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Freedom in the World 2009 - Cameroon

Capital: Yaounde

Population: 18,500,000

Political Rights Score: 6

Civil Liberties Score: 6

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Cameroon received a downward trend arrow due to the authorities' imposition of additional restrictions on the political opposition and President Paul Biya's increasing centralization of power.

Overview

President Paul Biya in April 2008 secured a constitutional amendment that removed term limits and allowed him to stand for reelection in 2011. The change came as the authorities increased pressure on Anglophone groups, including the opposition Social Democratic Front and the separatist Southern Cameroons National Council, and pursued corruption probes against Biya's potential rivals within the government. Also during the year, a taxi drivers' strike triggered broader protests over rising food and fuel prices, among other complaints.

Colonized by Germany in the late 19th century, Cameroon was later administered by Britain and France, first as League of Nations mandates after World War I 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). Biya was reelected the same year in a vote that was roundly condemned by international observers.

Municipal elections in 1996 saw the CPDM lose control of all major councils in the country. A constitutional revision that year extended the presidential term from five to

seven years. Biya won a fourth term in 1997, obtaining 93 percent of the votes cast amid numerous irregularities and a boycott by the main opposition parties. The CPDM led the 1997 legislative elections and the 2002 legislative and municipal elections, which were again tainted by irregularities. Biya secured reelection in 2004 with 75 percent of the vote, and appeals by opposition parties to annul the vote were unsuccessful.

The 2007 legislative and municipal polls followed the existing patterns. Electoral gerrymandering provided the CPDM with significant inroads into the SDF support base, and SDF parliamentary representation decreased from 43 seats in 1997 to 16 seats in 2007. In September 2007, after the elections, Biya dismissed seven cabinet ministers, including three senior ministers who were arrested on corruption charges in 2008. Municipal reruns took place in five municipalities in October 2008, after the Supreme Court annulled the initial results in these areas. The CPDM again dominated the polls.

In January 2008, the governor of Littoral Province banned demonstrations indefinitely in anticipation of opposition to the constitutional amendment. However, a strike in February 2008 by taxi drivers in Douala, located in Littoral Province, spurred antigovernment riots in several cities, including the capital, as people used the opportunity to express grievances with rising food and fuel prices as well as the government's proposal to remove constitutional term limits for the president. These protests were the largest in many years, and the government deployed antiriot forces and police to control the demonstrations. Local human rights groups estimate that approximately 100 people were killed and 1,500 people were arrested.

Biya in April 2008 secured a constitutional amendment that removed the two-term limit for presidents, allowing him to stand for reelection in 2011. In another sign of a closed political system, the trial of SDF leader John Fru Ndi and 21 other party members, who were accused of murdering another SDF member in 2006, began in August 2008. Some party members had been detained since 2006, and two had died in custody within the past year. Critics have denounced the trial as politically motivated. In November 2008, Fru Ndi along with the other party members were released after the tribunal was unable to reach a judgment.

The last Nigerian troops withdrew from the Bakassi peninsula in August 2008, fulfilling a 2002 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that awarded sovereignty over the territory to Cameroon. However, armed groups opposed to Cameroonian rule remained active on the peninsula.

Cameroon has an overwhelmingly poor, mainly agricultural economy. Although the country earned significant debt relief under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, the resources released by the program have not been diverted to antipoverty efforts. In 2008, Cameroon began designing another "poverty alleviation program" with the IMF after it failed to complete the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) program as expected in June 2008, due to the poor implementation of macroeconomic reforms. Cameroon was ranked 144 out of 177 countries in the UN Development Programme's 2007/2008 Human Development Index.

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 those changes have been implemented. An April 2008 constitutional amendment removed term limits for the president, who had been restricted to two seven-year terms. 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, 153 of which are held by the ruling CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote to serve five-year terms.

