

THE STATUS OF RIGHTS AND GOVERNANCE IN CAMEROON

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TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
HUMAN RIGHTS IN CAMEROON BRIEFING
JUNE 15, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to share Freedom House's views concerning the deteriorating human rights and governance conditions in Cameroon. In our most recent *Freedom in the World* report, Cameroon is rated as "Not Free" – and has been so since 1976. Both its political rights and civil liberties rankings are 6 out of 7, with seven being the lowest score. Cameroon's most recent *Freedom in the World* score declined, largely due to rights restrictions related to the ongoing Anglophone crisis, including the mass arrest of Anglophone rights activists, a 93-day internet shutdown in early 2017 in the Anglophone regions, and authorities' violent repression of protests.

President Paul Biya – in power since 1982, and one of only two presidents that Cameroon has ever known – maintains power by manipulating elections, using state resources for political patronage, and limiting the activities of opposition parties, civil society, and the media. Absent a significant change of course, elections planned for this October are likely to mirror past shoddy elections that create a veneer of legitimacy barely masking an authoritarian government.

There is no obvious successor to President Biya, who is 85 years old and widely expected to run again. Thanks to a 2008 constitutional amendment, Cameroon has no presidential term limits. It is important to put these elections in a regional context. In the Central Africa sub-region, leaders of the Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon,

Rwanda and Burundi have all sought to change or circumvent presidential term limits in recent years. President Biya does not face the burden of having to do so, but he is part of a trend of leaders in this part of Africa refusing to leave office.

Increasing violence and government crackdowns ahead of the election should be expected. Although opposition parties can and do compete in Cameroonian elections, authorities often impose constraints on their ability to hold rallies and campaign events, and their supporters face intimidation, and sometimes violence. Government critics are a consistent target of government repression, sometimes facing arrest and imprisonment. For example, in October 2017 a military court sentenced the leader of an opposition party in northern Cameroon to 25 years in prison on national security charges. Amnesty International condemned the trial as politically motivated. Groups advocating greater regional autonomy or a return to a federal system have also faced repression, and even peaceful advocacy of secession is banned.

At Freedom House we are particularly concerned about three key sets of rights that are increasingly threatened in Cameroon. One is the right to assembly and protest, especially in Anglophone areas. The most recent wave of protests began in late 2016 with strikes by lawyers and teachers, who objected to what they perceived as growing efforts by the francophone-dominated central government to proscribe the use of the English language in courts and schools, despite a tradition of common law in Anglophone areas and the constitutional status of English as one of Cameroon's two official languages. The government repressed the peaceful protest movement in the Anglophone regions, thereby fueling more extremist voices. In October 2017, according to Amnesty International, at least 20 people were killed and 500 people arrested when security forces responded to demonstrations in Anglophone regions with live bullets and tear gas. In December 2017, government forces were accused of burning several villages in Anglophone regions, in response to a deadly separatist attack against a military base in which four soldiers were

killed. In May 2018, security forces allegedly killed dozens of people during a stand-off in the western town of Pinyin, although the circumstances of the incident remain disputed.¹ Separatists, it should be noted, are also responsible for abuses, using attacks on schools and even abduction of teachers and other state officials to underscore their message and pressure the government.²

The second set of rights concerns media freedoms. Journalists face continuous pressure and risk detention and arrest. Defamation is still a criminal offense. The National Communications Council has a history of harassing independent journalists and outlets, and imposed a ban on political reporting and programming on the Anglophone conflict. Cameroon's anti-terror law – portrayed as a measure against Boko Haram,³ but written to be quite broad – has been used against journalists. The maximum sentence under the law is the death penalty, the law allows for indefinite detention, and it provides for prosecution of civilians in military courts.⁴ Using this law, authorities are currently detaining a radio journalist for a renewable six-month period while police investigate claims of secessionist propaganda. In February 2017, authorities arrested three other journalists under this law. After several months, one was released without any charges being brought. The two others were charged by a military court, and only recently discharged and acquitted after almost a year of hardship.⁵

The third set of rights concerns communications and information. In response to growing protests in Anglophone regions, the government blocked messaging and social media applications and shut down internet service for 93 days in 2017 (January to April) in

¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/dozens-of-cameroon-youth-killed-in-south/4411815.html>

