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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Cameroon

Not Free

15

/ 100

Political Rights 6 / 40

Civil Liberties 9 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

15 / 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 2023

- In March, the Supreme Court's Chamber of Accounts completed its third audit report of COVID-19 special funds, highlighting nontransparent and ineffective financial management. Despite evidence of numerous irregularities documented in the audit report, in October the government awarded prizes to members of the COVID-19 Task Force.
- In January, journalist Martinez Zogo was kidnapped and killed after making allegations of large-scale corruption connected to public

funds. Many questions about the crime remain unanswered, despite over 20 arrests made in connection with it.

- The conflict in the Anglophone regions wore on, with frequent reports of violence and deaths attributed to both separatists and government forces.

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 is the head of state and is directly elected to a seven-year term in a single voting round and may serve an unlimited number of terms due to a constitutional change made by President Biya in 2008. Biya won a seventh term in the October 2018 presidential election, with 71 percent of the vote in a process characterized 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 marred by irregularities including unsigned results sheets. Intimidation and fear in the Anglophone regions prevented many from casting their votes. Supporters of Biya, who turned 90 in February 2023, have started calling for him to run for an eighth term in 2025.

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.

Elections for 70 senators took place in March 2023 in polls that generated accusations that the ruling CPDM had engaged in vote-buying and other irregularities. Ten political parties took part in the election, but the CPDM won all 70 seats. The opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) had won 7 of the 70 elected seats in the previous poll, in 2018. Biya appointed the remaining 30 senators later in March 2023, including six representing opposition parties.

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 in the National Assembly, winning 139 of the

167 seats. The first-ever regional elections were held in December 2020, despite opposition boycotts and threats from Anglophone separatists. Biya's CPDM 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

Partisan election management bodies compromise the independence of Cameroon's electoral system. The majority of the 11 members of the Constitutional Council, which validates election results and adjudicates election disputes, 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. In August 2023, a group of opposition parties and civil society organizations met to discuss a push for a reform of the country's electoral code.

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, while CPDM marches in support of President Biya are authorized. Several CRM party leaders and other protesters arrested in September 2020 after a peaceful protest remain in detention after sentencing by a military court. In January 2023, a court rejected a petition to release some of the detainees.

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 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 disadvantage opposition candidates. Frequent harassment, intimidation, and arrests of

opposition figures further reduce the ability of opposition parties to gain power through elections.

Opposition parties—including the two largest, the SDF and CRM—remain highly fragmented internally, preventing any one of them from becoming a viable alternative to the ruling CPDM. A 2022 internal reshuffle of the SDF, which created two opposing groups internally, carried over into 2023 with the mass February expulsion of over two dozen high-level party members, triggering a legal battle. Several senior leaders of the CRM were also expelled from their party in 2023, including Michel Ndoki, the prominent vice president of the CRM's women's movement.

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. The Anglophone crisis also affected the 2020 parliamentary, municipal, and regional elections, contributing to very 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. LGBT+ people, some ethnic minorities, and women are generally excluded from positions of political influence, and their interests are poorly represented by elected officials.

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 instructed by the government and adopted by presidential decree, with minimal involvement of the parliament. When involved, Parliament often 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? 0 / 4

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors, despite anticorruption initiatives and the presence of the National Anticorruption Commission (CONAC). Several former high-level government officials are in prison for corruption allegations, though these efforts are often perceived as moves by President Biya to sideline political adversaries. Individuals convicted of crimes have been released by seemingly arbitrary clemency decisions, and corruption charges at times are similarly dropped despite evidence of wrongdoing. In 2022, proceedings against the director of the Autonomous Port of Douala were suspended, reportedly at the president's behest, despite clear irregularities in his awarding of service contracts. Suspicions of misappropriation or embezzlement of funds under certain government budget lines continued to generate controversy, as illustrated by the January 2023 killing of journalist Martinez Zogo after he made public allegations of the misuse of funds.

C3 0-4 pts

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

Decisions, especially those made by presidential decree, are often adopted without public consultation. Cameroon lacks an access to information law, and it is difficult to access government documents or statistics. The Ministry of Finance has started publishing a "citizens budget" intended to make the government budget process more transparent and accessible to citizens, but the websites of most ministries still lack substantial information. Despite the existence of a public procurement ministry, the procurement of public works remains opaque. A constitutional article regarding asset declaration by the president and senior officials offers no means to assess their wealth when entering and leaving office.