Elections in Cameroon have been hampered in part by the lack of an independent electoral commission. The National Elections Observatory (NEO) has little influence, and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization effectively controls elections. A new elections commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), was created in December 2006. President Biya eventually appointed the 12 members of the electoral commission in late December 2008, although 11 out of the 12 members are CPDM loyalists. In response, the SDF has launched legal action contesting the body's impartiality.

There are more than 180 recognized political parties in Cameroon, although Biya's CPDM and the Anglophone-led SDF are dominant. The Anglophone-Francophone linguistic divide constitutes the country's most volatile political fault line. Since independence, an Anglophone has been appointed to the important finance, defense, or territorial administration cabinet portfolios. Continued marginalization is fueling a campaign for Anglophone independence, led by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC).

Despite some high-profile convictions of former regime officials, corruption remains endemic. Biya's many years in power and the large number of cabinet ministries have encouraged cronyism, with members of Biya's Beti ethnic group dominating key positions. Cameroon signed on to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in September 2007, but revenues from the oil, gas, and mining sectors are not openly reported. A constitutional provision requiring all top civil servants to declare their assets before and after leaving office has been ignored. Cameroon was ranked 141 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index and 164 out of 181 countries in the World Bank's 2009 Doing Business index.

In early 2008, several senior government officials were investigated on charges of corruption linked to the purchase of a presidential aircraft in 2004. The affair has led to speculation that Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni may come under investigation, which could lead to a major government reshuffle in 2009. The opposition has argued that the anticorruption campaign is being used to eliminate potential presidential challengers.

The constitution guarantees free speech, but genuine freedom of expression remains elusive. Although the 1996 constitution ended prepublication censorship, the charter's Article 17 restricts free expression by giving officials the power to ban newspapers based on a claimed threat to public order. There are no legal provisions guaranteeing equal access to information, and libel and defamation remain criminal offenses. Judicial harassment, arrests, detentions, and torture of journalists have engendered fear and self-censorship. While private radio and television stations operate, and dozens of independent newspapers are published, the lack of structural and editorial independence at the state-owned *Cameroon Tribune* and Cameroon Radio & Television (CRTV) has transformed them into propaganda organs of the ruling party. The pattern of media repression continued in 2008 with the arrests of six journalists. In September 2008, a well-known singer-songwriter and SDF member, Pierre Roger Lambo Sandjo, alias Lapiro de Mbanga, received a three-year prison sentence for allegedly inciting the February 2008 rioting. The private television and radio stations, Equinoxe Télévision, Radio Equinoxe, and Magic FM, were also closed down as a result of critical reporting on the government's crackdown on the February demonstrations. The government has not attempted to restrict or monitor internet communications.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. Although there are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, state security informants operate on university campuses, and many professors exercise self-censorship.

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 October 2008, the chairman of the SCNC, Chief Ayamba Ette Otun, and 24 other members were arrested during a meeting. In December 2008, Cameroonian police violently cracked down on a peaceful demonstration against alleged government corruption. Authorities arrested nine members of the organization that led the demonstration, including its president, along with two journalists. Trade union

formation is permitted, but it is subject to numerous restrictions and government interference.

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and the courts are weakened by extensive political influence and corruption. Military tribunals exercise jurisdiction over civilians in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence, and various intelligence agencies operate with impunity. Torture, ill-treatment of detainees, and indefinite administrative or pretrial detention are routine. The absence of habeas corpus as a fundamental principle in Francophone civil law further undermines due process. In the north, traditional rulers (*lamibee*) operate their own private militias, courts, and prisons, which are used against the regime's political opponents. The Human Rights Commission, created by the government in 1992, has yet to publish a single report.

Slavery reportedly persists in parts of the north, and indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, particularly the Baka (Pygmies), face discrimination. Many laws contain gender-biased provisions and penalties. There is widespread violence and discrimination against women, who often are denied inheritance and property rights. Female genital mutilation is practiced in the Southwest and Far North provinces, and homosexuality is illegal. Cameroon is a market for child labor and a transit center for child trafficking. Abortion is prohibited except in cases of rape or to preserve the life of the mother.

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