



Freedom in the World - Cameroon (2007)

Population:
17,300,000

Capital:
Yaounde

Political Rights Score: 6 *
Civil Liberties Score: 6 *
Status: Not Free

Overview

President Paul Biya, who is serving his fifth consecutive term in office, made only limited progress on his pledge to combat widespread corruption, though Cameroon met prescribed economic targets to qualify for significant debt relief in 2006. Nigeria complied with the International Court of Justice ruling on the Bakassi Peninsula by withdrawing its troops and turning administrative control of the northern part of the peninsula over to Cameroon in August 2006. Since the handover, the Nigerian government has alleged harassment of Nigerian residents by Cameroon military forces.

Previously a German colony, Cameroon was seized during World War I and divided between Britain and France. Distinct Anglophone and Francophone areas were reunited at independence in 1961. During the three decades that followed, Cameroon was ruled under a repressive one-party system.

Prime Minister Paul Biya succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo as president in 1982. In 1994, the constitution extended the presidential term to seven years and allowed Biya to run for a fourth term in 1997. He won with 93 percent of the vote, though numerous irregularities and a boycott by the three major opposition parties compromised the credibility of the election.

The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) dominated legislative and municipal elections in 2002 that lacked transparency, despite the creation of the National Observatory of Elections to oversee their conduct. In the June 2002 parliamentary elections, the ruling CPDM increased the number of its seats in the 180-member National Assembly from 116 to 149. The main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), won 22 seats, down from the 43 it had held previously. The Supreme Court ordered a rerun of municipal elections in six constituencies where massive fraud was proven in 2003. Observers claimed that subsequent voting in June 2004 was equally flawed, with the ruling CPDM winning the same five seats.

Biya won the presidential elections in October 2004 with 75 percent of the vote. The two opposition candidates charged fraud and appealed unsuccessfully to the Supreme Court for the election to be annulled. Although turnout approached 80 percent, only 4.6 million of the estimated 8 million Cameroonians eligible to vote were registered. Many others attempted to cast ballots but were turned away.

because their names did not appear on the voter rolls. Cameroon does not have independent electoral commission.

UN-brokered talks between Nigeria and Cameroon in 2006 resulted in Nigeria's agreement to hand over sovereignty of the disputed oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula in accordance with a 2002 International Court of Justice ruling in Cameroon's favor. Nigeria completed the withdrawal of its troops and formally transferred control of the northern part of the peninsula to Cameroon in August 2006. The rest of the peninsula will remain under Nigerian civil administration until 2008, in line with the court's ruling. Most of the estimated 150,000 to 300,000 predominately Nigerian inhabitants who were given the option of resettling in Nigeria or remaining under Cameroonian authority chose to stay. Since the handover, some Nigerian residents have alleged harassment and intimidation by Cameroon's security forces, including demands for payment of back taxes, seizure of property, and beatings. Nigerian government complaints led to the creation of a special mixed committee to investigate the charges.

Biya's long years in power have encouraged high levels of corruption and cronyism. His bloated administration counts more than 60 government ministries. Key positions in the government and military are generally held by members of Biya's Bulu-Beti ethnic group.

Cameroon is overwhelmingly poor with a mainly agricultural economy. Petroleum products comprise half of all exports, though oil production has declined since 1986. Since joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2005, Cameroon's national oil company has begun publishing production, sales, and revenue data.

The government launched a new anticorruption drive in January 2006, two weeks after firing two magistrates accused of graft. Cameroon met economic targets set by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 2006, which enabled the country to qualify for significant debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cameroon is not an electoral democracy. Rampant voter intimidation, manipulation, and fraud have marked both presidential and legislative elections. Cameroon's centralized government is dominated by a strong presidency. The president is not required to consult the National Assembly, and the judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice. The Supreme Court may review the constitutionality of a law only at the president's request. President Paul Biya's current seven-year term will end in 2011. International observers reported that the 2004 presidential poll lacked credibility but reflected the will of the voting population.

