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Cameroon

Country:

Cameroon

Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

6

Aggregate Score:

22

Freedom Rating:

6.0

Overview:

President Paul Biya has ruled Cameroon since 1982. His Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has maintained power by rigging past elections, using state resources for political patronage, and limiting the activities of opposition parties. Security forces use violence to disperse antigovernment protests, especially in the country's two Anglophone regions. The Boko Haram insurgent group continues to attack civilians in northern Cameroon, and security forces responding to the insurgency have been accused of committing human rights violations against civilians.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 9 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 3 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The president is directly elected to a seven-year term in a single voting round and may serve an unlimited number of terms. Cameroon's fragmented opposition was unable to coalesce around a single candidate ahead of the 2011 presidential election, and Biya easily beat out nearly two dozen opponents to claim 78 percent of the vote. Turnout was low, with one civil society organization reporting it at 35 percent. A Commonwealth election monitoring mission noted problems with voter registration, and said abuse of public resources by the ruling party during the election campaign had tilted the playing field significantly. The mission also noted a general sense of apathy among voters.

The country still lacks an obvious successor to the 84-year-old President Biya, whose current term is scheduled to end in 2018.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

In 2013, Cameroon held National Assembly elections, direct elections for municipal councilors, and long-delayed elections for its first Senate. The ruling CPDM won 56 of the elected Senate seats, while the main opposition party, the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), won the remaining 14. Biya appointed an additional 30 senators, three from each of the country's 10 regions. The CPDM took 148 assembly seats and won 305 of the country's 360 communes.

While some observers characterized the elections as credible, there were also accusations that the CPDM paid bribes to certain municipal councilors of up to \$90 each. The CPDM also enjoyed an advantage over fragmented and weak opposition parties due to preexisting party infrastructure.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

The electoral commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) was created in 2006 to address concerns about the fair management of previous elections. However, Biya chooses its members, and CPDM partisans have traditionally dominated the body. The ruling party has benefited from electoral gerrymandering.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 3 / 12

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

The ability to organize political groups and those groups' freedom to operate is subject to the whims of the central government, and opposition leaders risk arrest and imprisonment. In January 2017, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), an Anglophone political grouping, was banned. In October 2017, a military court convicted Aboubakar Siddiki, a critic of Biya and the head of the small Cameroon's Patriotic Salvation Movement, of attempting to incite a revolution and sentenced him to 25 years in prison, prompting condemnation from Amnesty International and others.

In February 2017, authorities banned a rally and a march planned by the main opposition SDF, which were to have taken place in the capital. In October, authorities in the capital granted the SDF a permit to hold a march and a rally intended to show solidarity with protests in the Anglophone regions. However, the permit was revoked days later on grounds that the activities constituted a threat to public safety.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

Despite having almost 300 political parties, Cameroon remains essentially a one-party state. The numerous opposition parties are highly fragmented, preventing any one from becoming a credible threat to the ruling CPDM.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

State patronage and Biya's control of high-level appointments help the CPDM retain power.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Anglophone Cameroonians, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals, and individuals from some ethnic groups, such as the Bamiléké, are generally excluded from political processes, and their interests are poorly represented by elected officials.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

In principle, laws and policies in Cameroon are created and approved by the parliament and president. But in practice, policy is often made by presidential decree.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors. There have been some anticorruption initiatives, but senior officials in the ruling party generally enjoy impunity for corrupt behavior.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Decisions, especially those made by presidential decree, are often made with little or no public consultation.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 13 / 60 (-2)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 6 / 16 (-1)

D1. Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

Journalists face pressure and the risk of detention or arrest in connection with their work. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and the National Communications Council (CNC) has a history of harassing independent journalists and outlets.

In 2017, the government clamped down on media coverage of the Anglophone protest movement. The CNC issued an official statement warning that media outlets that covered the demonstrators' grievances could "adversely affect the Republican system, unity and territorial integrity, and the democratic principles on which the state stands," which was interpreted as a threat to impose sanctions against outlets that covered the issue. In January, authorities shut down a radio station after it aired a debate about the Anglophone protest movement. The same month, the German news agency DW reported that its journalists and others had been threatened with sanctions if they covered the demonstrations. And in December 2017, Cameroonian-American author Patrice Nganang, known for his criticism of Biya, was jailed for three weeks and then deported. The government said he had threatened Biya's life in a Facebook post, but Nganang's family said he was detained after writing an article for the French-language, pan-African magazine *Jeune Afrique*, in which he criticized Biya's repression of the Anglophone protest movement. Radio journalist Mancho Bibixy remained in detention at year's end on charges related to his calls for the secession of the Anglophone regions.

