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Freedom in the World 2011 - Cameroon

Capital: Yaounde

Population: 18,879,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

In 2010, President Paul Biya strengthened his political influence through a cabinet reshuffle, and the government took additional steps to assert control over the electoral commission. Opposition parties continued to be marginalized and members of the press were incarcerated, leading to the death of one journalist in prison due to lack of medical care. The government increased its efforts to reduce misuse of public funds through an anticorruption campaign, though arrests under the initiative in 2010 were seen by many as politically motivated. Despite health concerns, Biya was expected to run for reelection in 2011.

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

The CPDM lost control of all of the country's major councils in the 1996 municipal elections. 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, while SDF parliamentary representation decreased to 16 seats.

In 2008, Biya secured a constitutional amendment to remove the 1996 two-term presidential limit, allowing him to stand for reelection in 2011. Approximately 100 people were killed in clashes with police during subsequent antigovernment riots, as citizens used the opportunity to protest the president's potential reelection as well as the rising cost of living.

In a 2009 cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Ephraïm Inoni was replaced by Philémon Yang, another CPDM politician. In September 2010, Biya replaced 22 senior government officials, including 15 permanent secretaries in various ministries. The majority of those appointed were said to have come from Biya's home region. The president's old age and failing health fueled concerns that he would become incapacitated while in office. There are no clear rules for presidential succession, nor any obvious successor.

In recent years, the president has resumed his 2004 anticorruption initiative, Opération Épervier. As of May 2010, over 100 government officials, including former ministers and former heads of state-owned companies, had been arrested on corruption charges since the program's establishment in 2004, with over a third of them arrested in 2010 alone. While the campaign maintained some public support, critics argued that the initiative was being used to eliminate political opponents.

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 CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote for five-year terms.

The National Elections Observatory (NEO) has little influence. An elections commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), was created in 2006, but commissioners were not named until December 2008. No civil society or opposition members were included, and 11 of the 12 appointees were reputedly CPDM loyalists. In March 2010, an amendment was passed requiring ELECAM to collaborate with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization; the move was widely criticized for placing election management into the hands of a ministry loyal to Biya and jeopardizing the commission's transparency. In July, the opposition threatened to boycott the elections until the independence of ELECAM was ensured; however, at year's end, statements from party leaders indicated that they planned to participate.

There are more than 180 recognized political parties, but Biya's CPDM and the Anglophone SDF are dominant. Continued marginalization of the Anglophone community has fueled a campaign for independence by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). In October 2009, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights officially dismissed the SCNC's secessionist claims while also condemning discrimination against Anglophones. In 2010, the SCNC continued to release statements advocating for independence.

Corruption remains endemic in Cameroon. Biya's administration has encouraged cronyism, with members of the president's ethnic group dominating key positions. Revenues from the oil, gas, and mining sectors are not openly reported. A constitutional provision requiring top civil servants to declare their assets continued to be ignored in 2010, despite public calls for transparency of government finances. Cameroon was ranked 146 out of 178 countries in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index and 168 out of 183 countries in the World Bank's 2011 Doing Business Report.

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. In 2010, journalists were

regularly harassed, abused, or imprisoned. In February, three editors of different publications were arrested and charged for possessing a file which purportedly implicated a presidential advisor in undisclosed payouts to the state-run oil company. Several weeks earlier, security agents had tortured another journalist into revealing his sources for the same document. In April, one of the incarcerated journalists, Germain S. Ngota Ngota, died in prison from lack of proper medical care. In November, Biya ordered the release of the two remaining journalists, although criminal charges were still pending at year's end. There is no systematic internet censorship in Cameroon.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses, many professors exercise self-censorship, and some argue that entrance into university requires bribery or the support of a powerful patron.

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 February 2010, members of the SDF were denied authorization to hold a ceremony to memorialize the victims of the deadly 2008 protests. In May, police violently dispersed hundreds of journalists staging a sit-in to protest Ngota's death. 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. Acts of brutality against civilians by Cameroon's elite military unit, Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (BIR), are increasing, although some troops have been dismissed for unnecessary use of force. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees are routine. In May 2010, a report by the UN Committee Against Torture found that over half of Cameroon's prisoners were in provisional detention, many of whom remained in jail much longer than the maximum time limits for pre-trial detention. The absence of habeas corpus provisions in Francophone civil law further undermines due process. In the north, traditional rulers (*lamibe*) 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, and there is widespread violence and discrimination against women. 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.

** 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.*

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