

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2021 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, which he founded in 1991. In 2016 President Obiang claimed to receive 93.7 percent of the vote in a presidential election that many considered neither free nor fair. In 2017 the country held legislative and municipal elections that lacked independent domestic or international monitoring and verification of the voter census, registration, and tabulation of ballots. The ruling party and its 14 coalition parties won 92 percent of the vote, taking all 75 Senate seats, 99 of 100 seats in the lower chamber, and all except one seat in municipal councils.

The vice president (Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, eldest son of President Obiang) has overall control of the security forces. Police generally are responsible for maintaining law and order in the cities, while gendarmes are responsible for security outside cities and for special events. Police report to the minister of national security, while gendarmes report to the Ministry of National Defense. Military personnel, who report to the minister of national defense, also fulfill police functions in border areas, sensitive sites, and high-traffic areas. Both ministers report to the vice president directly. Additional police elements are in the Ministries of Interior (border and traffic police), Finance (customs enforcement), and Justice (investigative and prosecuting police). Presidential security officials also exercise police functions at or near presidential facilities. Civilian authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings, by the government; torture or cruel,

inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or on behalf of the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; political prisoners or detainees; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and the existence of criminal libel laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including but not limited to domestic or intimate partner violence; trafficking in persons; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took some steps to prosecute or punish officials who committed abuses or engaged in corruption, including certain cases prompted by criticism from the press and public, whether in the security forces or elsewhere in the government, but impunity was a serious problem.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were anecdotal accounts of deaths in prison due to injuries inflicted by prison staff.

No specific office investigates the legality of security force killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

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

The law prohibits such practices, but there were reports that both police and military personnel in Malabo and in Bata used excessive force during traffic stops, house-to-house searches, and interrogations, sometimes including sexual assault, robbery, and extortion. Police also tortured members of opposition parties, according to opposition leaders. Security personnel particularly abused persons suspected of plotting against the government, often with little or no evidence against them. Lawyers and other observers who visited prisons and jails reported serious abuses, including beatings and torture.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, citizen activists documented police officers and the military using excessive force, including beating citizens who did not abide by the government's preventive actions, such as not adhering to mask mandates.

Authorities later fired, suspended, or arrested some of these officials, and government officials reminded security personnel to treat their fellow citizens with respect.

Police reportedly beat and threatened detainees to extract information or to force confessions.

Some military personnel and police reportedly raped, sexually assaulted, or beat women, including at checkpoints. Foreigners recounted being harassed at checkpoints, including having guns pointed at them without provocation. Senior government officials took few steps to address such violence and were sometimes implicated in ordering the violence.

Impunity was a significant problem within the security forces, due to corruption, politicization of the forces, poor training, and the ability of senior government officials to order extrajudicial acts. An inspector general's office within the Ministry of National Security investigates abuses within the ministry.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in the country's three prisons and 12 police station jails were generally

harsh and occasionally life-threatening due to severe physical and emotional abuse, overcrowding, disease, inadequate food, poorly trained staff, limited oversight, and lack of medical care. The COVID-19 pandemic made these conditions especially concerning, particularly in Black Beach prison in Malabo.

Physical Conditions: Men, women, and minors had separate sleeping quarters and bathrooms but shared a common area for meals. Pretrial and convicted prisoners were held separately, although they shared a common area.

Statistics on prisoner deaths were unavailable. There were anecdotal accounts of deaths in prison due to injuries inflicted by prison staff.

Prison cells were overcrowded, dirty, and lacked mattresses. Up to 30 detainees commonly shared one toilet that lacked toilet paper and a functioning door. Inmates rarely had access to exercise. Diseases such as COVID-19, malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and HIV and AIDS were serious problems. Authorities sporadically provided a limited number of prisoners and detainees with medical care as well as basic meals, but food was generally insufficient and of poor quality. Ventilation and lighting were not always adequate, and rodent infestations were common. Jails did not provide food to detainees, but authorities generally allowed families and friends to deliver meals twice daily, although police did not always pass on the food to the detainees. In some cases prisoners were reportedly left in solitary confinement for extended periods.

The Ministries of Justice and National Security operated civilian prisons on military installations, with military personnel handling security outside the prisons and civilians providing security and other services within them. There were reports that military and police personnel ran the most important prisons and prevented civilian authorities from entering them. There was little information on conditions in those prisons.

Administration: Authorities did not regularly investigate credible allegations of mistreatment. Visitors and religious observance were restricted for political prisoners. Visitors had to pay guards small bribes to see detainees. Since 2020 authorities restricted visitation rights for family members and for legal counsel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

Cooperation stated that they visited prisons to report concerns, such as possible incarceration of victims of trafficking in persons.

Independent Monitoring: There was no independent monitoring of prisons or detention centers.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but the government rarely observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires arrest warrants unless a crime is in progress or in cases that affect national security. Members of the security forces 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 this determination often took longer, sometimes several months. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated most detainees were not charged and that judges typically failed to issue a writ of habeas corpus within the legal limit of 72 hours.