Ahmed Abba—a Nigerian journalist arrested in 2015 in connection with his reporting on Boko Haram—in 2017 was convicted on terrorism-related charges and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

However, he was freed after being credited with time served when a court later reduced his sentence to 24 months.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Religious freedom is somewhat restricted in areas affected by the presence of Boko Haram, which has carried out violent attacks against places of worship. In 2015, the government banned full face veils in the Far North region following two suicide bombings that were attributed to Boko Haram and thought to have been carried out by veiled women. However, the ban is not usually enforced.

Separately, the government has at times closed churches in order to encourage resolutions to leadership disputes.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4 (-1)

Public criticism of the government and membership in opposition political parties can have a negative impact on professional opportunities and advancement. Cameroonians tend to avoid discussing sensitive political issues for fear of reprisals, notably the potential for a return to a federal system that would grant the Anglophone regions more autonomy, or the regions' outright secession.

Internet access in the Anglophone regions was completely shut down for a total of 93 days between January and April of 2017 after several days of demonstrations in Bamenda, the regions' main city, inhibiting online discussion of the Anglophone protest movement. Internet outages hit the region again in October, following that month's protests. The mass arrests of protest participants in October further discouraged discussion of the Anglophone issues.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the mass arrest of many Anglophone-rights activists and a 93-day internet shutdown in the country's Anglophone regions demonstrated that discussion of the Anglophone protest movement is not tolerated.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12 (-1)

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4 (-1)

Freedom of assembly is subject to significant restrictions. In 2017, the Cameroonian government violently repressed a protest movement in the country's Anglophone regions. In October, security forces responded to demonstrations there with live bullets and tear gas. At least 20 people were killed in the crackdown, and at least 500 people were arrested, largely in mass sweeps.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to authorities' violent repression of protests in the Anglophone regions of the country.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 4

The influence of civil society has gradually weakened over the years, with many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) relying entirely on foreign assistance, and others coopted or overtly supported by the regime.

In January, the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) was banned, and its president and secretary general were arrested and charged under terrorism laws. They were both detained until August, when Biya ordered their release.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Trade unions, strikes, and collective bargaining are legally permitted, although unions are still subject to numerous restrictions.

F. RULE OF LAW: 1 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and political influence and corruption weaken courts. Judges are appointed by the president, who may also dismiss them at will.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process rights are generally not respected. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace. State security forces have carried out arbitrary detentions in both the Far North region, in response to the Boko Haram conflict, and in the Anglophone regions. French legal customs are frequently imposed upon Anglophone regions.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Boko Haram insurgents continue to conduct attacks in the country's Far North region, and state security forces there have been accused of torturing alleged Boko Haram collaborators, many of whom are held without charge. Prison conditions are often dire.

In December 2017, government forces were accused of burning several whole villages in one of the Anglophone regions, in response to a deadly separatist attack against a military base in which four soldiers were killed.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Discrimination against Anglophone Cameroonians and individuals from certain ethnic groups including the Bamiléké is common. The government imposes the French language in Anglophone regions, and Anglophone Cameroonians are frequently denied senior jobs in the civil service. Discrimination against the LGBT community is rife, and violence against LGBT people is not uncommon.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

Free movement is difficult in parts of the Far North due to Boko Haram activity. In 2017, the government issued bans on "the movement of persons" in the Anglophone regions during protest periods.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

Harassment of small business owners by state agents is common. Agribusinesses and logging operations are operated without consulting local inhabitants.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

The constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, but traditional legal values often take precedence and do not always provide women full rights. Traditional legal codes often forbid women from owning property, exclude women from inheritance rights, and allow rapists to escape punishment if the victim consents to marriage.

The penal code forbids “sexual relations with a person of the same sex” and includes prison sentences of up to five years. In practice, people are prosecuted with no evidence of sexual activity, but rather on suspicions that they are gay.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Despite a 2011 law against human trafficking, Cameroon remains a source, transit, and destination country for forced labor and sex trafficking of children, as well as a source country for women who are subject to forced labor and prostitution in Europe.

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