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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2022 - Cameroon

Not Free

15

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 6 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 9 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

16 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

President Paul Biya has ruled Cameroon since 1982. His Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has maintained power by rigging elections, using state resources for political patronage, and limiting the activities of opposition parties. Press freedom and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are restricted, and due process protections are poorly upheld. A conflict between security forces and separatists in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions is ongoing and has resulted in widespread civilian deaths and displacements.

Key Developments in 2021

- In December, members of the opposition Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), who had been arrested in September 2020 during a peaceful protest, received prison sentences of up to seven years for "rebellion."
- A November report by the Supreme Court's Chamber of Accounts noted numerous "weaknesses and abuses" in the government's management of COVID-19 funding, and found that more than 21 billion CFA francs (\$34.8 million) had been diverted from the government's COVID-19 fund. In May, the government also committed to investigating why "most of a \$335 million loan" from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could not be accounted for.
- The conflict in the Anglophone regions wore on, with frequent reports of violence and deaths at the hands of both separatist and government forces throughout the year, including numerous deadly attacks on civil servants, students, teachers, and schools by separatists.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president is the head of state, is directly elected to a seven-year term in a single voting round, and may serve an unlimited number of terms. President Paul Biya won a seventh term in the October 2018 presidential election, taking 71 percent of the vote in a process marked by low turnout and a lack of genuine democratic competition. Maurice Kamto of the CRM came in second with 14 percent of the vote. The election was marred by irregularities including unsigned results sheets, and intimidation and fear in the Anglophone regions kept many from casting their votes. A television report after the election depicted supposed Transparency International observers praising the electoral process, but Transparency International quickly issued a statement asserting that they had no election observers in Cameroon.

In the Northwest and Southwest regions, separatists called for an election boycott, and armed militants used threats and intimidation to keep voters away from the polls. Out of 2,300 polling stations in the Northwest Region, only 74 opened on election day. Approximately 15 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the Southwest Region, while turnout was only 5 percent in the Northwest Region.

Mayoral elections were held in Bangangté, a town in West Cameroon, in May 2021. The election process featured numerous irregularities, and resulted in the son of the Senate's top official being elected, despite the absence of the required number of municipal councilors as stipulated by Cameroon's electoral laws.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The upper chamber of Cameroon's bicameral Parliament is the 100-member Senate. Senators serve five-year terms; 70 are elected through indirect suffrage by regional councils, while the remaining 30 are appointed by the president. The 180 members of the National Assembly, the lower chamber, are directly elected in multimember constituencies to five-year terms.

Long-delayed National Assembly elections were finally held in Cameroon in February 2020, together with municipal elections. The CRM refused to put up candidates, though the Social Democratic Front (SDF) participated, as did the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), which is allied with the CPDM. The CPDM retained its majority, winning 139 of the 167 seats contested. The Constitutional Council invalidated the results in 11 constituencies of the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions, where boycotts and ongoing tensions resulted in low turnout; separatists claimed that 98 percent of eligible voters had boycotted the election. Reruns took place in March 2020, and the incumbent CPDM won all 13 of the seats at stake.

The first-ever regional elections took place in December 2020, despite calls for a boycott by opposition parties and threats by separatist groups in the Anglophone regions to arrest would-be voters. Biya's CPDM won the majority. In September 2021, the CPDM elected the executives of its local institutions; those appointed to senior positions will be able to take part in the next party conference, which some believe will determine President Biya's successor.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The independence and integrity of Cameroon's electoral framework has long been compromised by accusations of partisanship by election management bodies. The Constitutional Council—created in February 2018, just eight months before the presidential election—has the power to validate election results and adjudicate election disputes, and the majority of its 11 members have ties to the ruling party. The council rejected all 18 petitions to cancel the presidential election results filed by opposition parties in 2018, despite credible allegations of fraud and intimidation.

The Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) electoral body was created in 2006 to address concerns about the fair management of previous elections. However, President Biya chooses its members, and CPDM partisans have historically dominated the body. In March 2021, the leaders of seven opposition political parties met to draft an updated and fair electoral code. The group planned to present the proposed reforms to the public in November, but was prevented from doing so by police.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

The ability to organize in political groups, and their freedom to operate, is severely limited, and opposition leaders risk arrest and imprisonment. Opposition rallies are frequently prohibited by the government; in July 2021, the government banned a peaceful protest planned by the CRM, though numerous CPDM marches in support of President Biya were authorized.

In December 2021, the government briefly placed CRM president Kamto under house arrest in an apparent attempt to stop him from launching his book in Douala, a CRM stronghold. Later in December, 47 CRM members, who had been arrested in September 2020 during a peaceful protest, received prison sentences of up to seven years for "rebellion."