Some foreign nationals who did not have legal status complained of detention and deportation without a trial or administrative hearing. Courts rarely approved bail. The bar association supplied public defenders to those who could not afford private counsel but only at the time they were charged. Authorities occasionally denied access to lawyers, particularly in the case of political detainees. The law prohibits incommunicado detention, but local police chiefs did not always respect this prohibition.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were numerous reported cases of arbitrary arrests. The government arbitrarily arrested immigrants, opposition members, and others. Many detainees complained that bribes had to be paid to obtain release.

Police detained foreign nationals and took them into custody even when they provided proper documentation. Police raided immigrant communities. Reliable

sources reported that police abused, extorted, or detained legal and irregular immigrants during raids. Diplomatic representatives in the country criticized the government for making foreign nationals vulnerable to abuse through harassment, abuse, extortion, detention, and not renewing residence and work permits in a timely manner.

On September 23, authorities arrested 12 nurses in the clinic Campo Yaounde and detained them for five days in the gendarmerie jail for allegedly vaccinating foreigners in contravention of government policy. After five days, authorities released them without charge.

In October police and gendarmes arrested hundreds of foreigners, mainly from West and Central Africa, ostensibly to verify residence and employment documentation, although some who produced documents also faced arrest. Authorities held many at the national soccer stadium in Malabo.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a problem and in previous years was often politically motivated. Inefficient judicial procedures, corruption, lack of monitoring, and inadequate staffing contributed to the problem.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: By law detainees have the right to challenge their detention and obtain release, although there is no provision for compensation if a detainee is found to have been unlawfully detained. Authorities did not respect this right, and detainees could not challenge the validity of the charges against them.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law does not provide for an independent judiciary. Instead, the president is designated the "first magistrate of the nation" and chair of the Judicial Council responsible for appointing judges and magistrates.

Members of the government often influenced judges in sensitive cases. Judges and magistrates sometimes decided cases on political grounds, and many were members of the ruling party; others sought bribes. Impunity for politically motivated abuses was a problem, and human rights activists and opposition members had little legal recourse to protest such abuses. Authorities did not

always respect court orders, and many persons turned to the legislature, the Constitutional Court, or the president in his executive role for enforcement of civil judgments on matters such as employment, land, and personal injury disputes, circumventing appropriate legal processes altogether. Credible reports alleged judges decided in favor of plaintiffs in cases against international companies in return for a percentage of damages awarded.

The military justice system provided defendants with fewer procedural safeguards than the criminal court system. The code of military justice states that a military tribunal should judge any civilian or member of the military who disobeys a military authority or who is accused of committing a crime that is considered a “crime against the state.” A defendant in the military justice system may be tried in absentia, and the defense does not have the right to cross-examine an accuser. Such proceedings were not public, and defendants have no right of appeal to a higher court.

In June a military court tried three individuals for crimes related to accidental explosions at a military barracks complex in a heavily populated neighborhood outside of Bata. The government stated 98 persons were killed and 617 injured, but Human Rights Watch and a local NGO reported the death toll may have been considerably higher. Two of the individuals received prison sentences of 30 and 70 years respectively, and the third was acquitted. Lawyers including the Equatoguinean Commission of Jurists criticized the trying of the case in a military court, in view of the high number of civilian casualties, the lack of opportunity for the victims to testify or observe at the trial, and the legal requirement that the attorney general “defend the interests of the people.” Legal observers considered the trial lacked genuine accountability and transparency, as evidenced by the relatively low rank of the accused and the relative lack of evidence presented for such a complex event.

In rural areas tribal elders adjudicated civil claims and minor criminal matters in traditional courts. Traditional courts conducted cases according to customary law that does 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 public trial, but the 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, with free interpretation as necessary from the moment charged through all appeals, and to have adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. The courts, however, generally did not respect these rights. Defendants have the right to a trial without undue delay, and most trials for ordinary crimes were public. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials, but unless they could afford private counsel, they were rarely able to consult promptly with attorneys. A defendant unable to afford a lawyer is entitled to request a government-appointed lawyer but only after first appearing in court, which generally did not occur within the mandated 72 hours. The law provides for defendants to confront and question witnesses and present their own witnesses and evidence, but courts seldom enforced this right. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt and the right to appeal. Authorities did not respect these provisions of the law.

During the 2019 trial of the alleged 2017 coup plotters, authorities tried many defendants in absentia, did not consistently provide interpreters for individuals from other African countries, and severely limited defense lawyers' ability to meet with their clients, ask questions, or cross-examine prosecution witnesses. In 2019 the American Bar Association, which had observers at the trial, noted the proceedings' many egregious irregularities. The convicted defendants remained in prison, except for those outside the country whom the government considered fugitives. The appeal process ended in November 2020 with the Supreme Court upholding the convictions.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political prisoners or detainees, but no data was available on their number or length of detention. They were often held at Black Beach Prison, where they remained without charge or trial and without access to attorneys or human rights or humanitarian organizations for months at a time.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

Although the government engaged in such abuses in previous years, there were no reports of reprisals against individuals located outside the country.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals or organizations may seek civil remedies for human rights abuses through domestic courts or other administrative mechanisms, such as filing petitions with the Chamber of Deputies' Commission on Human Rights.

