



Freedom in the World 2016 - Cameroon

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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 24

Freedom Rating: 6.0

Political Rights: 6

Civil Liberties: 6

Quick Facts

Capital: Yaounde

Population: 23,739,000

GDP/capita: \$1,429.30

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

In 2015, Cameroon continued to struggle with high youth unemployment, an aging political leadership, and the lack of an obvious successor to President Paul Biya in the ruling party. Moreover, the security situation in the country's north and east remained precarious throughout the year. The Far North province, which borders the stronghold of Boko Haram in Nigeria, continues to face incursions from the Islamic militant group. Instability in neighboring Central African Republic (CAR), which shares a 500-mile-long border with Cameroon, has also led to increasing confrontations between Cameroon's military and rebel groups. Since the inauguration of Nigeria's new president in May 2015, cooperation in fighting Boko Haram has grown and some territory has been reclaimed from the group. However, Boko Haram launched a number of deadly attacks in Cameroon throughout the year, claiming the lives of more than 400 people.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 9 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

Now in his fourth decade in power, Biya retains a strong hold on Cameroon. His Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) controls the Senate, the National Assembly, and municipal councils by large majorities. In the 2011 presidential elections, Biya beat out nearly two

dozen opponents to claim 78 percent of the vote; the poll was widely viewed as tainted. Despite his advanced age of 83, Biya has not groomed a successor. There is no provision for a presidential runoff, which impedes the ability of opposition candidates to unseat the incumbent.

Cameroon has a 180-seat National Assembly and established the 100-seat Senate in 2012; representatives serve five-year terms. In 2013, Cameroon held National Assembly elections, direct elections for municipal councilors, and long-delayed elections for its first Senate. The CPDM won 56 of the elected Senate seats, while the main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), won the remaining 14. Biya appointed an additional 30 senators, three from each of the country's 10 regions. The CPDM took 148 assembly seats and won 305 of the country's 360 communes. While some observers characterized the elections as free and fair, there were also accusations that the CPDM paid bribes to certain municipal councilors of up to \$90 each.

Cameroon adopted a new electoral code in 2012 that introduced biometric voter registration. However, Biya still chooses the members of the electoral commission.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

Despite having almost 300 political parties, Cameroon remains essentially a one-party state. The numerous opposition parties often have aging leaderships and are highly fragmented, preventing any one from becoming a credible threat to the ruling CPDM or forming effective coalitions. The SDF is the largest opposition party and has a national base; other opposition groups suffer from ethnic and regional biases that limit their membership.

State patronage and Biya's control of high-level appointments help the CPDM retain power. The state also controls the release of mandated public funding for political parties, as well as the salaries of village chiefs, who in turn control their local votes.

The Baka minority is not represented in the legislature or in the top levels of government.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors. According to a Transparency International survey of citizens of 28 African countries in 2015, Cameroon reported the second-highest rate of bribery out of all countries surveyed, with 48 percent of respondents having to pay bribes to access public services. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (CONAC) was established in 2006, but its work has been regularly stymied by interference from the executive branch. In November 2015, CONAC published its annual report covering the year 2013, more than a year late. Its release was reportedly delayed after Biya attempted to pressure CONAC to omit high-profile officials named in the report by withholding permission for its publication. Biya ultimately approved the report's release, which revealed systemic corruption across multiple ministries and placed blame on a number of powerful cabinet officials. In a more positive development, CONAC reported receiving its highest-ever number of complaints from the public in 2015, which according to officials reflected not an expansion of corruption but increasing willingness on the part of citizens to report corrupt behavior.

Since late 2013, Cameroon has been classified as compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which asks countries to submit reports detailing the proceeds they have gained from the extraction of their natural resources. In July 2015, Cameroon's EITI report listed for the first time the names of the legal owners of licenses for exploration of natural resources. Cameroon was ranked 130 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 15 / 60 (-1)*D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16*

The constitution guarantees free speech, and there are some 500 newspapers and 100 radio and television stations. However, genuine freedom of expression remains elusive. The constitution gives officials the power to ban newspapers based on a claimed threat to public order. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and the National Communications Council (CNC) has a history of harassing independent journalists and outlets.

Several journalists were arrested and detained in 2015. In July, Ahmed Abba, a Nigerian reporter for the Hausa service of Radio France International, was arrested in the Far North region and subsequently interrogated over his reporting on the activities of Boko Haram. He was denied access to a lawyer until October, and he remained imprisoned without charge at year's end. In August, Simon Ateba, a Cameroonian reporter who had been living in Nigeria, was arrested upon returning to Cameroon to report on conditions in a refugee camp in the Far North. He was detained for four days. In September, a photographer for the newspaper *Génération Libre* was arrested for photographing police as they shut down a workshop being given by a civil society group. He is facing a number of pending charges, and as of December his trial had been postponed three times. In December, the government informed two journalists at different print publications that they would face charges before a military court for "failing to report on a matter affecting state security" following a 2014 incident in which they declined to publish unsubstantiated reports on the activities of CAR militants in the country.

