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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2020 - Cameroon

NOT FREE

18

/ 100

Political Rights (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/cameroon/freedom-world/2020#PR>) 7 / 40

Civil Liberties (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/cameroon/freedom-world/2020#CL>) 11 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

19 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology. (<https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-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. Security forces use violence to disperse antigovernment protests. The Boko Haram insurgent group continues to attack civilians in northern Cameroon, and security forces responding to the insurgency have been accused of committing human rights violations against civilians. The conflict between security forces and separatists in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions has intensified, resulting in widespread civilian deaths and displacements.

Key Developments in 2019

- Opposition leader Maurice Kamto and several allies were arrested in January after calling for a recount of the 2018 presidential election results. Kamto was charged with insurrection and rebellion in February and stood trial in September, but President Biya ordered his release in October.
- The government also cracked down on the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), which Kamto leads, banning and violently dispersing nationwide rallies throughout the year.
- The conflict in the Anglophone regions wore on, with continued reports of violence by separatists and government forces. Separatists successfully enforced a boycott of schools in the regions, forcing over 4,400 of them to close by August.

- President Biya hosted a national dialogue in an attempt to defuse the Anglophone crisis in October, but separatist leaders declined to participate. Separatist leaders also rejected Parliament's move to grant special status to the regions in December, and reiterated their calls for independence.

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, 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. 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 tainted by irregularities including unsigned results sheets. 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.

The president appoints the prime minister, who lacks power but formally serves as head of government. In January 2019, Biya appointed foreign ministry official Joseph Dion Ngute to the role, replacing Philémon Yang.

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.

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 2018, the government delayed local and legislative elections originally due in October 2018 to October 2019, citing the logistical difficulty of managing presidential, legislative, and municipal elections concurrently. In July 2019, the government delayed those elections to February 2020, giving no reason why. In November, CRM leader Maurice Kamto called for a boycott of the 2020 contests, saying that the authorities were trying to destroy the party.

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 0-4 pts

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

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 2018, despite credible allegations of fraud and intimidation.

The other electoral body, Elections Cameroon (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.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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

The ability to organize in political groups, and their freedom to operate, is subject to the whims of the central government, and opposition leaders risk arrest and imprisonment. In late January 2019, Maurice Kamto and several CRM officials were arrested by security forces after the party held nationwide rallies calling for a recount of the 2018 presidential vote. Kamto was tried on charges of insurrection and rebellion in September, but President Biya ordered his release in October.

Opposition rallies are also frequently prohibited. The government used force to disrupt the CRM's rallies in January, and relied on the same tactics when the party held rallies to call for Kamto's release in June. The government also banned CRM rallies scheduled for April, and sought to do the same when the party scheduled events in three cities in November; 33 people who defied the ban in Yaoundé were arrested.

B2 0-4 pts

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

B4 0-4 pts

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 the 2017 banning of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone political group. LGBT+ people, and some ethnic minorities, such as the Bamileké, are generally excluded from political processes, and their interests are poorly represented by elected officials.

Women can advocate for their interests, but only through participation in the CPDM. The government has expressed a commitment to increasing women's representation in Parliament. In the National Assembly, 35 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

C1 0-4 pts

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 0-4 pts

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

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors. Initiatives to fight corruption, including the creation of the National Anticorruption Commission (CONAC), have been insufficient. A number of former high-level government officials have been successfully prosecuted and imprisoned for corruption, and this activity continued in 2019. In March, the government accused former defense

minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo'o of corruption and the diversion of public funds. However, analysts suspect that many such cases are politically motivated; Mebe Ngo'o was considered a future presidential contender.

C3 0-4 pts

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

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, with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reporting that seven journalists were imprisoned at the end of 2019. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and the National Communications Council (CNC), a media regulatory body, has a history of harassing journalists and outlets. State-run CRTV has been criticized for favoring the ruling CPDM in its coverage.

In May 2019, Paul Chouta, a reporter for news site Cameroon Web, was arrested after a French Cameroonian writer accused him of defamation. In the months before his arrest, Chouta, a government critic, received anonymous threats and was attacked by suspected government agents; Chouta remained imprisoned at year's end, after his trial faced numerous delays.

The government also continued its crackdown on media coverage of the Anglophone crisis in 2019. In August, authorities arrested Chillen Muzik and Television (CMTV) journalist Samuel Ajiekah Abuwe and accused him of collaborating with separatists. Abuwe was transferred to military custody several days after his arrest, and has been held incommunicado since. In September, political analyst and Anglophone activist Abdul Karim Ali was arrested on charges including terrorism and secession. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Ali was denied access to a lawyer before his eventual release in early November.

D2 0-4 pts

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. Kidnappings and attacks against Roman Catholic clergy, believers, and facilities in connection with the conflict in the Anglophone regions are common. The Roman Catholic Church reported that dozens of nuns and priests have been kidnapped by mid-2019, and nine of its clergy were killed.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 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 or discussing its political opponents. In September 2019, local authorities arrested a high school teacher in southern Cameroon for discussing the possibility of Maurice Kamto's involvement in a national dialogue. The teacher was charged with inciting rebellion, but was conditionally released later that month.