The government sometimes failed to comply with court decisions pertaining to human rights, including political rights. Individuals and organizations may appeal adverse court decisions to the ombudsman or the legislature.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful 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 a crime is in progress or for reasons of national security. Nevertheless, security force members reportedly entered homes without required warrants and arrested alleged criminals, foreign nationals, and others; they confiscated property and demanded bribes with impunity. Military and police personnel committed many break-ins.

Authorities reportedly monitored opposition members, NGOs, journalists, and foreign diplomats, including through internet and telephone surveillance.

Members of civil society and opposition parties reported both covert and overt surveillance by security services.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of expression, including for

members of the press and other media, the government has extensive legal powers to restrict media activities. The government restricted journalistic activity through prepublication censorship. Media remained weak and under government influence or control. Most journalists practiced self-censorship. Those who did not were subject to government surveillance, arrests, and threats.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals generally chose not to criticize the president, his family, other high-ranking officials, and 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 some cases authorities reprimanded individuals, removed them from their jobs, or both. For example, in 2020 the then minister of health publicly insulted a nurse who privately criticized the government's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: A limited number of independent media outlets were active and expressed a variety of views, but not without restriction. The country had one marginally independent newspaper that published sporadically, and an online news portal published articles including criticism of the government. Print media outlets were extremely limited. Persons close to the president, including his son, the vice president, owned the few private media outlets that existed; the vice president owned the only private broadcast media. Starting a newspaper was a complicated process governed by an ambiguous law and impeded by government bureaucracy; creating a digital presence was less onerous. Accreditation was cumbersome for both local and foreign journalists. International magazines occasionally were available in grocery stores and hotels in major cities, providing some access to global news sources.

The government owned the only national radio and television broadcast system. Journalists who worked for these entities could not report freely.

The government denied or left pending requests by political parties to establish private radio stations. Satellite broadcasts were widely available, including a French-language television channel, which the government partially owned.

International news agencies did not have correspondents or regular stringers in the

country. As most foreigners need visas to visit the country, the time-consuming nature of the process effectively dissuaded some journalists from travelling, although international media covered major events. In other cases the government may have prevented reporters from obtaining visas.

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.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law gives the government considerable authority to restrict media content through official prepublication censorship. The law also establishes criminal, civil, and administrative penalties for violation of its provisions. Journalists routinely practiced self-censorship, fearing government retaliation.

The only publishing facility available to newspapers was located at the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio, where officials censored printed materials. At least one newspaper publisher stated it was cheaper and easier to print newspapers abroad than locally, citing censorship as one reason.

Libel/Slander Laws: The government used criminal libel and slander laws to restrict public discussion. For example, on July 30, authorities detained social activist Noelia Asama for three days in the local gendarmerie jail for alleged libel and slander against the vice president.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content. During the 2017 legislative and municipal elections, the government blocked all access to the internet for approximately 10 days. Access to Facebook and opposition blogs *Diario Rombe* and *Radio Macuto* continued to be generally restricted.

Users attempting to access political opposition sites were redirected to the government's official press website or received a message that the websites did not exist. WhatsApp and the internet were the primary ways that the opposition expressed and disseminated their views. In November the government

disseminated information suggesting it had the ability to monitor conversations on the WhatsApp messaging application. While it was highly unlikely the government had such an ability, the threatening message appeared to be designed to discourage communication and criticism.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Faculty, students, and members of opposition political parties 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. Most faculty at the national university were political appointees, and teachers with political connections but no experience or accreditation reportedly seldom appeared at the classes they were assigned to teach. Most professors practiced self-censorship.

Some cultural events required coordination with the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, or both. This was more common outside of the largest cities. Occasionally authorization from local authorities was also required. The resulting bureaucratic delay was a disincentive for prospective organizers, who often could not ascertain the criteria used for judging proposals or their chances for approval.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. The government imposed many additional restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and law provide for the right of peaceful assembly, but regulatory provisions effectively undermined this right, and the government routinely restricted freedom of assembly, including for political parties (see section 3, Political Parties and Political Participation). The government frequently dispersed peaceful, preapproved public gatherings if a participant asked a question that could be construed as criticism of the government or the ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE).

Civil society and political opposition members met infrequently, claiming that any gathering of activists or individuals perceived to be engaged in political activities would be seen as suspicious, and authorities would harass or detain participants.

Activists judged one curfew the government ostensibly put in place as a measure against COVID-19 to be politically motivated, since authorities allowed ruling party political events to continue, but restricted similar opposition party events.

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.

Politically motivated crackdowns on civil society organizations remained a problem, including the temporary detention of civil society activists without charge. The government was slow to authorize NGOs, especially those that worked in areas considered sensitive by the government, including human rights or those with members associated with opposition parties.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) association Somos Parte del Mundo (We are Part of the World) was still not registered after submitting its request in 2016. Local social and advocacy organization Somos + (We are More) submitted a registration request in 2018 and was also still not registered, apparently due to an opposition party member being one of its members. The legally established period for government approval is two months. In December the Ministry of Interior threatened to revoke the registration of faith-based NGO Apoyo Misionero Obra Humanitaria (Missionary Support for Humanitarian Work) for partnering with Somos + to provide lunches to children in a rural school.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties along ethnic lines. Some parties have been unable to register for years (see section 3, Political Parties and Political Representation). Only one labor organization was believed to be registered (see section 7.a.).

The law limits the amount of funding civil society organizations can receive from foreign sources to approximately 53,000 CFA francs (\$96) per year. The government also pressured NGOs, especially those focused on human rights, through both overt and covert means (see section 5).

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but the government often restricted these rights. Multiple members of the opposition reported that authorities delayed the renewal of their identity documents, effectively limiting their ability to travel within the country and abroad.

In-country Movement: Police at roadblocks routinely checked travelers, and some engaged in petty extortion. The government also conducted frequent roundups of foreign nationals at roadblocks, claiming the need to counter irregular immigration, delinquent activities, and coup attempts. The government imposed tight restrictions on interdistrict movement, nominally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but used such restrictions to increase extortion attempts and threaten immigrants.

Foreign Travel: The government at times issued temporary travel prohibitions on senior government officials due to alleged national security concerns. After nearly two years, opposition party Citizens for Innovation (CI) leader Gabriel Nze Obiang in December had no update on his passport renewal requests, although the regular waiting period to receive a new document was approximately two to four weeks. Authorities did not permit him to travel internationally. The government stopped issuing travel documents for several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exile: The law prohibits forced internal or external exile, but since 2016 Gabriel Nze Obiang had his movements restricted to the capital.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government did not generally cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

UNHCR did not maintain an office in country.

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 ability to choose their government in free and fair elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, but the government severely limited this right.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent elections: In 2017 legislative and municipal elections, the PDGE and 14 coalition parties claimed 92 percent of the vote in the country's closed-list party system. The PDGE and its coalition partners took all 75 Senate seats and 99 of 100 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. CI was the only opposition party to win a seat in the legislature, although the single opposition legislator was imprisoned for several months during 2018 and was never allowed to take his seat. At the local level, the PDGE coalition won all but one of the municipal council seats and all but one mayoral race.

There were irregularities and no transparency in the electoral process. The voter census and registration process took place without independent domestic or international monitoring. The government blocked access to social media, opposition websites, and international channels during the electoral campaigns.

Authorities closely monitored and tightly controlled public gatherings. Political parties required government authorization to hold rallies; the PDGE received preferential treatment.

Only government-selected observers participated in the election. They could not communicate for more than a week before the elections because of a shutdown of the internet. The government created an atmosphere of intimidation by deploying military personnel at polling stations.

In 2016 President Obiang claimed 93.7 percent of the vote in presidential elections that were marred by reports of capricious application of election laws, nontransparent political funding, polling station irregularities, voter fraud, intimidation, and violence. Military personnel and PDGE representatives were present at all polling stations. There were instances in which procedures to protect ballot secrecy were not enforced. Photographs of the president remained on public buildings used as polling stations. Electoral officials, led by the head of the electoral commission (the minister of interior, who was also a member of the ruling party), denied some opposition candidates the opportunity to register and applied requirements irregularly.

Contrary to the constitution, which requires that presidential elections be held no more than 45 days before or 60 days after the end of the prior presidential term, the election was held 136 days before the end of the president's term.

In the months leading up to the presidential election, security forces violently dispersed opposition rallies and arrested demonstrators and opposition leaders. Some opposition political parties chose to boycott the elections in protest.

The government and the PDGE had a near-absolute monopoly of national media, leaving opposition political parties with almost no means to disseminate their message. Despite a "pact" regulating access to media and political financing and supposedly providing free weekly national radio and television spots for opposition parties, the PDGE received hourly radio and television coverage before and during the campaign period while opposition parties received almost none. The PDGE was also able to cover cities throughout the country in campaign posters and gave away smart phones, promotional clothing, and even cars at campaign events.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) was not independent of the PDGE or government influence. By law the NEC consists of six judges appointed by the head of the Supreme Court, six government representatives and a secretary appointed by the president, and one representative from each registered political party. The president appointed the minister of interior, a PDGE leader, to head the NEC. Election laws regarding the NEC were not enforced.

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 and to agree to garnishment of their salaries to fund PDGE activities. The party's near monopoly on power, funding, and access to national media hampered independent opposition parties Convergence for Social Democracy and CI. Most parties joined the PDGE coalition as part of the "aligned opposition."

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 disclosed.

The government subjected opposition members to arbitrary arrest and harassment before and after the legislative and presidential elections.

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 selectively 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 law establishing procedures to register political parties remained banned for allegedly "supporting terrorism." The government formally abolished permit requirements for political party meetings

within party buildings but required prior permission for public events, such as meetings in other venues or marches, and frequently denied the permit requests.