There are no restrictions on internet use, but penetration is low, at about 20 percent in 2015.

Cameroonians can exercise religious freedom with generally little government interference. Religious groups are required to register with the government, though many operate unencumbered without official registration. In July, the government banned Muslim women from wearing full face veils in the Far North province following two suicide bombings in the region. Muslims were also prohibited from holding large gatherings to commemorate the end of Ramadan.

There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses. Public criticism of the government and membership in opposition political parties can have a negative impact on professional opportunities and advancement.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 3 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association, while legally protected, are subject to significant restrictions, including a requirement that organizers notify the government before assemblies take place. In practice, this policy leads to frequent suppression of the right to free assembly. In July 2015, there were isolated protests on the occasion of French president Francois Hollande's visit to Cameroon. Many citizens feel France exerts undue political and economic influence on the country.

The influence of civil society has gradually weakened over the years, with many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) relying entirely on foreign assistance and others coopted or overtly supported by the regime. Other NGOs are no more than a registered name and a website.

Trade unions, strikes, and collective bargaining are permitted, and there is a growing public sector trade union movement, though unions are still subject to numerous restrictions. In June 2015, two unions representing medical personnel at public hospitals called a strike to demand improvements to their severely dilapidated facilities and equipment, as well as salary payments that had been

delayed by as much as a year. The strike persisted for nearly two weeks and caused significant disruptions to medical service delivery before the government granted some concessions.

F. Rule of Law: 1 / 16 (-1)

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and political influence and corruption weaken courts. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace, and there are reports of arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of activists. The security forces act with impunity for human rights violations including excessive use of force, torture and other abuse, and extrajudicial executions. Prisons are overcrowded and conditions are sometimes life threatening. Between March and May 2015 alone, 40 prisoners died in the Maroua prison due to overcrowding and poor sanitation. The prison has no running water and only 20 latrines for over 1,200 inmates. Torture and abuse of detainees are widespread. In June, 84 children who had been held since being arrested in December 2014 from their Qur'anic schools – which the government accused of being fronts for Boko Haram – were released.

Boko Haram launched regular attacks against civilians throughout the year, resulting in more than 400 deaths and hundreds more injured and abductions. In one of the worst incidents, more than 90 civilians were killed and 500 wounded in February when militants raided the town of Fotokol near the Nigerian border, slaughtering women and children, burning houses of worship, and pillaging food and livestock. The Cameroonian government has responded to such attacks with indiscriminate violence and lack of regard for the rights and safety of civilians. In 2015, over 1,000 suspects were arbitrarily detained, including teens and young boys, who have been housed in inhumane conditions. Many suspects have died while in custody and 130 remained unaccounted for at year's end.

In July 2015, the Cameroonian government began forcibly repatriating 15,000 Nigerian refugees who had fled Boko Haram violence in their home country. In December there were estimated to be almost 70,000 Nigerian refugees remaining in the country, in addition to more than 250,000 refugees from Central African Republic.

The roughly 30,000 members of the Baka pygmy community face discrimination in Cameroon. Many are born in isolated forest areas and lack birth certificates needed to obtain a national identity card, which excludes them from many government services.

Discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is also rife. The penal code forbids "sexual relations with a person of the same sex" and includes prison sentences of up to five years. In practice, people are prosecuted with no evidence of sexual activity, but rather on suspicions that they are gay.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Travel is largely unrestricted, though Boko Haram activity in Cameroon's Far North has increased insecurity in the region.

Cameroon's ranking in the World Bank's 2016 *Doing Business* report dropped to 172 out of 189 economies. Agribusinesses operate with little or no consultation with local inhabitants, and a lack of transparency means people are usually unaware of potential environmental hazards. Concerns have been raised about the government's failure to recognize indigenous forest peoples' right to prior consent when logging concessions are granted.

The constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, but traditional legal values often take precedence and do not always provide women full rights. Although the penal code criminalizes rape against women, perpetrators are declared innocent if the victim has reached puberty and

freely consents to marriage. Female genital mutilation is still practiced, particularly in isolated areas of the extreme north, east, and southwest regions. Women are also traditionally barred from land ownership in Cameroon's predominately agricultural economy, creating a major obstacle to economic independence. A lack of inheritance rights further encourages dependency on men and can leave widows and orphans destitute. Women won 56 National Assembly seats in the 2013 elections, a significant increase over previous years, and 20 Senate seats.

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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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