

Equatorial Guinea: Blogger, literary magazine editor protests against lack of freedom

MALABO: Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, a novelist, blogger and editor of the arts and literature magazine *Atanga*, left Equatorial Guinea for Spain early on Wednesday, 16 February 2011, saying he had been "harassed" because of the hunger strike he began on 11 February in protest against President Teodoro Obiang Nguema's dictatorial rule. He was planning to continue his protest in Spain.



"We do not encourage hunger strikes as a form of protest because of their extreme nature and the danger they pose to the protestor's health but we salute this activist's courage in a country in which any form of protest or criticism is quickly repressed," Reporters Without Borders said. "We call on Equatorial Guinea's government and its western partners to heed Ávila's demands, especially those concerning the lack of freedom of expression."

"Moving in the wrong direction" - Ávila

In an interview Ávila said: "We have been in this terrible situation for 30 years, moving in the wrong direction, and it was time to do something. We cannot go on like this, with this dictatorship (...) For a long time we thought it was too difficult to remove a dictator from power and now we have seen what can be done. We have to try it. We must take advantage of the winds of change in the Maghreb."

In the interview, he also urged the president of the Spanish national assembly, who led a parliamentary delegation on a visit to Malabo last week, to apply "the necessary pressure" so that a government of transition, without any member of the current regime, could be installed in Equatorial Guinea.

In an attempt to prevent North African-style protests spreading to Equatorial Guinea, the government imposed a news blackout on the fall of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Information minister Jeronimo Osa Osa, who is also the government's spokesman, issued clear directives to the staff of the state radio and TV broadcaster, RTVGE, not to cover the unrest in Tunisia and Egypt.

Constant critic of Obiang Nguema

In his [[http://www.fronterad.com/?q=blog/18 blog](http://www.fronterad.com/?q=blog/18%20blog)], novels, poems and theatre plays, and in the conferences he has given in foreign universities, Ávila has been constant critic of the Obiang Nguema dictatorship and the international community's readiness to tolerate it.

According to the Spanish daily *El País*' coverage of the US diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks, the senior US diplomat stationed in Malabo in 2009, Anton K. Smith, described Obiang Nguema as one of "the good guys" and talked of his "mellowing, benign leadership." So, in the US embassy's eyes, everything is clearly fine in this "African Kuwait," which lacks any freedom but is a major source of oil for US companies.

Equatorial Guinea is ranked 167th out of 178 countries in the 2010 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index while Obiang Nguema has been on the Reporters Without Borders list of ["Predators of Press Freedom"](#) for years. A stranglehold over the economy, a personality cult, corruption, a lack of pluralism and closely controlled news media have been the main features of Obiang Nguema's iron rule since he took over in 1979.

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