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Freedom in the World 2012 - Cameroon

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 6.0
Civil Liberties: 6
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Longtime president Paul Biya easily won another term in the October 2011 election, securing approximately 78 percent of the vote. A marginalized and divided opposition offered only token resistance during the campaign. Though nearly 80 years old, Biya still has not officially anointed a successor, raising concerns that Cameroon will suffer political upheaval if he dies or becomes incapacitated before vacating office.

Colonized by Germany in the late 19th century, Cameroon was later administered by Britain and France, first through League of Nations mandates and then as a UN trust territory after World War II. Independence for French Cameroon in 1960 was followed a year later by independence for Anglophone Cameroon, part of which opted for union with Nigeria. The rest joined Francophone Cameroon in a federation, which became a unitary state in 1972.

The country's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, oversaw a repressive, one-party system until his resignation in 1982. He was succeeded by Paul Biya, whose Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) did not face multiparty legislative elections until 1992. It failed to win an absolute majority, despite a boycott by the main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF). In 1992, Biya was reelected in a vote that was condemned by international observers.

A 1996 constitutional revision extended the presidential term from five to seven years, and Biya won elections in 1997 and 2004 amid numerous irregularities. The CPDM's victories in 1997 and 2002 legislative and 2002 municipal elections were similarly tainted. Electoral gerrymandering provided the CPDM with significant inroads into the SDF support base in the 2007 legislative and municipal polls, and SDF parliamentary representation decreased to 16 of 180 total seats.

In 2008, Biya secured a constitutional amendment to remove the two-term presidential limit, allowing him to stand for reelection in 2011. Approximately 100 people were killed in clashes with police during subsequent antigovernment riots, as citizens used the opportunity to protest the amendment as well as the rising cost of living.

For much of 2011, Biya refused to commit to running in the October presidential poll, officially entering the race only in early September. The SDF, after pledging to boycott the election, agreed in August to field a candidate. Nevertheless, Biya easily defeated his 22 rivals, claiming 78 percent of the vote. His closest challenger, SDF leader John Fru Ndi, received just 11 percent. However, the president's advancing age and rumored failing health fueled concerns that he would become incapacitated while in office, potentially sparking a succession crisis.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cameroon is not an electoral democracy. Although the 1996 constitutional revisions created an upper chamber for the legislature, a decentralized system of regional government, and a Constitutional Court, none of these provisions have been implemented. A 2008 constitutional amendment removed the limit of two seven-year terms for the president, allowing the incumbent, Paul Biya, to run again in 2011. The president is not required to consult the National Assembly, and the Supreme Court may review the constitutionality of a law only at the president's request. Since 1992, the executive has initiated every bill passed by the legislature. The unicameral National Assembly has 180 seats and is dominated by Biya's CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote for five-year terms.

The National Elections Observatory has little influence. An elections commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), was created in 2006, but commissioners were not named until December 2008. No civil society or opposition members were included, and 11 of the 12 appointees were reputedly CPDM loyalists. Expanded to 18 members in 2011, ELECAM continues to be dominated by CPDM partisans. In March 2010, an amendment was passed requiring ELECAM to collaborate with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization; the move was widely criticized for placing election management into the hands of a ministry loyal to Biya and jeopardizing the commission's transparency. An opposition threat to boycott the 2011 election until the independence of ELECAM was ensured proved empty. Of the 52 individuals who sought to run for president in 2011, 29 were rejected by ELECAM due to procedural irregularities.

There are more than 250 recognized political parties, but Biya's CPDM, with its access to state patronage, dominates. Biya's grip on the CPDM remains strong; during the party's congress in September 2011, he was reelected for another five-year term as party leader. One of his few critics within the CPDM, Ayah Paul Abine, had resigned from the party in January, citing fears for his safety. Continued marginalization of the Anglophone community has fueled a campaign for independence by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). In February 2011, the security forces temporarily detained the SCNC's national chairman, Ayamba Ette Otun, and his son on charges of fomenting secessionist sentiments. Meanwhile, the northern-based Fulani, who once enjoyed political prominence under former president Ahmadou Ahidjo, still resent Biya for a bloody 1984 crackdown on northerners in the armed forces.

Corruption remains endemic in Cameroon. Biya's administration has encouraged cronyism, with members of the president's Beti ethnic group dominating many key positions. Revenues from the oil, gas, and mining sectors are not openly reported. The National Anticorruption Commission, created in 2006, is the country's principal independent anticorruption agency, though its subservience to the president and lack of autonomy undermine its effectiveness. The National Financial Investigations Unit is a separate intelligence unit that tracks money laundering. In recent years, Biya has resumed his 2004 anticorruption initiative, Opération Épervier, under which scores of government officials have been arrested on corruption charges. While the campaign maintained some public support, critics argued that it was being used to eliminate political opponents. Cameroon was ranked 134 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution guarantees free speech, but genuine freedom of expression remains elusive. Although the 1996 constitution ended prepublication censorship, the charter's Article 17 gives officials the power to ban newspapers based on a claimed threat to public order. Libel and defamation remain criminal offenses, and judicial harassment and arrests of journalists and writers have engendered self-censorship. Author Bertrand Teyou – who had been imprisoned in November 2010 for six months, after a trial in which

he had no legal representation, for allegedly insulting the president's wife in a book he had written – was released in April 2011 after a supporter paid his \$4,371 fine. Author and founding member of the Cameroon Writers Association Enoh Meyomesse was arrested in November and charged with attempting to organize a coup, possessing a firearm, and aggravated theft, though he maintained that the arrest was politically motivated. He remained in prison by year's end. There were several reports of journalists being attacked, harassed, and arrested in 2011. In September, special operations police in Yaounde assaulted and seriously injured journalist Ulrich Fabien Ateba Biwole of *Le Jour* newspaper. There is no systematic internet censorship in Cameroon.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses, many professors exercise self-censorship, and some argue that entrance into university requires bribery or the support of a powerful patron.

The requisite administrative authorization for public meetings is often used to restrict freedoms of assembly and association. Meetings of the banned SCNC are routinely disrupted. In May 2010, police violently dispersed hundreds of journalists staging a sit-in to protest the death of journalist Germain S. Ngota Ngota, who died in prison from lack of proper medical care. In February 2011, eight political and civil society activists were arbitrarily arrested, apparently in response to calls for demonstrations to commemorate the deadly 2008 protests. Trade union formation is permitted, but subject to numerous restrictions.

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and the courts are weakened by political influence and corruption. Military tribunals exercise jurisdiction over civilians in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence. Acts of brutality against civilians by Cameroon's elite security unit, Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (BIR), are increasing, although some troops have been dismissed for unnecessary use of force. Prison conditions are poor and sometimes life threatening, with overcrowding, poorly maintained facilities, and widespread violence by guards and among inmates being the norm. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees are routine. In May 2010, a report by the UN Committee Against Torture found that over half of Cameroon's prisoners were in provisional detention, and that many remained in jail much longer than the maximum time for pre-trial detention. The absence of habeas corpus provisions in Francophone civil law further undermines due process. In the north, traditional rulers (*lamibe*) operate private militias, courts, and prisons, which are used against political opponents.

Slavery reportedly persists in parts of the north, and indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, particularly the Baka, face discrimination.

Despite legal protections, and there is widespread violence and discrimination against women, and female genital mutilation is practiced in the Southwest and Far North Regions. Homosexuality is illegal, and in November 2011, three men received five-year prison terms for engaging in homosexual acts. Cameroon is a child labor market and a transit center for child trafficking.

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