Education has been largely curtailed in the Anglophone regions, with separatists enforcing a boycott of schools and threatening violence against teachers who attempt to tend to their students. In August 2019, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that over 4,400 schools were closed in the Anglophone regions.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the majority of schools in the Anglophone regions were closed during the year as a result of the ongoing separatist conflict.

D4 0-4 pts

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.

Social media users and individuals who possess or distribute antigovernment material have also faced arrest. In February 2019, Wilfried Siewe was arrested when Yaoundé police discovered a video of an antigovernment protest on his mobile phone. He was handed a three-year sentence for alleged involvement in prison unrest in August, and faced charges of destabilizing the government at year's end. In April 2019, authorities arrested Magina Nkenkom Kouolitto when she visited Cameroon to attend a wedding before releasing her on bail later that month. Kouolitto, who resides in France, denounced President Biya's nephew in an online video posted in 2018.

Authorities have also periodically blocked or slowed access to social networking sites to quash dissent and prevent opposition forces from mobilizing. In 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

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is subject to significant restrictions, and the authorities have consistently targeted events held by the opposition CRM in 2019. Police responded with force when the party held nationwide rallies in late January, using tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds and arresting over 200 participants. Several participants were wounded, including Michelle Ndoki, a lawyer affiliated with Maurice Kamto.

In June, the CRM held nationwide rallies calling for the release of Kamto and other party officials who were arrested in late January. Authorities resorted to similar tactics to disperse the rallies, injuring at least two participants and arresting over 350 others throughout the country. In November, the government banned meetings scheduled in the cities of Yaoundé, Douala, and Ebolowa. Police assaulted at least 10 demonstrators and arrested a total of 33 people who defied the ban in Yaoundé.

E2 0-4 pts

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 activities. In late 2018, SCNC leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe was detained in Nigeria and was sent back to Cameroon to face charges including secession and terrorism; he and nine followers were convicted in August 2019.

LGBT+ organizations have also been targeted by law enforcement. In 2018, four members of AJO, which works on behalf of sex workers and LGBT+ people, were arrested for homosexuality and jailed for a week before the charges were dropped.

The government has also restricted the work of international NGOs; in April 2019, it denied a HRW researcher entry into the country, offering no reason for its decision.

E3 0-4 pts

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. In early 2018, police arrested 100 participants in a teachers' strike in Yaoundé. Several dockers were injured when police used live ammunition to disperse a mid-2018 strike in the city of Douala.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is subordinate to the justice ministry, and political influence and corruption weaken courts. The president appoints judges, and can 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 0-4 pts

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. French legal norms are regularly imposed upon Cameroonians in Anglophone regions. Defendants are frequently not afforded the right to a fair trial, particularly in terrorism cases.

The government has employed charges of terrorism, rebellion, and insurrection against opposition leaders and separatist supporters in 2019. CRM leader Maurice Kamto was charged with insurrection and rebellion after his party protested Biya's reelection; he was released in October 2019 as the government sought to resolve the separatist crisis. In August 2019, SCNC leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe received a life sentence from a military court for charges of insurrection and terrorism, along with nine supporters. One of Ayuk Tabe's lawyers claimed that the ruling was prearranged, and local activists called the trial a sham.

F3 0-4 pts

**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and 0 /
insurgencies? 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 have continued in the Anglophone regions in 2019. HRW reported that government forces destroyed several hundred homes in these areas, and carried out violent attacks against civilians throughout the year.

Boko Haram also maintained its campaign against the government in 2019, with the militant group launching over 100 attacks in the Far North Region. Amnesty International reported that at least 275 people, most of them civilians, were killed in the first 11 months of the year, and that survivors were mutilated by militants. Security forces operating in the Far North have been accused of torturing alleged Boko Haram collaborators, many of whom have been held without charge.

President Biya has made some recent efforts to resolve these conflicts. In 2018, Biya established a National Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) for ex-fighters of Boko Haram and armed Anglophone separatist groups. In October 2019, Biya held a national dialogue in an attempt to end the conflict, but separatist leaders declined to participate. In December, Parliament granted special status to the Anglophone regions, but separatist leaders rejected the offer and reiterated their calls for independence.

F4 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the 0 /
population? 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 also 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. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted 950,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the country at the end of 2019. IDPs often struggle to access food, education, and other basic needs. Displaced women commonly face 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? 1 / 4

Free movement is difficult in parts of the Far North Region due to Boko Haram activity. Free movement in the two Anglophone regions has also been impeded by the ongoing crisis. Residents have been forced to flee their homes due to the ongoing conflict, and some have resorted to sending their school-age children to the cities of Yaoundé and Douala.

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. In many regions, women are still dispossessed of their inheritance rights.

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 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 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.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2019



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