² [http://www.africanews.com/2018/05/30/cameroon-separatists-must-safely-free-female-headteacher-hrw//](http://www.africanews.com/2018/05/30/cameroon-separatists-must-safely-free-female-headteacher-hrw/)

³ <https://cpj.org/reports/Cameroon-English-Web.pdf>

⁴ <https://cpj.org/reports/Cameroon-English-Web.pdf>

⁵ <https://cpj.org/2017/08/cameroon-arrests-journalists-on-terror-charges.php>;

<https://cpj.org/2017/09/cameroon-publisher-detained-for-more-than-eight-mo.php>

Anglophone regions. More internet outages in Anglophone areas were reported in October 2017, and access was not fully restored until March 2018.⁶

Cameroon does not attract significant attention from the international community, but is of strategic importance, given the presence of extremist groups, its role as a growing counterterrorism partner of the United States, and shared borders with multiple fragile states, including Africa's would-be hegemon, Nigeria. Following from the challenges to democracy and human rights outlined above, I will offer several recommendations for international community involvement – especially for the U.S. Congress given where this briefing is being held:

1. **Reevaluate the balance of security and political engagement.** Cameroon has become an important U.S. partner in security efforts, including efforts to defeat Boko Haram. But any partnership should not come at the expense of sustained support for democratic governance and respect for human rights. Any claims that the Biya government is a “guarantor of stability” should be viewed with deep skepticism, especially in light of violence in Anglophone regions and allegations of serious abuses in the north. Repression of dissent and the marginalization of minority groups increase rather than decrease stability. The international community should publicly rebuke Cameroon's use of anti-terrorism legislation to punish political opponents and should call for the release of all those wrongly imprisoned under these laws. The United States should ensure that any provision of security assistance to the government of Cameroon is in compliance with the Leahy Law, which prohibits the U.S. Government from providing equipment, training, or other assistance to units of foreign security forces when there is credible information implicating that unit in human rights violations.⁷ Congress should ensure both the letter and spirit of the law are upheld. Members of Congress should also consider

⁶ <https://qz.com/1221011/the-internet-slow-and-unstable-is-back-in-camerouns-anglophone-regions/>

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/fs/2018/279141.htm>

publicly expressing support for the statement made by U.S. Ambassador Peter Barlerin on May 17, in which he raised serious human rights concerns and called on President Biya to “consider his legacy” in determining whether to run for another term.

2. **Encourage dialogue on options for decentralization and federalism.** While some demands for secession reflect legitimate and deeply-held grievances, secession remains an unlikely outcome, and can create as many problems as may be solved. Options for strengthened decentralization and a return to federal governance structures – while part of the debate in Cameroon for some time – should be an increasing focus for all involved in light of the Anglophone protests and the government’s inability to peacefully and effectively address the concerns raised.
3. **Expand support to Cameroonian civil society and human rights defenders.** In a context of closing political space, support to civil society and human rights defenders becomes even more important given their role in amplifying citizen voices and exposing human rights violations. A vigorous civil society is essential to pressuring the government to adhere to democratic standards as elections approach, and can help guide democratic reforms in a post-Biya Cameroon.
4. **Maintain a high bar for elections.** Too often, deeply flawed elections are given a passing grade by observers and the broader international community, and are sometimes credited for being “peaceful,” whereas the true test of an election is whether it is broadly free and fair. Given instability in Anglophone areas, and the Cameroonian government’s track record, it is very difficult to see how free and fair elections can be held in the current context. This is not a call for an election delay, but for urgent efforts to address the instability. International interlocutors – including the African Union – should signal now that steps must be taken urgently before elections are held. They should also encourage Cameroon to make pro-democratic reforms, such as reinstating term limits, reforming the electoral commission, and instituting a two round electoral process.

5. **Consider a post-Biya future.** President Biya may not face term limits, but his close to four decades in office increasingly goes against the grain in Africa. As witnessed in Zimbabwe, The Gambia, Burkina Faso and elsewhere, change can happen quickly, and few may see it coming. It is essential that Cameroonians consider and plan for their future after the Biya presidency, including how they will use any openings to address long-held grievances and glaring inequalities. International supporters and partners should help them in this important endeavor.