The unicameral National Assembly has 180 seats, 149 of which are held by the ruling CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote to serve five-year terms, although the president has the authority to either lengthen or shorten the term of the legislature. Legislative elections last held in 2002 were characterized by

significant irregularities, and the next elections are scheduled for 2007. Cameroon's constitution calls for an upper chamber for the legislature, to be called a Senate, but it has yet to be established. A mandated Constitutional Court exists in name only.

There are more than 180 recognized political parties in Cameroon, although Biya's CPDM and the Anglophone-led SDF are dominant and the hundreds of smaller political and civic organizations have little effect on public policy or government decision-making processes. The Anglophone-Francophone linguistic distinction constitutes the country's most potent political division. At least one Anglophone group, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), advocates secession from the country.

Cameroon was ranked 138 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's (TI) 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index. According to TI, government corruption is rife within the judiciary, police, customs service, and educational sector.

There are no legal guarantees on free speech in Cameroon, though there are dozens of private radio stations and several hundred independent newspapers that publish on an irregular basis. The government tightly controls both broadcast and print media, and tough criminal libel laws have in the past, though not recently, been used to silence regime critics. In 2006, an editor of a privately owned weekly was detained by military security for several days and only released after drafting a letter apologizing to President Biya and the defense minister for reporting on detailed corruption and mismanagement in the armed forces. Self-censorship among broadcast and print journalists is common, partly in response to instances of security forces arresting, detaining, physically abusing, threatening, and otherwise harassing journalists. The government has not attempted to restrict or monitor internet communication, however.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. Although there are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, state security informants reportedly operate on university campuses, and many professors fear that participation in opposition political parties could harm their careers.

Security forces regularly restrict freedom of assembly and limit freedom of association by members of nongovernmental organizations and political parties, often through the use of violence. Meetings of members of the banned SNSC are routinely disrupted. Trade union formation is permitted, but is subject to numerous restrictions. Workers have the right to strike but only after arbitration, and the government maintains the right to overturn final decisions made in this process.

The courts are highly subject to political influence and corruption. The executive branch controls the judiciary and appoints provincial and local administrators. Military tribunals may exercise jurisdiction over civilians in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence. Various intelligence agencies operate with impunity, and opposition activists are often held without charge or disappear while in custody. Indefinite pretrial detention under extremely harsh conditions is permitted either after a warrant is issued or in order to "combat banditry." Torture

and ill-treatment of prisoners and detainees are routine, and inmates routinely die in prison. Amnesty International called for an investigation into reports that dozens of extrajudicial executions were carried out in 2002 as part of an anticrime campaign. Despite repeated requests, the Cameroonian government has never granted entry to Amnesty International's representatives. In the north, traditional chiefs known as *lamibee* control their own private militias, courts, and prisons, which are used against the regime's political opponents.

Cameroon's population consists of nearly 200 ethnic groups. The Beti and Bula ethnic groups dominate the civil service and state-run businesses. Slavery reportedly persists in parts of the north, and discrimination exists against indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, particularly the Baka.

Approximately one-fourth of Cameroonians are Anglophone. Anglophone groups claim systemic discrimination, though some Francophone groups complain of similar treatment. The SCNC sent a formal request to the UN Human Rights Council in December 2006, asking the UN to investigate violations in Anglophone parts of the country.

Security forces routinely impede domestic travel, extracting bribes at checkpoint and roadblocks. Refugee and immigrant populations complain that they are singled out for harassment.

Discrimination against women is widespread. Women are often denied inheritance and landownership rights, even when these are codified, and many other laws contain unequal, gender-based provisions and penalties. Violence against women is common. Cameroon is a transit center and market for child labor and traffickers. Abortion is prohibited, except in cases of rape or to preserve the life of the mother. Homosexuality is culturally taboo and illegal, but emerged as a subject of public debate in 2006 after various media outlets published allegations of homosexual behavior against members of the government and other prominent figures.

**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.*