Despite laws that authorities stated were designed to facilitate the registration of political parties, the government prevented the registration of opposition parties. The government deregistered the CI in 2018, and it remained suspended, despite the 2018 general political amnesty and the 2018 presidential pardon of its members for sedition and other offenses. Authorities did not allow elected CI officials to take their positions in local and national offices. Attempts by CI officials to reregister or create a new party met with bureaucratic delays that appeared intended to prevent registration. High-level government officials claimed in February the party could reregister if Gabriel Nze Obiang resigned as the party leader.

Authorities removed civil servants for political reasons and without due process. Party affiliation remained a key factor in obtaining government employment.

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 October the PDGE concluded a “*gira*,” or tour of the country, in advance of the 2022 legislative elections. No opposition party conducted a *gira*, due to a curfew imposed at the end of the PDGE *gira* and to a lack of funding.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women and members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Patriarchal cultural influences, however, limited women’s political participation, especially in rural areas.

The president, vice president, prime minister, deputy prime minister, all three vice prime ministers, and the president of the chamber of deputies were men; the president of the Senate was a woman. After the 2017 elections, women occupied 21 of 72 Senate seats and 11 of 100 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In the reshuffled August 2020 cabinet, three of the 25 cabinet ministers were women, and

two of the 24 deputy and vice-ministers were women. There was one woman among the eight justices of the Supreme Court.

The government did not overtly limit minority participation in politics, but members of the Fang ethnic group occupied most of the top ranks. Estimated to constitute 80 percent of the population, the Fang group exercised dominant political and economic power. The law prohibits parties that are not national, eliminating opportunities for minority or regionally focused parties, although minorities were represented in most major parties, including the PDGE.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

While the law provides severe criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not effectively implement the law. There are no specific laws concerning conflict of interest or nepotism. On May 10, the government passed an anticorruption measure, Law No. 1/2021, imposing stricter standards of behavior on public officials regarding their interactions with the formal and informal private sector.

Officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of government corruption. The president and members of his inner circle continued to amass personal fortunes from the revenues associated with monopolies on all domestic commercial ventures, as well as timber and oil exports. Corruption at all levels of government was a severe problem.

According to Freedom House, the budget process was “opaque.” The government continued to improve fiscal transparency, including auditing state-owned enterprises and public debt using international accounting firms and publishing data on public-sector debt in the budget.

Corruption: Numerous foreign investigations continued into high-level official corruption.

On July 28, France’s highest court upheld conviction of the vice president for money laundering and embezzling public funds. French authorities were expected to return \$177 million in seized assets to the country.

In July 2020 authorities arrested 13 officials of the treasury for allegedly stealing financial instruments worth more than \$500,000. In February authorities tried and convicted the defendants and sentenced them to five-year prison sentences and substantial fines.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The law restricts NGO activity. The country's few domestic NGOs mainly focused on topics such as health, women's empowerment, and elder care. The Center for Studies and Initiatives for the Development of Equatorial Guinea (CEIDGE) was one of the few NGOs that made public statements regarding government corruption and human rights abuses. After authorities revoked its charter in 2019, CEIDGE remained unable to conduct operations.

The government was generally suspicious of human rights activities, claiming human rights concerns were largely prompted by antigovernment exile groups and hostile foreign NGOs. Government officials rarely were cooperative and responsive to the views of human rights groups, although they cooperated in some areas, such as on combatting trafficking in persons and gender-based violence. Government officials used media outlets to try to discredit civil society actors, categorizing them as supporters of the opposition and critics of the government. The few local activists who sought to address human rights risked intimidation, harassment, unlawful detention, and other reprisals. Somos + conducted democracy events and advocated for the rights of citizens. Lack of accreditation hampered its effectiveness.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The government did not generally cooperate with UN bodies focused on human rights matters or other international human rights organizations. The government did not fully cooperate with visits by representatives of human rights organizations. Members of international human rights NGOs continued to report difficulties obtaining visas to visit the country.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Commission on Human Rights, which

is part of the Chamber of Deputies' Committee for Complaints and Petitions, received citizen petitions. A government-funded Center for Human Rights and Democracy held human rights awareness campaigns. These human rights bodies were not fully operational, independent, or effective. An ombudsman and a coordinator for the government's efforts to combat trafficking in persons were also not fully operational or effective.

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

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal and punishable by 12 to 20 years' imprisonment and fines. The law does not address spousal rape or the gender of rape survivors. The government did not enforce the law effectively, in part due to reluctance of survivors and their families to report rape. Even when survivors reported rape, police and judicial officials were reluctant to act, particularly if alleged perpetrators were politically connected or members of the military or police. LGBTQI+ women and transgender men were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in the military, and these same groups reported abuse by their families including rape as a form of so-called conversion therapy. Transgender women reported harassment, rape, and sexual abuse in police custody.