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

Despite the existence of hundreds of registered political parties, Cameroon remains essentially a one-party state. The organizational advantages of the ruling party's long incumbency, its dominance over electoral bodies, and its superior access to media and public resources to achieve partisan gains, disadvantage opposition candidates. Opposition parties are highly fragmented, preventing any one of them from becoming a viable alternative to the ruling CPDM. Frequent harassment, intimidation, and arrests of opposition figures further reduce the ability of opposition parties to gain power through elections.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 1 / 4

State patronage and President Biya's control of high-level appointments help the CPDM retain power. Insecurity in the Anglophone regions caused by violence between armed militants and the military made voting nearly impossible in the 2018 presidential election, effectively denying voters a political choice. The ongoing crisis also affected the 2020 parliamentary, municipal, and regional elections with supporters of separatists in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions calling for boycotts, resulting in low turnout.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Groups advocating for greater self-determination in the Anglophone regions remain marginalized and excluded from political debate, as reflected by the 2017 banning of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone political group. LGBT+ people, some ethnic minorities, and women are generally excluded from positions of political influence, and their interests are poorly represented by elected officials. The government has expressed a commitment to increasing women's representation in Parliament.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

President Biya has extensive executive authority, including wide-ranging appointment powers and strong control over state institutions. Many policies are generated by the government and adopted by presidential decree, with minimal involvement by the parliament. When it is involved, Parliament shows little independence and largely acts as a rubber stamp for the president's policy initiatives.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors, despite anticorruption initiatives including the creation of the National Anticorruption Commission (CONAC). Several former high-level government officials are serving prison terms for corruption, though these efforts are often perceived as moves by President Biya to persecute political adversaries, who are oftentimes his former allies.

During 2020 and 2021, opposition leaders and civil society groups repeatedly alleged that government officials were embezzling funds intended to fight COVID-19. In May 2021, the summary of an investigative report by the Supreme Court's Chamber of Accounts was published on social media. The report, which was officially published in November, noted numerous "weaknesses and abuses" in the government's management of COVID-19 funding, and found that more than 21 billion CFA francs (\$34.8 million) had been diverted from the government's COVID-19 fund. In May, the government also committed to investigating why "most of a \$335 million loan" from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could not be accounted for.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because government officials brazenly embezzled funds allocated to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Decisions, especially those made by presidential decree, are often adopted without public consultation. Cameroon lacks an access to information law, and it is difficult to gain access to government documents or statistics in practice. The websites of most ministries do not provide substantial information.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Independent and critical journalists face pressure and the risk of detention or arrest in connection with their work. In September 2021, journalist Sébastien Ebala was sentenced to two years in prison for “contempt” of the president. Ebala has been detained since April 2020, when he was arrested after publicly stating that Biya should leave power while advocating for an antigovernment march.

The National Communications Council (CNC), a media regulatory body, has a history of harassing journalists and outlets. In June 2021, the prime minister installed the new head of the CNC, telling him to “promote sanity” and the “consolidation of national unity” and to fight fake news in the country’s media landscape. State-run Cameroon Radiotelevision (CRTV) has been criticized for favoring the CPDM in its coverage. The government continued to suppress media coverage of the Anglophone crisis in 2021.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 2 / 4 and private?

Religious freedom is somewhat restricted in northern areas affected by the presence of the Boko Haram extremist group, which has carried out violent attacks against places of worship. In addition, random attacks against believers and facilities in connection with the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions are common.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 1 / 4 indoctrination?

There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses and academics can face negative repercussions for criticizing the government or discussing its political opponents. In September 2021, military security forces detained Fridolin Nke, a philosophy professor who had recently published a book criticizing the Biya government; Nke, who reported being tortured while in custody, was quickly released. Academic freedom continues to be severely impacted by the crisis in the Anglophone regions, with separatists enforcing a boycott of schools and carrying out acts of violence against teachers and students.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 1 / 4 without fear of surveillance or retribution?

Public criticism of the government and membership in opposition political parties can have negative consequences for professional opportunities and advancement. In general, Cameroonians tend to avoid discussing sensitive political issues for fear of reprisals, notably the potential for a return to a federal system that would grant the Anglophone regions more autonomy, or the regions’ outright secession.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is subject to significant restrictions. Authorities continued to ban and violently disperse events perceived as antigovernment in 2021, notably those staged by the opposition CRM.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged 1 / 4 in human rights- and governance-related work?

The influence of civil society has weakened over the years, with many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) relying entirely on foreign assistance, and others coopted by the regime. Anglophone activists have faced harassment, violence, and arrest for their activities. LGBT+ organizations have also been targeted by law enforcement.

