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World Report - Cameroon

- Area: 475,442 sq km
- Population: 19.6 million (July 2010)
- Language: French, English
- Head of state: President Paul Biya, since 1982

Indiscriminate repressive measures against the media are now a thing of the past but sustainable improvements in freedom of information are still hard to achieve. Journalists and news media are often exposed to police excesses, score settling between rival politicians and judicial corruption.

The Cameroonian media are clearly dynamic but journalists who dare to cross the red lines set by the 1996 social communication law are still taking a risk. Government and judicial censorship has been abolished for the past 15 years, but the criminal code continues to provide for severe punishments for media offences. A libellous article can still land a reporter or newspaper editor in prison.

The archaic laws make no provision for online media, do not distinguish media offences from common law crimes, give government officials too much power over the media and do not accord enough protection to access to information and the confidentiality of sources.

More than ten journalists have been prosecuted in connection with their work in the past five years. While making concessions, above all to improve its image in the eyes of its

foreign donors, the government keeps trying to exercise increasingly aggressive control over the media. The armed forces, corruption and secessionist desires in the English-speaking part of the country are all highly sensitive subjects.

In Cameroon, as in other African countries, poverty and a difficult economic environment have fostered the emergence of media that are often corrupt and easily manipulated. Unscrupulous newspaper publishers and editors are sometimes also guilty of excesses. In 2006, for example, the Cameroonian media were divided over a series of scandal-mongering stories about "the republic's homosexuals" in several low-circulation newspapers, which appalled many journalists.

Under the specious pretext of concern for "public health" in a country where homosexuality is a crime, the participating newspapers splashed with headlines about "deviants" who had secured senior positions thanks to supposed "favours." Their "information" consisted of nothing but gossip and slurs. The authorities complain about the country's "gutter press" but use it to fight their political battles.

Under such circumstances, media freedom is fragile and must be monitored closely. The death of Germain **Ngota Ngota**, a newspaper editor usually referred to as Bibi Ngota, in Kondengui, Yaoundé's main prison, in April 2010 dealt a blow to the country's image. Firstly, it served as reminder that a journalist could be sent to prison in Cameroon. And secondly, it drew attention to the fact that he would not get adequate medical treatment if he were. The investigation into his death tried to clear the government of any blame.

Although press freedom is a reality in Cameroon, given the media landscape's diversity and the outspoken tone often used by its journalists, many reforms are needed to protect journalists and combat the threats to which they are exposed. Reporters Without Borders calls for the adoption of a new media law and the decriminalization of media offences.

Updated in October 2012