Domestic violence is illegal. The penalty for assault ranges from one to 20 years' imprisonment. Survivors were reluctant to report cases, and the government did not enforce the law effectively, with police and the judiciary reluctant to prosecute cases. Authorities generally treated domestic violence as a private matter to be resolved in the home, did not protect the anonymity of survivors, and often disclosed victims' whereabouts to their alleged abusers. No statistics were available on prosecutions, convictions, or punishments.

National television on several occasions broadcast interviews with underage girls, in some cases concealing their faces, being coerced by authorities into withdrawing

rape allegations. Sometimes the girls withdrew their allegations following financial settlements with their alleged rapists, or due to family or community pressure. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Gender Equality mediated some domestic disputes but had no enforcement powers.

The government-controlled media regularly broadcast public service announcements regarding domestic violence and trafficking in persons.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: In rural areas there were instances of levirate marriage, the practice by which a woman is required to marry her deceased husband's brother, often against her will. Under such practice, women were not allowed to inherit their late husbands' possessions. In some cases large bride prices paid to a wife's family made it difficult for women to leave their marriages because, despite the law's requirement for an equitable division of assets, traditional practices within the majority Fang ethnic group require reimbursement of the bride price and additional goods accrued during the marriage to a husband's family in the case of divorce.

Sexual Harassment: Although the law prohibits sexual harassment, it continued to be a problem. The government made no effort to address the problem, and no statistics were available.

In June anonymous sources reported sexual extortion and abuse by officials on several women's national sports teams, particularly regarding selection to the teams.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Legal, social, and cultural barriers and government policies impeded access to sexual and reproductive health services. LGBTQI+ individuals were generally not afforded the ability to manage their reproductive health.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services for sexual violence survivors, including interviews and medical examinations at hospitals and clinics, although service providers had no specific training on handling sexual violence. Emergency contraception was not available as part of

the clinical management of rape cases. There was limited access to postabortion care.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the maternal mortality rate was 301 per 100,000 live births in 2017. Major factors affecting maternal mortality included poverty, poor medical training, and limited access to health care, especially in rural areas. Prenatal and obstetric care was free in government clinics but limited primarily to the cities of Malabo and Bata. The WHO reported that skilled health personnel attended 68 percent of births, but only 21 percent of women of reproductive age had their need for family planning satisfied through modern methods. The birth rate was 176 per 1,000 girls and women ages 15 to 19. Factors likely contributing to the high birth rate included cultural tolerance for childbirth out of wedlock, low access to sexual education and contraception in rural populations, and economic constraints forcing girls into relationship with older men who could support families.

Discrimination: While the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law discriminates against women in matters of nationality (for example, it is easier for a man to pass citizenship to a foreign woman through marriage than it is for a woman to pass citizenship to a foreign man), real and personal property, and inheritance. The prevalence of negative stereotypes and adverse cultural norms and customs was believed to contribute to discrimination against women.

Custom confined women in rural areas largely to traditional roles. Women in urban areas experienced less overt discrimination but did not enjoy pay or access to employment and credit on an equal basis with men (see section 7.d, Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation).

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

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The law does not protect members of racial or ethnic minorities or groups from violence and discrimination.

Societal discrimination, harassment by security forces, and political marginalization of minorities were problems (see section 1.d, Arbitrary Arrest, and section 3, Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups).

The predominant ethnic group, the Fang, dominated politics and the economy. Foreigners were often victimized, including documented and irregular immigrants from Benin, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, and other African countries, a significant portion of the labor force. The government required immigrants to have relevant documents, partly to address concerns regarding trafficking in persons, although police and gendarmes used documentation status to extort bribes from foreigners at routine traffic stops. In October police and gendarmes arrested hundreds of foreigners, ostensibly to verify immigration and employment documentation (see section 1.d., Arbitrary Arrest).

In public speeches President Obiang frequently referred to foreigners as a security and terrorist threat and warned of a renewal of colonialism by foreign interests.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived from (at least) one citizen parent, whether born in the country or abroad, but not automatically from birth on the country's territory. If both parents are foreigners, a person born in the country can claim nationality at age 18, but the process was extremely burdensome and rarely resulted in approved citizenship. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare requires parents to register all births and adjudicates them on a nondiscriminatory basis. Failure to register a child may result in denial of public services.

Education: Education is tuition free and compulsory until age 16, although all students are required to pay for registration, textbooks, and other materials. Most children attended school through the primary grades (sixth grade) (see section 7.c., Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment). Boys and girls generally completed secondary or vocational schooling. The Ministry of

Education required teenage girls to take a pregnancy test, and those who tested positive were not allowed to attend school. LGBTQI+ girls reported discrimination or exclusion by teachers. Chores and work at home also limited girls' access to secondary education, especially in rural areas. School enrollment was nearly identical in the elementary grades (50.1 percent for boys versus 49.9 percent for girls). By high school the percentage of girls declined slightly (50.7 percent for boys versus 49.3 percent for girls). Efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 resulted in smaller class sizes and additional school sessions. While this left many children outside the classroom due to a lack of space and staff in 2020, the hiring of temporary teachers increased staffing in public schools. Attention to school attendance generally focused more on citizen children than on their foreign resident peers.

