

Democracy, Obiang and a Disputed Prize

By Charlayne Hunter-Gault

Democracy is complex, as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright reminded during a conversation I facilitated at a summit on human rights at the Ford Foundation. Having spent the last 40-odd years of my professional life reporting on long-standing democracies, as well as some of those taking their first baby steps on the democratic trail, I couldn't agree more. But my years of reporting all over the world also led me to agree with their point that to harness that complexity in a way that allows citizens to benefit most from the system, those citizens have to be vigilant and engaged.

I am moved to these thoughts as UNESCO is considering implementing the Obiang International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences which was suspended indefinitely in June 2010 and is funded by a \$3 million gift from the president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, for whom it is named. The prize and its revival now, is a highly controversial move, condemned by many human rights organizations, as well as the Committee to Protect Journalists on whose board I serve. And some, like CPJ, see it as case study in the dilemma of how good organizations deal with receiving money for a good cause, but for the wrong reasons. It happens all the time, across our global community, that some leaders promote good causes abroad, while engaged in dubious, if not heinous practices at home. Political hypocrisy is, alas, a global phenomenon.

President Obiang, who has served for more than three decades, has done more than his share to thwart freedom of expression, by cowing the local press into self-censorship, preventing any probing coverage of ongoing international investigations of the ruling elite over alleged corruption or of the recent uprisings in the Arab world, among other sensitive topics.

While President Obiang proclaimed in August that "there are no human rights violations" in his country, CPJ reports that six days later authorities detained a German television crew and deleted footage of their interview with an opposition leader and images showing poverty deemed to tarnish the country's image. Still, the UN special rapporteur on torture has documented the systematic use of torture in Equatorial Guinea's prisons. Meanwhile, ongoing arrests, intimidation and obstruction of journalists, most of whom, as a matter of survival practice self-censorship, make the country one of the world's most censored nations, CPJ research shows. Virtually all of the news media in the country are owned and run by the government or its allies, according to the Committee.

Of course, there are always other views, and President Obiang has denied any of the abuses he's been accused of. He has garnered the support of some African heads of state and of the African Union, where he is a rotating Chairman. As recently as August, five Central African countries agreed to back Equatorial Guinea for a two year seat on the UNESCO executive

board. The revival of the Obiang prize follows an AU resolution calling for its immediate implementation.

Given all that, in the first instance, global citizens have to know, in the words of Marvin Gaye, “what’s goin’ on,” and when “what’s going on” is a threat even to their imperfect worlds, to help perfect the imperfect, citizens must act with urgency. Many human rights groups are alarmed by the imminent implementation of a prize that will help burnish the legacy of President Obiang, but that is a legacy which, those organizations argue, belies the reality of a leader whose record on human rights and freedom of speech is blemished beyond burnishing. It is laudable to have a prize recognizing research in life sciences, but what, if any name, should it carry? Is it not essential that a prize be in keeping with the values and actions of the prize sponsors, in this case both President Obiang and UNESCO?

Despite the “baby steps to democracy” being taken by many African countries, it is still the case that in far too many of the continent’s countries, citizens are being deprived of the capacity to harness the complexities of democracy through their own engagement because their leaders have themselves harnessed the instruments that would allow their people the freedom to know “what’s goin’ on”—to know their rights and obligations as citizens. Moreover, there are still countries in the world—and not just in Africa- where there is kleptocratic rule, human rights abuses and an ongoing obstruction of one of the basic instrument of a free society--freedom of the press --stifled, often in the most cruel ways. And in such societies, despots are able to manipulate their systems to remain in power in perpetuity.

Even in countries like the United States, democracy is complex, and where the former Zimbabwean Freedom fighter and opposition politician Margaret Dongo rightly observes: “The US is still growing into its constitution.” But one of the many things going for its people is a free press, albeit one that is also complex, as news organizations struggle to define themselves and their role in new and uncertain times.

And this is all the more reason that people who are privileged with access to independent information need to use it to benefit not only themselves, but their neighbors around the world. The hope for those of us who believe in the promise of democracy and use journalism to help fulfill that right, is that the press can give voice to those whose right to speak out is denied them. The hope is also that those who have the precious right of freedom will stand up when the history that they are creating for future generations is in danger of being written in a way that will reflect poorly on their commitment to freedom, justice, human rights and human dignity.

CPJ and other organizations believe bestowing the Obiang Prize would not only send the wrong signal to those struggling to harness the complexity of democracy, but would also undermine the credibility of UNESCO, and cast a blight on the entire UN system. For those who believe that even a system as complex as democracy offers the opportunity for citizens

to speak freely and to live in freedom and dignity, the Obiang case offers an opportunity to stand up and use that freedom to write a chapter of the history of our time their children can be proud of.

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