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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2019 - Cameroon

Not Free

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Key Developments:

Key Developments in 2018:

- President Paul Biya won a seventh term in October's presidential election, which was marked by low turnout and a lack of genuine democratic competition. Threats of violence and intimidation in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions made voting nearly impossible in some areas. Senatorial elections in March 2018 resulted in the ruling CPDM winning 63 of 70 contested seats.
- In July, the government announced that local and legislative elections scheduled for October 2018 would be postponed until October 2019, citing the logistical difficulty of managing presidential, legislative, and municipal elections concurrently.
- The conflict in the Anglophone regions worsened throughout the year, with increased civilian deaths and displacements. Intense fighting between separatists and security forces threatened to escalate into civil war.
- The government continued to crack down on journalists and civil society leaders who criticized policies in the Anglophone regions. In May, radio journalist and Anglophone advocate Mancho Bibixy was sentenced to prison along with six other Anglophone activists after being convicted on terrorism charges.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 7 / 40 (-2)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 1 / 12 (-2)

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4 (-1)

The president, who holds most executive power, is directly elected to a seven-year term in a single voting round and may serve an unlimited number of terms. The president appoints the prime minister, who lacks power but formally serves as head of government. 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 Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) came in second with 14 percent of the vote. The election was tainted by irregularities such as unsigned results sheets, and intimidation and fear in the Anglophone regions kept many from casting their votes. A television report in the aftermath of the election that included supposed Transparency International observers praising the electoral process caused confusion and controversy; Transparency International issued a statement after the report aired asserting that they had no election observers in Cameroon.

In the Anglophone 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.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to the creation of a new Constitutional Council with power to certify election results and adjudicate election disputes that is comprised mostly of individuals with links to the ruling party.

A2. 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 single-member and multimember constituencies to five-year terms.

Senatorial elections in March 2018 resulted in the ruling CPDM winning 63 of 70 contested seats. The main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF) won the remaining 7 seats, all based in the Northwest Region, even as separatist groups warned that they would not permit voting. The 30 remaining senators, appointed by the president at his prerogative, all belong to the CPDM. The SDF alleged fraud and intimidation in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, and petitioned the Constitutional Council to cancel election results in the Southwest Region, but the council rejected the petition.

In July, the government announced that local and legislative elections scheduled for October 2018 would be postponed until October 2019, citing the logistical difficulty of managing presidential, legislative, and municipal elections concurrently.

The last National Assembly elections were held in 2013, in which the CPDM took 148 out of 180 seats. Although some observers claimed the poll was credible, the CPDM enjoyed significant structural advantages over the weak and fragmented opposition parties, reducing the competitiveness of the process.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4 (-1)

The independence and integrity of Cameroon's electoral framework was compromised by the creation of the Constitutional Council in February 2018, just eight months before the presidential election. The new council 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 October, despite credible allegations of fraud and intimidation.

The other electoral body, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), is responsible for organizing the polls. ELECAM 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.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to the creation of a new Constitutional Council that has the power to certify election results and adjudicate election disputes, and which is comprised mostly of individuals with links to the ruling party.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 3 / 16

B1. 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 political groups, and their freedom to operate, is subject to the whims of the central government, and opposition leaders risk arrest and imprisonment. In 2018, several opposition figures were investigated, harassed, or arrested by authorities. On election day in October, CRM official Thierry Okala Ebode was arrested and held in a Yaoundé jail for eight days after protesting alleged fraud at a local polling station. During the immediate postelection period, the police and security forces raided the home of democracy activist Yondo Black hours before a planned press conference with CRM candidate Maurice Kamto. The police, without a warrant, later interrupted the press conference, which had been relocated to another CRM supporter's home.

Opposition rallies are also frequently prohibited. In October, police disrupted an unauthorized rally organized by the SDF in Douala to protest the election by encircling the home of the protest's leader before it was to begin. Some 30 people were

additionally arrested along the planned protest route. On election day in October, opposition party representatives were expelled from some polling stations by supporters of the CPDM.

B2. 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 resources disadvantages opposition candidates. Opposition parties are highly fragmented, preventing any one of them from becoming a viable alternative to the ruling CPDM. An opposition coalition formed ahead of the October 2018 presidential election, when Akere Muna of the People's Development Front (FDP) withdrew his candidacy to support Kamto, was unable to mobilize enough support to mount a strong challenge Biya.

Frequent harassment, intimidation, and arrests of opposition figures further reduces the ability of opposition parties to gain power through elections.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 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 October 2018 presidential election, effectively denying voters a political choice.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, 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, among other things, the 2017 banning of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone political group. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and some ethnic minorities, such as the Bamiléké, are generally excluded from political processes, and their interests are poorly represented by elected officials.

In practice, women are able to advocate for their interests only through representation in the CPDM. The government has expressed a commitment to increasing women's representation in Parliament. In the National Assembly, 31 percent of deputies are women, while 26 percent of senators are women. However, only 30 percent of registered voters in 2018 were women.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

In principle, laws and policies in Cameroon are created and approved by Parliament and the president. In practice, many policies are adopted by presidential decree. Otherwise, Parliament shows little independence and largely acts as a rubber stamp for the president's policy initiatives. President Biya has extensive executive authority, including wide-ranging appointment powers and strong control over state institutions.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors. Corrupt officials often act with impunity. Initiatives to fight corruption, including the creation of the National Anticorruption Commission (CONAC), have been insufficient. Although a number of former high-level government officials have been successfully prosecuted and imprisoned for corruption, analysts suspect that many such cases were politically motivated and do not reflect a commitment to tackling the systemic nature of the problem.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Decisions, especially those made by presidential decree, are often adopted with little or no public consultation. Cameroon lacks an access to information law, and it is difficult to gain access to government documents or statistics in practice. Despite the launch of an e-governance initiative in 2006, which was tasked with making government data more available online, the websites of most ministries do not provide substantial information.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 12 / 60 (-1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 5 / 16 (-1)

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4 (-1)

Independent and critical journalists face pressure and the risk of detention or arrest in connection with their work. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and the National Communications Council (CNC), a media regulatory body, has a history of harassing journalists and outlets.

In 2018, the government continued to clamp down on media coverage of the Anglophone protest movement. Radio journalist Mancho Bibixy, who was arrested in 2017 on terrorism charges after he advocated for Anglophone rights and criticized government policies, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in May. In October, journalist Michel Biem Tong, who reported on the crisis in the Anglophone regions, was arrested and charged with "glorifying terrorism." He was later among the 289 people pardoned by President Biya who had been arrested in connection with the Anglophone conflict. However, other journalists remained imprisoned or jailed for their reporting at year's end.

A series of internet shutdowns in the Northwest and Southwest Regions that began in early 2017 continued into 2018. Between January 2017 and March 2018, the internet was shut down for a total of 230 days in the Anglophone regions, curtailing free expression and the exchange of information among those impacted.

The national television channel, CRTL, has been criticized for favoring the CPDM in its political coverage. CRTL aired the segment in October that featured fake election observers from Transparency International approving of the conduct of the presidential poll. At year's end, the debunked story remained on CRTL's website.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to an internet shutdown that continued for nearly a year in the Anglophone regions, and the persistent harassment and arrests of journalists, particularly those covering the Anglophone crisis.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Religious freedom is somewhat restricted in northern areas affected by the presence of the Boko Haram militant group, which has carried out violent attacks against places of worship. In 2015, the government banned full-face veils in the Far North Region following suicide bombings that were attributed to veiled women associated with Boko Haram.

There were violent attacks against Roman Catholic clergy, believers, and facilities in 2018 in connection with the conflict in the Anglophone regions. These included the murders and detentions of priests, and the burning of a Catholic primary school in Bamessing.

Separately, the government has at times closed churches in order to encourage resolutions to leadership disputes.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

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. In late 2017, Patrice Nganang, a literature professor at Stony Brook University (State University of New York), was arrested by authorities while attempting to leave Cameroon, following the publication of an article he wrote that was critical of the government. Nganang was released at the end of 2017 and barred from returning to Cameroon.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

Public criticism of the government and membership in opposition political parties can have a negative impact on professional opportunities and advancement. 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.

Authorities have also periodically blocked or slowed access to social networking sites to quash dissent and prevent opposition forces from mobilizing. In October 2018, as the government prepared to announce the election results, access to social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp was slowed by internet service providers.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is subject to significant restrictions. Authorities continued to repress protests in the Anglophone regions in 2018. In March, more than 100 women in the Cameroon People's Party (CPP) were arrested and detained for several days for staging a demonstration to protest the humanitarian crisis in the Anglophone regions. Ahead of October 1, which Anglophone separatists consider their symbolic "independence day," a 48-hour curfew was imposed in the Anglophone regions, and gatherings of more than four people were prohibited. Assembly rights were also curtailed after the election. In November, authorities arrested 20 protesters in Yaoundé who claimed that Maurice Kamto had won the election.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 1 / 4

The influence of civil society has gradually 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 work. In May 2018, six other Anglophone activists received prison sentences after being convicted on terrorism charges. In 2017, the SCNC, an Anglophone political group, was banned for supporting secession.

LGBT organizations have also been targeted by law enforcement. In April, four members of AJO, an NGO that works on behalf of sex workers and LGBT people, were arrested for homosexuality and jailed for a week before the charges were dropped.

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

Trade unions, strikes, and collective bargaining are legally permitted, although unions are still subject to numerous restrictions in the exercise of their rights.

F. RULE OF LAW: 1 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and political influence and corruption weaken courts. Judges are appointed by the president, who may also dismiss them at will. Executive interference can influence judicial proceedings: prosecutors have been pressured to stop pursuing corruption cases against some high-profile officials, while critics allege that corruption charges have been used to punish officials who have fallen out of favor with the regime.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process rights are generally not respected. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace. State security forces have carried out arbitrary detentions in connection with the Anglophone crisis, and in the Far North Region in response to Boko Haram activity. Defendants are frequently not afforded the right to a fair trial, particularly in terrorism cases. French legal norms are regularly imposed upon Cameroonians in Anglophone regions.

F3. 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 threaten the security of millions of people in Cameroon. Clashes between state security forces and separatists intensified in the Anglophone regions in 2018. As of December, homes and buildings in more than 100 villages had been burned by security forces. Both separatists and soldiers have killed scores of civilians in the escalating violence that has brought the country to the brink of civil war.

Although the conflict with Boko Haram deescalated in 2018, insurgents continue to conduct attacks in the Far North Region, and state security forces there have been accused of torturing alleged Boko Haram collaborators, many of whom are held without charge. In July, a video circulated online that showed the extrajudicial executions of two women and two children by soldiers who accused them of involvement with Boko Haram. The video sparked international outrage, and in September, after initially denying that the military was responsible for the crimes, the government announced that seven soldiers had been arrested and would be tried for murder.

In December, President Biya established a National Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) for ex-fighters of Boko Haram and armed Anglophone separatist groups. Analysts are skeptical about whether the committee will be able to effectively address the conflict in the Anglophone regions, given government policies and practices that have exacerbated the crisis there.

F4. 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 Bamiléké 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 not uncommon. The penal code forbids "sexual relations with a person of the same sex" and includes prison sentences of up to five years for the crime. In practice, people are frequently prosecuted with no evidence of sexual activity, but rather on suspicions that they are gay.

The Boko Haram conflict in the Far North Region and the Anglophone crisis has led thousands to flee their homes. As of December 2018, there were approximately 437,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. IDPs struggle to access food, education, and other basic needs, and displaced women commonly face gender-based violence.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

Free movement is difficult in parts of the Far North Region due to Boko Haram activity. Movement in the two Anglophone regions has been impeded by the ongoing crisis there, as well. In September 2018, the governor of the Northwest Region imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in response to separatist attacks. The curfew was temporarily suspended at the end of the year. A 48-hour curfew was also imposed in the Anglophone regions leading up to "independence day" on October 1.

G2. 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. Customary law makes it difficult for women to own property. In many regions, women are still dispossessed of their inheritance rights.

G3. 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 exacerbated the already prevalent practice of child marriage and 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. Domestic violence and rape are widespread, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

G4. 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. Child labor remains common, and child workers are frequently exposed to hazardous working conditions, particularly when collecting scrap metal for sale.

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