The government has restricted the work of international NGOs, denying their staff access to the country. In December 2020, Cameroonian authorities instructed international NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) to suspend their operations in the Northwest Region, claiming that the group was covertly aiding Anglophone separatists; MSF repeatedly denied such accusations, but was forced to withdraw from the region in August 2021.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Trade unions and collective bargaining are legally permitted, although unions are still subject to numerous restrictions in the exercise of their rights. Strikes are theoretically permitted, but the government has used force to disrupt them in practice.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, with corruption and political influence, including by the executive, weakening courts. The president appoints judges and can dismiss them at will. Prosecutors have been pressured to stop pursuing corruption cases against some high-profile officials.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Due process rights are poorly upheld. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace. Civilians accused of terrorism are frequently not afforded the right to a fair trial. French legal norms are regularly imposed upon Cameroonians in Anglophone regions.

Acts of violence against lawyers have increased in recent years. In October and November 2021, human rights lawyer Felix Agbor Nkongho received numerous death threats in response to his work as a “prominent defender” of the rights of Cameroon’s Anglophone minority.

The government has also invoked charges of terrorism and insurrection against opposition leaders and separatist supporters, and they are often detained in the absence of due process and without realistic avenues for challenging their detention. In December 2021, 47 people arrested in the aftermath of the September 2020 CRM antigovernment rallies were sentenced to up to seven years in prison on charges of “rebellion.” State security forces have carried out extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions in connection with the Anglophone crisis, and in the Far North regions in response to Boko Haram activities.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Active conflicts involving both Boko Haram and Anglophone separatists continue to threaten the security of millions of people in Cameroon. The ongoing violence led to the deaths of numerous Cameroonian soldiers and civilians in the Anglophone and Far North regions throughout 2021.

Prison conditions are harsh, marked by “extreme overcrowding” and poor sanitation. Inmates often face a lack of access to food, water, and medical care. Police brutality remains a problem, including the abuse and torture of detainees.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Discrimination against Anglophone Cameroonians and individuals from certain ethnic groups, including the Bamileké, is common. The government imposes the French language in Anglophone regions, and Anglophone Cameroonians are frequently denied senior jobs in the civil service.

Discrimination against the LGBT+ community is rife, and violence against LGBT+ people is common. The penal code forbids same-sex relations; those convicted face prison sentences as long as five years. A cybercrime law punishes those who solicit same-sex relations online with two-year prison sentences. People are frequently prosecuted with no evidence of sexual activity, but rather on suspicions that they are gay.

The ongoing Boko Haram and Anglophone conflicts have forced large numbers of people to flee their homes. As of December 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that there were 573,900 internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the Northwest and Southwest regions; other UN reports estimated that as of August there were more than 340,000 IDPs in the Far North region. IDPs often struggle to access food, education, and other basic needs, and displaced women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4

Free movement is severely limited in parts of the Far North Region due to Boko Haram activity, and in the two Anglophone regions due to the ongoing crisis there.

The Anglophone crisis has exacted a heavy toll on children, many of whom have been deprived of their right to education. Thousands of schools have closed, and attacks and kidnappings of students and teachers at those operating are frequent. In June 2021, six civil servants from the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT) were kidnapped by Anglophone separatists in the Southwest Region; one was killed, and the others had not been released at year's end.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

Harassment of small business owners by state agents is common. Agribusinesses and logging operations are often carried out without consulting local inhabitants. In many regions, women are still dispossessed of their inheritance rights.

In August 2020, the minister of domains and land affairs, Henri Eyébé Ayissi, announced the suspension of a provisional lease between the government and cocoa producer Neo Industry SA in the Ntem Valley, in the South Province. The decision followed local opposition to Neo's plans to begin development of parts of an ancestral reserve. In May 2021, the prime minister signed a cancellation of Neo's lease, putting an end to five years of litigation.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

The constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, but traditional legal values and practices often take precedence, and do not always provide women with full rights. The Boko Haram conflict has also exacerbated the already prevalent practice of child marriage and the sexual abuse of minors in the Far North Region. Customary law can allow rapists to escape punishment if the victim consents to marriage. Despite laws guaranteeing equal rights to men and women to file for divorce, in practice courts often disadvantage women by making proceedings prohibitively expensive or lengthy. Cases of domestic violence and rape are widespread, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

Sexual relations between people of the same sex are legally prohibited in Cameroon. In May 2021, two transgender women were sentenced to five years in prison and fined 200,000 CFA francs (\$330) for "attempted homosexuality." Both women were released pending appeal in July following pressure from international and domestic human rights organizations.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Despite a 2011 law against human trafficking, Cameroon remains a source, transit, and destination country for forced labor and sex trafficking of children, as well as a source country for women who are subject to forced labor and prostitution in Europe. Some internally displaced women have also resorted to prostitution in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala. Child labor remains common, and child workers are frequently exposed to hazardous working conditions, particularly when collecting scrap metal for sale. The sexual exploitation of children on social media has increased in recent years; in June 2021, the Minister of Women's Empowerment held a press conference condemning such abuse, saying that those responsible will be held accountable under the law.

ecoi.net summary: 
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