

Multi-party municipal elections were held in September 1995. Observers emphasized the spirit of popular participation and considered that the elections constituted progress. Political parties benefitted from the general atmosphere of freedom and from greater freedom of expression during the election campaign. Unfortunately, the vote was tainted by irregularities. The opposition made significant gains but believed that it had been robbed of victory. The resumption of greater repression forced many opponents into exile.

Early presidential elections were held on February 25, 1996. Once again, no mechanism was in place to ensure the neutrality of the election process. Amnesty International reported that many political opponents were jailed or tortured on the eve of the election. None of the leaders of the legitimate opposition parties accepted President Obiang Nguema's invitation to join the new national unity government announced on April 8. Opposition leaders alleged that the President had refused to consider their minimum demands for a freer political environment. In August, the regime invited the parties to dialogue, but with no concrete resolutions. According to some opposition leaders, such as Saverio Moto of the PPGE, however, the regime is showing greater flexibility, by allowing the opposition to travel freely in the country and abroad and by making efforts to strengthen its ties with Madrid. Other positive signs of openness and dialogue are apparently on the horizon.

In 1992 and 1993 the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) openly criticized authorities in Equatorial Guinea. The CHR passed a consensus resolution appointing a Special Rapporteur, Alejandro Artucio. In April 1996, he reported abuses and irregularities, particularly regarding the unacceptable conduct of the presidential election, which he had been unable to observe. On April 23, 1996, the CHR passed a consensus resolution expressing its concern at the human rights situation in Equatorial Guinea and renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

Not surprisingly, the Government of Equatorial Guinea continues to oppose any outside interference, which it deems an unacceptable breach of its sovereignty. The Government took the offensive several times in 1996, before the CHR and the international press, to defend its actions and to accuse the opposition and Western countries of casting aspersions on the Obiang Nguema regime.

#### Canadian Position

Canada has recognized Equatorial Guinea since its independence in 1968, but its relations with this country are very limited. Canada is nevertheless concerned about persistent human rights abuses in Equatorial Guinea. Canada's representatives continually raise this issue with authorities in Equatorial Guinea, urging them to adopt measures that will allow the return of political refugees, to bring to trial abusers of human rights, and to meet all international obligations, so that the rule of law can be established in Equatorial Guinea.

The Canadian ambassador and other members of the diplomatic corps took part in the municipal election observer mission on September 17, 1995. This group of observers shared its comments with local authorities immediately after the vote. However, Canada and many Western countries refused to send observers for the presidential election of February 25, 1996, because electoral conditions were not in accordance with the rules of democracy. President Obiang won the election with more than 98% of the vote.