In March 2023, the Supreme Court's Chamber of Accounts completed its third audit report into the potential mismanagement of special funds for COVID-19 relief worth 180 billion CFA francs (\$300 million). The report was not officially released to the public but was circulated on social media. The audit pointed out numerous irregularities, including inadequate and sometimes nonexistent accounting documents and overbilling. It concluded that "the management of the Special Fund was neither effective nor transparent." Despite the apparent irregularities, Biya still awarded honorary distinctions to members of the COVID Task Force in October 2023.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Independent and investigative journalists continue to face serious pressure including risk of attack or detention. In March 2022, journalist Paul Chouta, known as a strong critic of the government, was kidnapped by unidentified assailants who assaulted him and left him with severe injuries to his face and ear. In January 2023, radio journalist Martinez Zogo was abducted and killed, apparently after having been tortured; before his kidnapping, he had reported allegations about government corruption involving Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga, a prominent Cameroonian businessman. Many questions remain about Zogo's murder, despite the arrests of Belinga and over 20 other people in connection to the death.

The National Communication Council (CNC), a media regulatory body, has a history of harassing journalists or suspending them on frivolous grounds. State-run Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) has been criticized for favoring the CPDM in its coverage. The government continued to suppress media coverage of the Anglophone crisis.

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 religious facilities in connection with the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions are common. In June 2023, the ministry of territorial administration issued a decree objecting to the creation of a decentralized branch of the Evangelical Church of Cameroon.

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 2021, military security forces detained and tortured Fridolin Nke, a university professor who had recently published a book criticizing the Biya government. Nke was fired from the university of Yaoundé in August 2023. Academic freedom also continues to be 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.

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 parties can have negative consequences on professional and career

advancement. In general, Cameroonians avoid discussing sensitive political issues for fear of reprisals. Such topics include the potential return to a federal system that would grant the Anglophone regions more autonomy.

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 2023, especially those initiated by the opposition parties CRM and Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (PCRN). In May 2023, Maurice Kamto of the CRM was permitted to hold a meeting in Yaoundé for the first time since 2018.

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 is weak, 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 them access to the country. This includes even medical operations such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), which was forced to withdraw from the Northwest Region in August 2021.

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 when exercising their rights. Strikes are theoretically permitted, but in practice, the government has used force to disrupt them. In 2023, continued efforts by teachers to strike for improved working conditions faced official repression.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and corruption and political influence weakens the courts. The president appoints judges and

can dismiss them at will. Prosecutors have been pressured to stop pursuing corruption cases against certain high-profile officials.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

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 continue to be reported. The government has also invoked charges of terrorism and insurrection against opposition leaders and separatist supporters, and they are often detained in the absence of due process and without realistic avenues for challenging their detention.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

In 2023, active conflicts involving both Boko Haram and Anglophone separatists continued to threaten the security of millions of people and have forced large numbers of people to flee their homes. At the end of 2023, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that there were over 1.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country. In a July 2023 report, Amnesty International documented serious human rights violations committed by separatists, militias, and government forces in the Anglophone regions. Later in July, at least 10 civilians were killed by gunmen in the Northwest region in a one-day massacre.

Prison conditions are harsh, marked by extreme overcrowding and poor sanitation. Inmates often face a lack of access to food, water, and medical care. Police brutality remains a problem, including the abuse and torture of detainees.

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 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 LGBT+ individuals is rife, and violence against them 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 under draconian anti-LGBT+ laws on suspicion that they are gay. In June 2023, a planned trip to

Cameroon by France's ambassador for LGBT+ rights to attend an event about sexuality and gender was canceled after the Cameroonian government opposed his visit.

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 Boko Haram activity, and in the two Anglophone regions due to the ongoing crisis. The latter 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 continued to be common throughout 2023.

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. Powerful individuals have effectively evicted people from their homes as part of large land purchases. These properties typically have dubious land titles, often granted with the complicity of administrative authorities.

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 the sexual abuse of minors in the Far North Region. Customary law can allow rapists to escape punishment if they marry their victim. 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 are widespread, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

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. Women and children, who make up 60 percent of IDPs, have been the most affected by internal displacement driven by the Anglophone crisis and have been exposed to sexual violence and lack of access to job opportunities and education.

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