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Freedom in the World 2008 - Cameroon

Capital: Yaounde

Population: 18,100,000

Political Rights Score: 6

Civil Liberties Score: 6

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Cameroon received a downward trend arrow to reflect the consolidation of President Paul Biya's regime and significant irregularities in the 2007 elections.

Overview

President Paul Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) consolidated its hold on power in 2007, winning commanding majorities in legislative and municipal elections that signaled the country's steady return to a one-party system. The CPDM continued to curb free expression and avoid accountability during the year, resisting any transition to genuine democracy.

Colonized by the Germans in the late 19th century, Cameroon was later administered by Britain and France, first as League of Nations mandates after World War I and then as UN trust territories 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). Biya was reelected the same year in a vote that was roundly condemned by international observers.

Municipal elections in 1996 saw the CPDM lose control of all major councils in the country. A constitutional revision that year extended the presidential term from five to seven years. Biya won a fourth term in 1997, obtaining 93 percent of the votes cast amid numerous irregularities and a boycott by the main opposition parties. The CPDM led the 1997 legislative elections and dominated the legislative and municipal elections of 2002,

which were again tainted by widespread irregularities. Biya secured reelection in October 2004 with 75 percent of the vote. The two main opposition candidates charged fraud and appealed unsuccessfully to the Supreme Court to annul the vote.

The July 2007 legislative and municipal polls followed the pattern of the previous elections. Thanks to electoral gerrymandering, the CPDM made significant inroads into the stronghold of the SDF, grabbing nine of the available 20 seats, compared with one in 2002. The United States, Britain, and the Netherlands called the relatively peaceful July vote "a missed opportunity for Cameroon to continue building public confidence in the democratic process."

Elections in Cameroon have been hampered in part by the lack of an independent electoral commission. The National Elections Observatory has little practical influence, since the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization controls each step in the actual conduct of elections, from voter registration to the publication of results. A new elections commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), was created in December 2006 but is not expected to become operational until June 2008, and the fact that its members will be appointed by President Biya has cast serious doubts regarding its neutrality and impartiality.

Cameroon is overwhelmingly poor, with a mainly agricultural economy. Although the country earned significant debt relief under the International Monetary Fund/World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, the resources released by the program have not been diverted to antipoverty efforts. Unemployment hovers around 20 percent, and Cameroon was ranked 144 out of 177 countries in the UN Development Programme's 2007 Human Development Index.

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 regional system of government, and a Constitutional Court, none of those changes have been implemented. Cameroon's centralized government is dominated by the powerful presidency. The president, elected for up to two seven-year terms, 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. Since 1992, every bill passed by parliament has been initiated by the executive. Biya's current term ends in 2011, but on December 31, during his annual state of the nation address, he announced plans to modify the constitution and seek a third seven-year mandate. The unicameral National Assembly has 180 seats, 153 of which were held by the ruling CPDM after the 2007 elections. Members are elected by direct popular vote to serve five-year terms.

There are more than 180 recognized political parties in Cameroon, although Biya's CPDM and the Anglophone-led SDF are dominant. The hundreds of smaller political and civic organizations have little effect on public policy and decision-making processes. The Anglophone-Francophone linguistic divide constitutes the country's most volatile political fault line. The public perception of an Anglophone problem stems from the systematic exclusion of Anglophones from high public office. Since independence, no Anglophone has been president, nor has any Anglophone ever been appointed to the important finance, defense, or territorial administration cabinet portfolios. Such marginalization of a region that produces 70 percent of gross domestic product is fueling a campaign for Anglophone independence, led by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). Every October 1, security forces clash with Anglophone activists as they commemorate Southern Cameroons Independence Day.

Despite some high-profile convictions of former regime officials, corruption remains endemic. Biya's long years in power have encouraged high levels of corruption and cronyism, and his bloated administration includes more than 60 government ministries. Key positions are held by members of Biya's Beti ethnic group, feeding a system of endemic graft and ethnic clientelism. Cameroon signed on to the Extractive Industries

Transparency Initiative (EITI) in September 2007 but revenue from the oil, gas, and mining sectors remains clouded in secrecy. A constitutional provision requiring the president and all top civil servants to declare their assets before and after leaving office has been ignored. Cameroon was ranked 138 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index. The corruption problem has discouraged vital foreign investment; Cameroon was ranked 154 out of 178 countries in the World Bank's 2007 Doing Business index.

The constitution guarantees free speech, but genuine freedom of expression remains elusive. Private radio and television stations operate, and dozens of independent newspapers are published. Although the 1996 constitution ended prepublication censorship, the charter's Article 17 imposes a serious restriction on free expression by giving administrative officials the power to seize and ban newspapers based on a claimed threat to public order. There are no legal provisions guaranteeing equal access to information, and libel and defamation remain criminal offenses. Judicial harassment, arrests, detentions, and torture of journalists have engendered fear and self-censorship, especially within the state-owned media. The lack of structural and editorial independence at the state-owned *Cameroon Tribune* and Cameroon Radio & Television (CRTV) has transformed them from public-service outlets into propaganda organs of the ruling party. The Pan-African News Agency (PANA) has reported that since 1990, 450 trials have been conducted against the media in Cameroon. The government has not attempted to restrict or monitor internet communications.

Freedom of religion is generally respected. Although there are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, 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 freedom of assembly and association. Meetings of the banned SCNC are routinely disrupted. Trade union formation is permitted, but it is subject to numerous restrictions and government interference.

The courts are subject to extensive political influence and corruption. The executive controls the judiciary and appoints provincial and local administrators. Military tribunals exercise jurisdiction over civilians in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence. Various intelligence agencies operate with impunity. Torture, ill-treatment of detainees, and indefinite administrative or pretrial detention under extremely harsh conditions are routine. The absence of habeas corpus as a fundamental principle in Francophone civil law further undermines due process. The government has disregarded international efforts to scrutinize its human rights record, repeatedly refusing to grant entry to Amnesty International representatives who were investigating reports that dozens of extrajudicial executions were carried out in 2002 as part of an anticrime campaign. In the north, traditional rulers (*lamibee*) operate their own private militias, courts, and prisons, which are used against the regime's political opponents. The Human Rights Commission, created by the government in 1992, has yet to publish a single report.

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 provinces, according to the World Health Organization, and homosexuality is both culturally taboo and illegal. Cameroon is a market for child labor and a transit center for child-trafficking. Abortion is prohibited except in cases of rape or to preserve the life of the mother.