The histories of Bioko and Río Muni are strikingly different. Río Muni remained isolated from contact with the West until the 20th century. However, the people of the Bubi ethnic group on Bioko retreated upland as the natural harbor of Malabo changed from Portuguese to Spanish to British and then back to Spanish hands between the late 1400s and early 1900s. During this time, Malabo was primarily a slave-trading center, except during the British occupation of 1827 to 1843. During the first half of the 1900s, Spain developed the infrastructure to support cocoa plantations on the island. Because of that system, Bioko has a higher income and literacy rate and has better health care than the mainland.

Conflicting claims to the mainland were settled in the Treaty of Paris (1900), which set the borders for Río Muni and gave it to the Spanish. The lives of the indigenous people (mostly Fang) of Río Muni were not really affected until the 1920s when Europeans established coffee production there. Río Muni and Bioko were joined artificially by the Spanish as Spanish Guinea.

In 1959, Spanish Guinea was made part of Spain, and all indigenous peoples gained full citizenship. Representatives were sent to the parliament in Madrid. In 1963, a measure of autonomy was granted and a joint legislative body was set up. On 12 October 1968, full independence for Equatorial Guinea was granted peacefully, and Francisco Macías Nguema became the first president in a multiparty election.

An attempted coup and attacks on Spanish citizens in Malabo were among events that led to tighter political controls. In 1972, Macías assumed complete control over the government and declared himself president for life. He deteriorated into a brutal ruler, and all government functions completely eroded except for internal security. The economy existed only due to Spanish, Cuban, Soviet, and Chinese assistance. Under Macías, about one-third of the population was either exiled or executed. Bioko’s cocoa production, the nation’s primary source of income, was severely disrupted when 20,000 Nigerians left. Churches, banks, and schools ceased to operate.

On 3 August 1979, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, the commander of the national guard and a nephew of Macías, staged a successful coup, and Macías was executed after a trial attended by international observers. Obiang Nguema assumed the presidency but also ruled with tight control. Equatorial Guinea struggled to overcome the darkest years of trouble. In a single-candidate election in 1989, Obiang Nguema
History of Equatorial Guinea

waselected to a seven-year term as president. The country legalized a multiparty system in a new 1992 constitution, but elections were not held until 1996. Opposition parties had posted presidential candidates but withdrew in protest over polling irregularities. Obiang Nguema was therefore reelected to another seven-year term in an unopposed victory.

In 1998, after the discovery of oil on Bioko, calls for Bioko’s independence grew louder, rebel factions attacked military bases, and tensions between the Bubi and Fang escalated. The government cracked down on militants and their sympathizers. Dozens of Bubi were arrested. Meanwhile, legislative elections in March 1999 gave the ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) 75 of parliament’s 80 seats. The opposition accused the PDGE of rigging the election and demanded that the results be annulled. When the government refused, the opposition members refused to sit in parliament.

Prior to December 2002 presidential elections, the government jailed nearly 70 opposition party members for conspiracy to overthrow the president, though they argued that Obiang Nguema had fabricated the charges to eliminate his political rivals and assure his victory in the elections. When opposition leaders withdrew from the elections, citing fraud, Obiang Nguema won the contest with nearly 100 percent of the vote.

In March 2004, police in Zimbabwe impounded an airplane that had flown 65 alleged mercenaries from South Africa. Shortly after, authorities in Equatorial Guinea arrested 15 men and charged them with collaborating with the group in Zimbabwe on a plot to overthrow President Obiang Nguema. Separate trials for the two groups took place in late 2004. In Zimbabwe, three men were found guilty of coup-related charges. In Equatorial Guinea, 14 men were found guilty. One died in custody, prompting allegations of torture. The six-man Armenian flight crew was later pardoned. Of the seven remaining prisoners, all South African, the suspected plot leader was given the longest sentence, a 34-year jail term.

Equatorial Guinea’s oil production has increased more than ten times since the 1990s, and it continues to rise. The sudden influx of oil revenue has given Equatorial Guinea one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. However, critics of the government argue that corruption has prevented most people from seeing the benefits of the economic boom.

References: