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HRW – Human Rights Watch (Author)

Another Troubling Decision For Free Speech in Cameroon

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Government Bans Media Debates On President's Health

Media discussions in [Cameroon](#) about the health of its president, Paul Biya, 91, are now outlawed.

On October 9, the territorial administration minister, Paul Atanga Nji, [issued](#) a communique saying that the health of President Biya is a "security issue," that any media debate on the state of the president is "formally forbidden," and that "offenders" will face the law. The minister also asked every governor across the country to establish "monitoring cells" to identify the authors of "tendentious comments" in the private media and on social media.

The communique comes amidst speculations on social media over Biya's wellbeing and [whereabouts](#), including that [he might have died](#). Concerns were raised, as Biya, in power since 1982, has not been seen in public for over a month. On October 8, a government spokesperson [said](#) that Biya was in good health and that speculation about his health was "pure fantasy." He added that the president was enjoying "a brief private stay in Europe."

The decision has caused uproar among media professionals and [opposition party leaders](#) who appropriately criticized it as step backwards for freedom of expression. Yet, this decision is just the latest in a series of government moves seeking to squash free speech ahead of the 2025 presidential elections.

In March, the government [banned two opposition coalitions](#), describing them as “clandestine movements.” In June, gendarmes in Adamawa region arbitrarily [arrested](#), not for the first time, prominent artist Aboubacar Siddiki, known as Babadjo, for “insulting” a governor. And in July, the head of the Mfoundi administrative division issued a [decree](#) threatening to ban anyone insulting state institutions. That same month, members of the intelligence services in the Littoral region [arrested](#) social media activist Junior Ngombe for his TikTok videos advocating democratic change, and security forces [forcibly disappeared and allegedly tortured](#) Ramon Cotta a social media activist known for his [TikTok videos](#) criticizing the Cameroonian authorities.

Free speech is key in any system aspiring to be democratic. Under international human rights law, freedom of expression is not absolute, but may only be restricted on limited grounds, and restrictions must be necessary, proportionate, and not discriminatory. The minister’s decision doesn’t meet this threshold. As elections near, Cameroonians need more free speech, not less. Authorities should respect freedom of expression and reverse this decision.

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Government bans media discussions about health of president Paul Biya

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