



## Freedom in the World - Cameroon (2010)

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**Capital:**  
Yaounde

**Population:**  
18,879,000

**Political Rights Score: 6 \***

**Civil Liberties Score: 6 \***

**Status: Not Free**

### Overview

**The government continued to resist electoral reforms in 2009, and the opposition Social Democratic Front party launched a legal challenge to the nomination of election commissioners who it argued were ruling party loyalists. Restrictions on the press also continued during the year, but the publication of a critical report by the government-created National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms marked a step toward open public discussion.**

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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). Also in 1992, Biya was reelected in a vote that was condemned by international observers.

Municipal elections in 1996 led the CPDM to lose control of all major councils in the country. A constitutional revision that year extended the presidential term from five to seven years, and Biya won subsequent presidential 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 seats, from 22 in 2002 and 43 in 1997.

In 2008, Biya secured a constitutional amendment to remove the two-term presidential limit set in 1996, allowing him to stand for reelection in 2011. However, strike action by taxi drivers in Douala that year spurred broader antigovernment riots in several cities, as citizens used the opportunity to protest the president's move as well as the rising cost of living. The protests were the largest in many years, and local human rights groups estimated that 100 people were killed and 1,500 arrested as riot police clashed with the protesters.

In a June 2009 cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni was replaced by Philemon Yang, another Anglophone and CPDM politician. The defense minister, Remy Ze Meka, was also replaced. The ousted officials had both been linked to a corruption scandal involving the purchase of a presidential aircraft in 2004.

The trial of SDF leader John Fru Ndi and 21 other party members, who were accused of murdering another SDF member in 2006, was postponed indefinitely in July 2009. Many party members had been held in pretrial detention since 2006, and two had died in custody. Critics had denounced the trial as politically motivated.

### **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 1996 limit of two seven-year terms for the president, allowing President 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, 153 of which are held by the ruling CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote to serve five-year terms.

The National Elections Observatory (NEO) has little influence, and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization effectively controls elections. An elections commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), was created in 2006, but the commissioners were not named until December 2008. No civil society or opposition members were included, and 11 out of the 12 appointees were reputedly CPDM loyalists. The SDF launched legal action in January 2009 to contest the body's impartiality.

There are more than 180 recognized political parties, but Biya's CPDM and the Anglophone SDF are dominant. Continued marginalization of the Anglophone community is fueling a campaign for independence led by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). In October 2009, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights ruled on a six-year case brought by the SCNC against the government, dismissing the SCNC's secessionist claims while simultaneously condemning discrimination against Anglophones.

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 the president's Beti ethnic group dominating key positions. Cameroon signed on to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 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. In June 2009, a French nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development (CCFD), published a report alleging the embezzlement of public funds by Biya and his relatives. Biya's lavish lifestyle came under more scrutiny in September 2009, when it emerged that he was spending

\$40,000 a day on 43 hotel rooms during a vacation in France. Cameroon was ranked 146 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index and 171 out of 183 countries in the World Bank's 2010 Doing Business 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 have engendered self-censorship. Editor Lewis Medjo of *La Detente Libre* was sentenced in January 2009 to three years in prison for publishing a story about the president's alleged attempts to manipulate the Supreme Court. Jean-Bosco Talla, editor of the private weekly *Germinal*, received death threats after republishing the CCFD's report on corruption in June; he was then detained in December and given a suspended one-year jail sentence on a charge of insulting the president, after *Germinal* published excerpts from a banned book. Separately, a military court in June sentenced two journalists to five years in prison after their paper, *La Nouvelle*, published articles that were critical of the former defense minister. The journalists were not present at their own trial. The government has not attempted to restrict or monitor internet communications.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but 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 April 2009, 50 members of the group were arrested for allegedly holding an illegal public meeting. 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, and various intelligence agencies operate with impunity. Torture, ill-treatment of detainees, and lengthy pretrial detention are routine. In August 2009, the government-created National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms published a report that was highly critical of the government and detailed appalling prison conditions. The absence of habeas corpus provisions in Francophone civil law further undermines due process. In the north, traditional rulers (*lamibee*) 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 (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 Regions, and homosexuality is illegal. Cameroon is a child labor market and a transit center for child trafficking. Abortion is prohibited except in cases of rape or to preserve the life of the mother.

*\*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*