Child Abuse: Abuse of minors is illegal, but the government did not enforce the law effectively. Corporal punishment was a culturally accepted method of discipline, including in schools.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum age for marriage is 14. UNICEF reported, using 2011 data, that 9 percent of women were married before age 15 and 30 percent before age 18. 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: Commercial sexual exploitation of children is illegal, but authorities generally did not identify nor prosecute offenders. The law specifically addresses the sale, offering, or use of children for commercial sex, and child pornography generally, and antitrafficking provisions include sexual exploitation and pornography as examples of cases of trafficking-related crimes. The law on trafficking children, however, requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion, and therefore does not criminalize all forms of child trafficking. The minimum age of sexual consent is 18.

Underage girls and boys were exploited in commercial sex, particularly in the two largest cities, Malabo and Bata. During the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a local NGO, transgender children were particularly vulnerable to sexual

exploitation, and 10 to 15 children were sexually exploited and transported between Bata and Malabo.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community was small, likely fewer than 100 persons. There were no known reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities cannot access education, health services, public buildings and transportation on an equal basis with others. New buildings must reportedly be accessible to persons with disabilities, but inaccessible public buildings and schools remained an obstacle, including some newly constructed government buildings. Access to other state services such as health services, information, communications, transportation, and the judicial system are not explicitly provided by law.

Authorities did not investigate incidents of violence or other abuses against persons with disabilities.

The law does not prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities. While the law requires companies employing more than 50 employees hire a certain percentage of persons with disabilities, few if any did so. Domestic and international NGOs reported allegations that employment as a person with disabilities without high-level political sponsorship

was nearly impossible. Women with disabilities reported that it was nearly impossible to obtain employment without a personal recommendation from the president's wife.

Persons with disabilities may vote and otherwise participate in civic affairs, but lack of physical access to buildings posed a barrier to full participation. Children with disabilities attended primary, secondary, and higher education, although generally no accommodations were made for their disabilities. A small number of private schools for children with disabilities operated with a combination of public and private funding.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Despite frequent public statements and radio campaigns advocating nondiscrimination, including one by President Obiang, there remained stigma regarding persons with HIV or AIDS, and many individuals kept their illness hidden. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare estimated that less than half of persons with HIV or AIDS sought treatment, and that some persons likely avoided the no-cost treatment because of associated social stigma.

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

Security forces reportedly subjected LGBTQI+ individuals to discrimination and violence, including rape and other sexual violence, within the military and in jails and prisons. Authorities did not investigate these abuses.

No laws criminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, but societal stigmatization of and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community was a problem. The government made no effort to combat this stigma and discrimination. The government and laws do not formally recognize or protect the existence of LGBTQI+ persons or groups; no laws prohibit discrimination. The government's position was that such sexual orientations and gender identities were inconsistent with cultural beliefs.

LGBTQI+ individuals often faced stigma from their families as well as from the government and employers. Families sometimes rejected children and forced them

to leave home, often resulting in them quitting school. Authorities removed some LGBTQI+ individuals from government jobs and academia because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation. School officials reportedly denied transgender children access to some educational facilities. There were persistent reports that family members raped LGBTQI+ women to impregnate them and supposedly convert them to heterosexuality. Family members also reportedly raped transgender men. There were also reports of families of LGBTQI+ parents taking children away.

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 collectively bargain. 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, however, effectively blocking most union formation. The government did not generally allow unions to organize.

The government did not effectively enforce laws providing freedom of association or the right to collective bargaining. All unions must register with the government, but the registration process was costly, burdensome, opaque, and slow. The Union Organization of Small Farmers was the only legal, operational labor union. Authorities refused to recognize other unions, including the Workers Union of Equatorial Guinea, Independent Service Union, Teachers' Trade Union Association, and the Rural Workers Organization. Most often those seeking to organize were co-opted into existing political party structures by means of pressure and incentives.

The law broadly acknowledges the right to engage in strikes, but no implementing legislation defines legitimate grounds for striking. No law requires the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity, although such dismissal may fall under wrongful termination. The government has never authorized a strike.

The government did not protect the right of unions to conduct their activities without interference. Penalties were not applied but were commensurate with

those for other laws involving denial of civil rights, such as discrimination.

Labor NGOs faced restrictions and were unable to operate.

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. The committee was not active.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security conducted numerous workplace inspections to verify adherence to laws on forced labor, however, many inspections ended in bribery of the labor inspectors and no significant findings of forced or coerced labor. Despite creating an online tool and telephone numbers to report cases of forced labor and promoting its efforts online, the government did not effectively enforce the law or take sufficient action to end trafficking, and forced labor occurred. Penalties were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes and are included in the law against trafficking in persons.

Men and women from Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, and other neighboring countries, as well as from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, were recruited for work, and there were reports that some were subsequently subjected to forced labor. Often they were not compensated as agreed, and their passports were confiscated. Companies in the construction sector, among others, sometimes held the passports of their foreign workers, a possible indication of forced labor. Some companies claimed they held passports to keep them from being stolen.

