to handle relations with Equatorial Guinea. Equatorial Guinea currently maintains an embassy in Washington.

While the fundamental character of Equatoguineans' perceptions about the United States has remained essentially the same between the Macias Nguema and post-Macias Nguema political era, the view of the United States as a selfish actor has become more profound and widespread in the latter era. This change in intensity and spread has been due to the growing dominance of U.S. firms in the Equatoguinean economy and the growing awareness of its role of promoting responsible governance in many parts of the world.

The U.S. government's current policy toward Equatorial Guinea is twofold: on the one hand, to push for democratization and greater respect for human rights, and on the other, to see that more of

Equatorial Guinea's petroleum revenues are used for the development of a better-functioning civil society. These policy intentions, however, have yet to be realized.

Perspectives on the United States

Not many Equatoguineans have immigrated to the United States. Most of those who have left the country have settled in Spain or in neighboring African countries. Conversely, few U.S. citizens resided in Equatorial Guinea before the mid-1980s. Therefore, the perspectives of Equatoguineans on the United States are not strongly influenced by people-to-people contact. To understand the perspectives of Equatoguineans better, one can consider the history of U.S.–Equatoguinean interaction as falling into two periods: the period stretching from the mid-1800s to the overthrow of Macias Nguema in 1979 and the period following the Macias Nguema era.

From the Mid-1800s to 1979

After Equatorial Guinea's independence and while Macias Nguema held power, the Equatoguinean people, especially those who were educated enough to understand the United States' role in global politics, held quite unfavorable views concerning the United States, especially concerning its policies toward Equatorial Guinea. Though the United States stood willing to comment on the domestic affairs of countries in the Western hemisphere and pushed for democracy and greater respect for human rights in many countries, it remained silent while Macias Nguema's dictatorial regime subjected the Equatoguinean population to widespread executions and other abuses. While less educated Equatoguineans did not understand why the more powerful nations of the world, including the United States, failed to act to curb the excesses of the Equatorial Guinea's totalitarian regime, but educated individuals understood clearly that it was all about vested interests. Exiled Equatoguinean opposition groups and human rights campaigners in the United States highlighted human rights violations, but their efforts went almost unnoticed by U.S.

authorities. Many Equatoguineans felt that the United States could have done more to push for greater respect for human rights under the new regime and were thus disappointed and embittered by its silence.

Post–Macias Nguema Era

U.S. officials and Equatoguinean authorities were quite friendly from the 1980s through the mid-1990s, with the one disruption in the relationship being the 1995 closure of the U.S. embassy in Malabo, which many believe was caused by a slight strain in diplomatic relations, despite the U.S. claim that it was closed for economic reasons. Equatoguinean authorities held favorable impressions of the United States and wanted to maintain good relations in order to attract further U.S. investment and to receive a stamp of approval for the new, Obiang Nguema–led, dictatorship. However, the foregoing cannot be said of ordinary Equatoguineans and those forced into exile. Many Equatoguineans felt that the United States could have done more to push for greater respect for human rights under the new regime and were thus disappointed and embittered by its silence. Under the new regime, thousands of Equatoguineans remained refugees in foreign lands, but the U.S. Department of State’s *World Refugee Report* of September 1985 failed to mention this. This silence compelled the historian and political scientist Randall Fegley to ask whether this was “naivety or a blatant attempt to not ruffle the feathers of new friends in Malabo?” (Fegley 1989). For Equatoguineans forced to live under difficult circumstances, U.S. involvement in Equatorial Guinea seems purely selfish. Although Equatoguineans’ perceptions of the United States have remained essentially the same between the Macias Nguema era and post–Macias Nguema era, the view of the United States as a selfish actor has become more profound and widespread in the latter era. This change has been caused by the growing dominance of U.S. firms in the Equatoguinean economy and the growing awareness of the U.S. role in promoting responsible governance in many parts of the world.

Popular Culture

There has been very little penetration of U.S. popular culture into Equatorial Guinea. This has been due to two major factors. First, the media, which has been a very decisive factor in propagating U.S. popular culture around the world, has not been free in Equatorial Guinea since its founding in 1968. Secondly, the U.S. did not maintain any significant presence or influence in Equatorial Guinea until very recently (mid 1980s). Equatorial Guinea, until this time, was essentially under the influence of the Spanish and the French to a lesser extent. As a result of the foregoing, Equatoguineans have had very minimal contact with U.S. popular culture. Also, very few Equatoguineans immigrate or travel to the United States. It is therefore almost impractical to present a generalized perception of Equatoguineans about U.S. popular culture. This notwithstanding, aspects of U.S. popular culture such as in the area of dressing, music and language (English Language), can be noticed among some of the significantly educated Equatoguinean people.

September 11

The September 11 attack greatly helped the Equatoguinean authorities, as the United States did open a limited mission in Malabo in 2003. Equatoguinean nationals felt sympathy for Americans following the September 11 attacks. It is hard, however, to get a true impression of how people felt because the media is heavily controlled in Equatorial Guinea. It may be, for example, that the government's pro-U.S. stance deterred those who did not sympathize with United States from expressing this opinion. While Equatoguinean authorities condemned the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, they welcomed the United States' post-September 11 policy of speeding up commercial and military cooperation with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. A main issue for them has been getting the United States to reopen its embassy in Malabo. When the United States voiced concern over continuing human rights violations in Equatorial Guinea, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema noted that the United States

must be basing its criticism of his regime on unreliable information, given that the United States did not even have an embassy in Malabo.

Until very recently, there was very little U.S. cultural influence in Equatorial Guinea. Two reasons probably accounted for the little U.S. cultural influence. First, there was very little U.S. presence (commercial, political, and media) in Equatorial Guinea until very recently, despite the fact that it was Equatorial Guinea's second commercial partner in the colonial era. Secondly, the media, which has proved very decisive in propagating U.S. culture around the world, was severely controlled under the Macias Nguema regime. Even today, the media remains substantially censored.

Outlook for the Coming Years

Given the United States' policy goal of obtaining a quarter of its oil imports from sub-Saharan Africa by 2015 and the fact that Equatorial Guinea is endowed with substantial petroleum reserves, it is likely that interaction between Equatorial Guinea and the United States will increase in the years to come. Presently U.S. oil companies dominate the Equatoguinean petroleum sector, investing billions of U.S. dollars in oil exploration and pumping. The open willingness of U.S. oil companies to do business with the tyrannical Equatoguinean authorities may have helped to shape perceptions of the United States as a selfish actor.

In the short term the relationship between the United States and the Equatoguinean political authorities is expected to remain cordial. In the intermediate to long term, however, the relationship is expected to grow more antagonistic. The current policy objective of the United States is to ensure political stability in its commercial and military partner-states through democratization and greater respect for human rights. With time, therefore, the United States is expected to exert pressure on the Equatoguinean authorities to democratize. This will most likely incur the displeasure of the Equatoguinean authorities and result in short-term strain in relations. However, as the Equatoguinean economy and society becomes more

and more dependent on U.S. capital and technology, the authorities are expected to eventually succumb to U.S. pressure. When this happens, it is expected that ordinary Equatoguineans and those forced into exile will develop more favorable perceptions of the United States.

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