

Freedom in the World 2014 - Cameroon

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2014 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

OVERVIEW

In April 2013, Cameroon elected its first Senate – a body that had been established under a series of constitutional reforms in 1996, but had not yet been realized. The body, however, has little authority; it is unable to reject presidential appointments or conduct investigations of the executive branch. Elections for municipal councilors and members of the National Assembly were held on September 30, resulting in landslide wins for President Paul Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM).

Biya turned 80 in 2013, and also began his fourth decade in office. His grip on power remains undiminished, and, despite rumors of ill health, he has suggested that he plans to run for the presidency again in 2018. Biya has not groomed a successor, and fears persist that his death in office would create a power vacuum. However, the election in June of a Senate president, 79-year-old Marcel Niat Njifenji, provided for a constitutional successor who would serve as a placeholder until elections could be held.

The persecution of those suspected of homosexual activity continued unabated in 2013. A prominent gay rights activist was murdered in Yaoundé in July.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 8 / 40 (+1)

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12 (+1)

Biya determines Cameroon's electoral calendar. On April 14, 2013, the country held long-delayed elections for its first Senate, which has 100 members. Seventy senators were indirectly elected by 10,636 members of the country's 360 municipal councils, while 30 senators were appointed by Biya, three from each of the country's 10 regions. The CPDM won 56 of the elected seats, while the main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), won the remaining 14. The SDF leader, John Fru Ndi, lost his Senate bid in the party's northwestern stronghold, an embarrassing defeat that pointed to a possible generational shift in party leadership. Fru Ndi accused CPDM leaders of vote-buying.

Direct elections for municipal councilors and the 180-seat National Assembly were held on September 30 after three postponements and a year of delay. Twenty-nine political parties took part in the legislative elections and 35 in the municipal elections. Results released in October showed that the CPDM took 148 of the 180 assembly seats; the SDF took 18, and smaller parties took the remainder. The CPDM won 305 of the 360 contested municipal council seats. Both the April and the September elections were generally described by observers as free and fair.

Presidential elections in 2011, in which Biya claimed 78 percent of the vote, were widely viewed as tainted, as had been previous presidential, legislative, and municipal elections. The country's electoral commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), had been formed in 2006 to address concerns about the fair management of previous elections. The commission's board remains dominated by appointees with close ties to the ruling party, despite the 2011 appointment of six additional board members with ties to civil society and the clergy. ELECAM introduced biometric voter registration for the September 30 National Assembly elections, which was credited with raising both voter registration and participation to new levels. Some 70 percent of the country's 5.4 million registered voters reportedly went to the polls.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

Despite having almost 300 political parties, Cameroon remains essentially a one-party state controlled by Biya. The country's numerous opposition parties remain highly fragmented, preventing any one from becoming a credible threat to the CPDM; efforts to form loose coalitions of rival parties have failed. The SDF is the largest opposition party and has a national base, but other opposition groups suffer from ethnic and regional biases that sharply limit their membership.

State patronage and Biya's control of high-level appointments help his CPDM retain its hold on power, as does de facto state control over the timing of the release of mandated public funding for campaigning political parties and the government's payment of village chiefs' salaries; voting recommendations by village chiefs are often still followed absolutely.

Several political rivals of Biya have been imprisoned on corruption charges. Critics raised questions about the timing of the release after three years' imprisonment of Haman Adama, the former minister of basic education; charges against her were dropped September 19 after she paid back to the government the money it said she had taken. Just days after her release and days prior to the municipal and National Assembly elections, Adama joined CPDM campaign activities in her home town, the country's northern city of Garoua, where she was popular and where support for the CPDM was weak.

The Baka people, who face discrimination in Cameroon, are not represented in either house of parliament or in the top levels of government.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

Corruption remains systemic. Generous fuel subsidies placate the car-owning middle and upper-middle classes. Biya initiated an anticorruption campaign called Opération Épervier, or "Operation Sparrowhawk," in 2006, but critics have accused him of using it to remove potential political opponents. In September 2012, Marafa Hamidou Yaya, a former minister and presidential hopeful whom Biya had fired in 2011, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for embezzlement. In October 2013, a court sentenced former prime minister Inoni Ephraim and former minister of state Atangana Mebara to 20 years in prison for corruption. The two had been charged with embezzling millions of dollars from state-run companies while in office.

Cameroon ranked 47 out of 58 countries worldwide and 14 out of 17 African countries included in the 2013 Resource Governance Index of revenue transparency and accountability in the oil, gas, and mining sectors. Cameroon was ranked 144 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 16 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16

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. Defamation remains a criminal offense; in June, a reporter was fined and briefly jailed after being convicted of criminal defamation for reporting in 2011 that the wife of a musician had been arrested; the editor of the weekly *Paroles* magazine served two months in prison following criminal defamation charges for reporting on allegations of mismanagement at a Douala bus company. In September, the National Communications Council banned 11 media outlets for what it described as ethics violations; the move followed a similar announcement from the council in April, when it had banned two television programs and three radio programs, and suspended seven journalists. There are no restrictions on internet use, but internet penetration is very low, at just over 6 percent in 2013.

While there is general religious freedom, the government in 2013 shut down dozens of Pentecostal churches, calling them a security threat. 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 led to frequent suppression of the right to free assembly. In July, about 80 members of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a banned organization that

advocates for the partition of Cameroon's English-speaking south from the rest of the country, were arrested while attending a meeting in a private home. Civil society is growing, but organizations can face stiff government opposition if they become too critical. Trade unions, strikes, and collective bargaining are permitted, but subject to numerous restrictions.

F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and courts are weakened by political influence and corruption. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace.

The security forces act with impunity for human rights violations that include excessive use of force, torture and other abuse, and extrajudicial executions. Prisons are overcrowded and conditions are sometimes life threatening, and torture and abuse of detainees is widespread.

In February, a French family was kidnapped and held for two months by members of the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram in the Waza National Park in Cameroon's far north. A Nigerian government report indicated that the abductors had received a \$3 million ransom, but did not indicate the money's source.

Discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is rife. Article 347 of the penal code forbids "sexual relations with a person of the same sex," but in practice, most people are prosecuted with no evidence of actual sexual activity, but rather on suspicion of being gay. There are persistent reports of forced anal exams as well as other forms of abuse. On July 15, Eric Ohena Lembembe, the executive director of the Cameroon Foundation for AIDS, was found murdered in Yaoundé, his neck broken, feet smashed, and face burned with an iron. Two prominent Cameroonian lawyers who regularly defend people accused of homosexuality, Alice Nkom and Michel Togué, have received threats, including against the safety of their children, and Togué's office was burglarized in June. There was a suspicious fire at an HIV-prevention center in Douala.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Travel is largely unrestricted, although Nigerian militant activity in Cameroon's far north has increased insecurity in the region. Bribery is commonplace and operates in all sectors, from gaining school admissions to fixing traffic infractions. There were reports that Cameroonians seeking to resettle abroad could base fraudulent asylum claims on bogus police reports and medical records they had purchased, and even on news articles alleging persecution that were written in exchange for bribes.

In recent years, Cameroon has bolstered its commercial legal system in a bid to make contracts easier to enforce. Yet Cameroon still ranked 175 out of 189 countries included in the World Bank's 2014 rankings on the ease of enforcing contracts, and 168 in the World Bank's 2014 rankings on the ease of doing business. 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 won 56 National Assembly seats in the September elections, a significant increase, and 20 Senate seats.

Despite an anti-human trafficking law passed in 2011, 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 have been subject to forced labor and forced prostitution in Europe.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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