Employees in the public and private sector were often paid months late, although the minister of public administration and administrative reform denied any delays in salary payment for central government workers. Some workers, especially those from overseas, quit their jobs because of nonpayment, having effectively worked for months without compensation.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits some of the worst forms of child labor. There is no law that specifically prohibits using a child for illicit purposes; under the antitrafficking law, perpetrators must use coercion to be prosecuted. The law prohibits employment of children younger than age 18. With the authorization of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and their parents or guardians, however, minors between ages 16 and 18 may perform light work that does not interfere with their schooling. The minimum age for apprenticeships is 16.

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 government has yet to publish any list of hazardous types of work prohibited for children.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for enforcing child labor laws, but labor inspectors focused mainly on the construction industry and not on child labor. The laws were not effectively enforced, and penalties were not commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. The government does not have data on the worst forms of child labor.

Children were reportedly transported from nearby countries, primarily Benin, Cameroon, Gabon, Nigeria, and Togo, and forced to work as domestic servants, market laborers, street vendors, launderers, and beggars. Increasingly there were reports of local children brought from rural areas to work as domestic servants in Malabo and Bata. The government occasionally provided social services on an ad hoc basis to children found working in markets. Government officials called attention to children working in markets and as street vendors and increased oversight of this sector of the economy. The law prohibits children from working as street vendors to reduce child labor.

Some children worked in family businesses, mostly in the informal economy, and were seen selling used clothes, fruit, and vegetables, especially on weekends. Other children worked as servers or cooks in family restaurants and bars.

The United Nations also documented children working as scrap metal salvagers in the aftermath of the March explosions at a military barracks outside of Bata (see also section 1.e, Trial Procedures).

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination based on race, skin color, sex, political opinion, national origin, social status, or union affiliation. Labor laws do not prohibit discrimination based on age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, HIV and AIDS status, or refugee or stateless status. The government did not effectively enforce these laws and regulations. Penalties were not commensurate to laws related to civil rights. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to political affiliation, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and HIV and AIDS status. Wage discrimination against foreign migrant workers occurred. High-ranking members of independent opposition parties were unable to find work and were barred from government employment.

The government does not have an agency responsible for the protection of persons unable to work due to permanent or temporary illness or other health conditions. 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, nor did the government take steps to accommodate them in the workplace.

The country continued to have large gender gaps in education, equal pay, and employment opportunities. Deep-rooted stereotypes and ethnic traditions impeded women's employment opportunities, and pregnant women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ women faced further barriers. Women mostly worked in the informal sector, where they did not have access to benefits or social security. The lack of enforcement left women vulnerable to discrimination, but they rarely complained due to fear of reprisals. Additionally, the informal sector provided some women with sufficient economic resources to finance major purchases, education abroad for family members, and self-sustainability that was not provided in similar positions in the formal economy. The government did not maintain accurate or updated statistics on unemployment generally, nor by segment of

society.

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

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law requires employers to pay citizens at the same rate as foreigners and to pay domestic workers not less than 60 percent of the national minimum wage. The government enforced neither requirement. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar crimes and were seldom enforced.

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. Offshore workdays in the oil and gas sector are a minimum of 12 hours, of which eight hours are considered regular work and four hours 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 yearly. Overtime is not mandatory, except as provided by law or special agreement, and is prohibited for pregnant workers. The law allows overtime for night work. Premium pay is required for overtime and holidays. Women have six weeks prematernity and postmaternity leave that can be extended for medical reasons. The law provides for two paid daily breaks of one hour each to breast feed.

Occupational Safety and Health: Appropriate occupational safety and health (OSH) standards provide for protection of workers from occupational hazards. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for setting and enforcing minimum wage, workweek rules, and OSH standards. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws, and penalties for violating these laws were not commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence. The ministry did not publish the results of its OSH inspections.

The ministry conducted numerous workplace inspections to verify adherence to labor laws regarding pay, benefits, and working conditions. The small number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce the law effectively. When inspectors

found violations, the government required some employers to correct the problem, pay fines, or pay reparations to the employees. The law permits workers to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

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

Foreigners, including migrants from other parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, were sometimes subjected to poor working conditions. Some workers were exposed to hazardous chemicals, supplied with insufficient safety gear, and subjected to excessively long hours. An existing ministry website and a telephone hotline established during the year enabled workers to report workplace irregularities and violations, including safety concerns and forced labor. No cases had been reported to the hotline as of October.

Informal Sector: The government did not monitor the informal sector, which employed most workers. The country's informal sector was estimated to have reached 32 percent of GDP by 2017 in response to growing demand for goods and services. The informal sector is mainly made up of small businesses that provide consumables and services, such as frozen food, produce stands, fish and fish products, hair salons, convenience stores, auto repair shops, restaurants, and bars. Most of the businesses are owned by women or by African immigrants. Employees and businesses in the informal sector are vulnerable to extortion and abuse from officials, including demands for bribes, occasional demolition of structures, and harassment from police and gendarmes.