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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

Cameroon

16
/100

NOT FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	7/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	9/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

18 /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 2020

- The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) dominated legislative elections in February, as well as the country's first-ever regional elections in December.
- Authorities cracked down on the opposition Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) throughout the year, banning their rallies and arresting demonstrators who defied the bans. On September 22, over 500 protesters including two party leaders were arrested in multiple cities and accused of crimes including insurrection. A day before, CRM leader Maurice Kamto was placed on house arrest, where he remained until December 8.
- The conflict in the Anglophone regions wore on, with frequent reports of violence by separatists and government forces. Separatists maintained an atmosphere of terror in the regions, including through deadly attacks on students, teachers, and schools.
- Rights groups and journalists reported a massacre of 21 civilians by government forces and armed ethnic Fulani militiamen in February, in Ngarbuh, Northwest Region. In April, authorities acknowledged some of the events there and pledged to investigate.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority

0 / 4

elected through free and fair elections?	
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The president is 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 tainted 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 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.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The ruling CPDM won 63 of 70 contested seats in March 2018 Senate elections. The opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF), won the remaining 7 seats, all based in the Northwest Region. 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.

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 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, and the incumbent CPDM won all 13 of the seats at stake.

On December 6, 2020, the first-ever regional elections took place despite calls for boycott by opposition parties, who rejected the government's characterization that they would lead to greater regional autonomy in the country, and threats by separatist groups in the Anglophone regions to arrest would-be voters. In the indirect election, a 24,000-member electoral college composed of regional delegates and traditional chiefs chose 900 regional councilors in all 10 regions (90 for each region). Biya's CPDM party won the majority.

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.

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, and such events were frequently banned in 2020, with police at times using force to disperse them. In September, the CRM defied a government ban and staged peaceful protests in multiple cities including Douala and Yaoundé, at which police arrested over 500 party members and supporters. Two CRM officers were detained at the central prison of Yaoundé in connection with the event, and Kamto was placed on house arrest for weeks in apparent connection with the event before being freed in December.

In addition, the government of Cameroon halted a fundraising campaign initiated by Kamto to fight the spread of the coronavirus. The government deemed the effort illegal, ordered two telephone operators to close the mobile accounts opened for the purpose, and rejected donations of protective masks and screening tests.

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; supporters of Ambazonia called 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, and some ethnic minorities, such as the Bamiléké, 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. There were 61 women deputies elected in 2020, an increase of four from the previous election, and women have some ability to advocate for their interests within the CPDM.

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, the 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?

1/4

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

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 no 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, with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reporting that eight journalists were imprisoned at the end of 2020. 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 CPDM in its coverage. The government continued to suppress media coverage of the Anglophone crisis in 2020.

In June 2020, the military acknowledged the death in state custody of journalist Samuel Wazizi, who covered the violent conflict in the Anglophone regions, among other topics. The head of the Cameroon Journalists' Trade Union and a number of independent analysts said Wazizi had been tortured by state forces; his death had not been investigated at year's end.

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 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. In November 2020, Roman Catholic cardinal Christian Tumi was kidnapped by gunmen in Cameroon's Northwest Region, but was freed shortly after.

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. Law lecturer Felix Agbor Bala was dismissed from the University of Buea in May 2020 over an exam question probing the causes of the Anglophone crisis that authorities considered “seditious.”

Academic freedom has been 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. Elsewhere, numerous teachers in 2020 reported acts of violence against them by their students.

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 consequences for 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.

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 2020, notably those staged by the opposition CRM.

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 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.

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.

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
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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 are increasing. In July 2020, then president of the Cameroon Bar Association, Patie Charles Tchakoute, filed a formal complaint with the defense secretary about police assaults against lawyers. Later, in November, hundreds of lawyers who turned out to a Douala bail hearing in support of colleagues being prosecuted for “contempt of court, attempted corruption, and fraud” were assaulted by security forces. In response to this and other incidents, the Cameroon Bar Association went on strike, once from November 30 to December 4, and again indefinitely, beginning December 7.

The government has invoked charges of terrorism, rebellion, and insurrection against opposition leaders and separatist supporters in 2019 and 2020, and they are often detained in the absence of due process and without realistic avenues for challenging their detention. A number of people arrested in the aftermath of the September 2020 CRM antigovernment rallies face charges in military courts.

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. In September, Ambazonian leader Sisiku AyukTabe received a confirmation of his life sentence from a military court for charges of insurrection and terrorism, along with nine supporters. One of AyukTabe’s lawyers claimed that the ruling was prearranged, and local activists called the trial a sham.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because due process protections have collapsed across much of the country.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	0/4
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Active conflicts involving both Boko Haram and Anglophone separatists threaten the security of millions of people in Cameroon. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that government forces destroyed several hundred homes in the Anglophone regions, and carried out violent attacks against civilians throughout the year. Rights groups and journalists reported the massacre of 21 civilians by government forces and armed ethnic Fulani militiamen in February 2020, in Ngarbuh, Northwest Region. In April, authorities acknowledged some of the events there and pledged to investigate.

In August, the Islamist armed group Boko Haram reportedly sent child suicide bombers to a site for displaced people in the Far North region of Cameroon, killing at least 17 civilians. Security forces operating in the Far North Region have been accused of torturing alleged Boko Haram collaborators, many of whom have been held without charge.

In 2018, Biya established a National Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) for ex-fighters of Boko Haram and armed Anglophone separatist groups. Its inaugural session took place in September 2020, in Yaoundé.

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 November 30, 2020, the UN Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that there were 711,056 internationally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and 321,886 in the Far North Region. IDPs often struggle to access food, education, and other basic needs, and displaced women are 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 the 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. Among instances over just a matter of weeks in 2020, at least eight students were killed in an October attack on a private school in Kumba, Southwest Region, perpetrated by likely Anglophone separatists. In a separate incident, children from Bamenda, Northwest Region, were kidnapped on their way home from school; six were released the next day, with several having to be hospitalized after being subjected to torture. On November 4, gunmen attacked a high school, Kulu Memorial College, in Limbe, Southwest Region, ordering students and teachers to remove their clothing before setting the school on fire.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because armed groups have continued to launch deadly attacks against students, teachers, and schools.

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 state and cocoa producer Neo Industry SA in Ntem Valley, in South Province. The decision followed local opposition to Neo's plans to begin development of parts of an ancestral reserve.

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. Cases of domestic violence and rape continue to be widespread in 2020, 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.





On Cameroon

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

15/100 Not Free

Other Years

2022

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