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## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

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# Cameroon

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**OVERVIEW:**

In the spring of 2012, legislative elections scheduled for July were postponed until 2013 in order to address procedural concerns raised by the opposition. Writer and activist Enoh Meyomesse remained imprisoned throughout 2012, and in December received a seven-year sentence for complicity in the theft and illegal sale of gold. Also during the year, the government continued to aggressively prosecute those suspected of homosexual activity, which is outlawed.

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. A 1996 constitutional revision extended the presidential term from five to seven years, and Biya has won every election since amid numerous irregularities. The CPDM's victories in legislative and municipal elections have been 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 of 180 total seats. In 2008, Biya secured a constitutional amendment to remove the 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.

In the 2011 presidential election, Biya easily defeated his 22 rivals, claiming 78 percent of the vote. His closest challenger, SDF leader John Fru Ndi, received just 11 percent. Foreign diplomats and members of the opposition protested the results, citing irregularities. The 79-year-old president's advancing age and rumored failing health have fueled concerns that he could become incapacitated while in office, potentially sparking a political crisis, as Biya has not officially anointed a successor.

In the spring of 2012, legislative elections scheduled for July were postponed until 2013 in accordance with opposition demands. The delay will allow the electoral commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), to update the voter registration list using biometric verification, which is intended to reduce fraud.

**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. 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 and is dominated by President Paul Biya's CPDM. Members are elected by direct popular vote for five-year terms.

ELECAM was created in 2006 to address concerns about the fair management of previous elections, but CPDM partisans dominate the body. In March 2010, an amendment was passed requiring ELECAM to collaborate with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization; the move was widely criticized

**2013  
SCORES**

STATUS

**Not  
Free**

FREEDOM RATING

**6.0**

CIVIL LIBERTIES

**6**

POLITICAL RIGHTS

**6**

for placing election management into the hands of a ministry loyal to Biya. In February 2012, civil society groups and the opposition called for ELECAM to be replaced with a new body, citing its lack of independence from the executive. In April, amendments to the electoral law took effect that introduced biometric registration and were intended to enhance ELECAM's independence.

There are more than 250 recognized political parties, but Biya's CPDM, with its access to state patronage, dominates. Continued marginalization of the Anglophone community has fueled a nonviolent campaign for independence by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), which has been declared an illegal organization. Throughout 2012, several SCNC members were arrested and charged with secession, participating in illegal meetings, or attempting to destabilize the state. Meanwhile, the northern-based Fulani, who once enjoyed political prominence under former president Ahmadou Ahidjo, still resent Biya for a bloody 1984 crackdown on northerners in the armed forces. The Cameroon Renaissance Movement, a new coalition made up of several opposition parties and led by former justice minister Maurice Kamto, was introduced in August 2012.

Corruption remains endemic in Cameroon. Biya's administration has encouraged cronyism, with members of the president's Beti ethnic group dominating many key positions. Revenues from the oil, gas, and mining sectors are not openly reported. The National Anticorruption Commission, created in 2006, is the country's principal independent anticorruption agency, though its subservience to the president undermines its effectiveness. The National Financial Investigations Unit is a separate intelligence unit that tracks money laundering. In recent years, Biya has resumed an anticorruption initiative, Opération Épervier, but critics argue that it has been used to eliminate political opponents and enemies. In September 2012, Marafa Hamidou Yaya, a former minister and presidential hopeful, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for embezzlement. Biya had fired Yaya in 2011. Cameroon was ranked 144 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions 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 and writers have engendered self-censorship. In one high-profile case, author and founding member of the Cameroon Writers Association Enoch Meyomessé—who had run as an opposition candidate in the 2011 presidential election—was arrested in November 2011 and charged with attempting to organize a coup, possessing a firearm, and aggravated theft, though he maintained that the arrest was politically motivated. Those charges were dropped in June 2012, but he remained in custody and was later charged with complicity in stealing and illegally trafficking in gold. He was found guilty in December, and sentenced to seven years in prison. 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 SCNC, banned in 2001, are routinely disrupted. In February 2012, former opposition presidential candidate Vincent-Sosthène Fouda and several others were arrested in connection with a demonstration held after a newborn baby was stolen from a hospital in the capital; Fouda was charged with holding an unlawful demonstration. In March, police disrupted a peaceful rally in the northern city of Maroua organized by the Movement for the Defense of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and arrested the organization's president and 14 other members; they were released the same day. In November, security forces used tear gas to disperse a crowd of a 1,000 gathered to protest Biya's extended time in power. Trade union formation is permitted, but subject to numerous restrictions.

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and 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 security unit, the Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide, are increasing, although some troops have been dismissed for unnecessary use of force. Prison conditions are poor and sometimes life threatening, with overcrowding, poorly maintained facilities, and widespread violence by guards and among inmates. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees are routine. A 2010 report by the UN Committee Against Torture found that over half of Cameroon's prisoners were in provisional detention, and that many remained in jail much longer than the maximum time for pretrial 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, face discrimination.

Despite legal protections, there is widespread violence and discrimination against women, and female genital mutilation is practiced in the Southwest and Far North regions. Cameroon is a child labor market and a transit center for child trafficking.

Prejudice and discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is pervasive. The law forbids homosexual activity, and stipulates prison terms of six months to five years. At least 28 people have been prosecuted under the penal code's Article 347 since 2010. Cases of alleged homosexuality are often fraught with violations of due process rights and based on weak evidence. Further, convictions for homosexual acts often rely on perceived sexual orientation, despite the fact that the law requires an individual be caught engaging in a sexual act. In February, police arrested a man for alleged homosexuality, and released him on the condition that he publicly denounce the work of Alternatives-Cameroun, an organization that provides HIV/AIDS services to the community; the organization suspended its activities as a result. Authorities in the capital shut down a workshop on the rights of sexual and gender minorities in March. In December, an appeals court upheld a conviction and three-year prison sentence for a university student accused of homosexuality, though he had no legal representation at his original trial. Lawyers representing clients of accused homosexuality were subjected to threats of violence throughout 2012 due to their work.

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