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## Cameroon

**Country:**

Cameroon

**Year:**

2015

**FIW Status:**

NF

**PR Rating:**

6

**CL Rating:**

6

**Aggregate Score:**

25

**Combined Freedom Score:**

6.0

**Overview:**

Cameroon saw growing fault lines in 2014, the result of a worsening security situation in the country's north and east, high youth unemployment, aging political leadership, and the lack of an obvious presidential heir in the ruling party. The Far North province, which borders the stronghold of Boko Haram in Nigeria, faces increasing incursions from the Islamic militant group. Instability in neighboring Central African Republic, which shares a 500-mile-long border with Cameroon, has also led to increasing confrontations between Cameroon's military and rebel groups.

As part of government's response to the rise in extremist violence, in December President Paul Biya signed a sweeping new antiterrorism law. However, the law was criticized by the opposition, media, and civil society groups as severely restricting freedom of speech and assembly. It imposed the death penalty for "acts of terrorism"; however, critics alleged that such acts were vaguely defined and that the law could be used to silence dissent.

While arrests for same-sex sexual behavior have declined, Cameroon still has the highest number of individuals in prison for such acts in the world. As of early 2014, at least 15 men and women were in prison because they were believed to be gay.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

**Political Rights: 9 / 40 (+1) [Key]****A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12**

Now in his fourth decade in power, Biya retains a strong hold on Cameroon. His Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) controls the Senate, the National Assembly, and municipal councils by large majorities. In the 2011 presidential elections, Biya beat out nearly two dozen opponents to claim 78 percent of the vote; the poll was widely viewed as tainted. Despite his advanced age of 85, Biya has not groomed a successor. There is no provision for a presidential runoff, which impedes the ability of opposition candidates to unseat the incumbent.

Cameroon has a 180-seat National Assembly and established the 100-seat Senate in 2012; representatives serve five-year terms. In 2013, Cameroon held National Assembly elections, direct elections for municipal councilors, and long-delayed elections for its first Senate. The 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 free and fair, there were also accusations that the CPDM paid bribes to certain municipal councilors of up to \$90 each.

Cameroon adopted a new electoral code in 2012 that introduced biometric voter registration. However, Biya still chooses the members of the electoral commission.

**B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16**

Despite having almost 300 political parties, Cameroon remains essentially a one-party state. The numerous opposition parties often have aging leadership and are highly fragmented, preventing any one from becoming a credible threat to the ruling CPDM or forming effective coalitions. The SDF is the largest opposition party and has a national base; other opposition groups suffer from ethnic and regional biases that limit their membership.

State patronage and Biya's control of high-level appointments help the CPDM retain power. The state also controls the release of mandated public funding for political parties, as well as the salaries of village chiefs, who in turn control their local votes.

The Baka minority is not represented in the legislature or in the top levels of government.

**C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12 (+1)**

Corruption is systemic. Bribery is commonplace in all sectors, from gaining school admission to fixing traffic infractions. An anticorruption campaign called Opération Epervier (Operation Sparrowhawk) was begun in 2006, but critics say it has been used to remove potential political opponents. Former minister and presidential hopeful Marafa Hamidou Yaya was sentenced in 2012 to 25 years in prison for embezzlement. Cameroon's former ambassador to the United States, Jérôme Mendouga, died in November 2014 after spending five years awaiting trial in Yaoundé's notorious Kondengui prison on embezzlement charges. In October

2013, a court sentenced former prime minister Inoni Ephraim and former minister of state Atangana Mebara to 20 years in prison for corruption, both on embezzlement charges.

Cameroon has been classified as compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)—which asks countries to submit reports detailing the proceeds they have gained from the extraction of their natural resources—since late 2013. Cameroon was ranked 136 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International’s 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 16 / 60

#### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16**

The constitution guarantees free speech, and there are some 500 newspapers and 100 radio and television stations. However, genuine freedom of expression remains elusive. The constitution gives officials the power to ban newspapers based on a claimed threat to public order. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and the National Communications Council (CNC), which started functioning full time in 2013, has taken a hard-line approach to enforcement of the country’s communications law, summoning journalists for “violating professional ethics.”

Several journalists were arrested and detained in 2014. Reporters were targeted after critical reporting on topics including the health of the president and alleged embezzlement by government officials. In April, the car of Denis Nkwebo, a journalist at the daily newspaper *Le Jour*, was blown apart outside of his house. Nkwebo, who had criticized efforts by security forces to curb attacks by Boko Haram, had been warned by government insiders to tread carefully. In late November, the CNC banned six journalists from working. Author and founding member of the Cameroon Writers Association Enoh Meyomesse—who had run as an opposition candidate in the 2011 presidential election—remained imprisoned throughout 2014, after being jailed in 2011 and convicted in 2012 of complicity in stealing and illegally trafficking in gold.

There are no restrictions on internet use, but internet penetration is very low, at 11 percent in 2014.

Cameroonians can exercise religious freedom, with generally little government interference. Religious groups are required to register with the government, a process that can take several years. There are no legal restrictions on academic freedom, but state security informants operate on university campuses. Public criticism of the government and membership in opposition political parties can have a negative impact on professional opportunities and advancement.

#### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 3 / 12**

Freedoms of assembly and association, while legally protected, are subject to significant restrictions, including a requirement that organizers notify the government before assemblies take place. In practice, this policy leads to frequent suppression of the right to free assembly.

In November 2014, the director of a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), Nasako Besingi, and five of his colleagues were arrested and charged with holding an undeclared public meeting while distributing t-shirts opposing the building of a large-scale palm oil plantation by U.S.-based Herakles Farms.

The influence of civil society has gradually weakened over the years, with many NGOs relying entirely on foreign assistance and others coopted or overtly supported by the regime. Other NGOs are no more than a registered name and a website.

Trade unions, strikes, and collective bargaining are permitted, and there is a growing public sector trade union movement, though unions are still subject to numerous restrictions. The Groupement Inter-Patronal du Cameroun (GICAM) business association is often critical of government policies.

## **F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16**

The judiciary is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice, and political influence and corruption weaken courts. Lengthy pretrial detentions are commonplace, and there are reports of arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of activists. For example, local NGO leader Besingi has been arrested multiple times for his environmental activism and his trial postponed nearly a dozen times. Célestin Yandal, the leader of an Adamaoua-based youth advocacy NGO, has likewise been subject to arbitrary detention and judicial harassment.

The security forces act with impunity for human rights violations including excessive use of force, torture and other abuse, and extrajudicial executions. Prisons are overcrowded and conditions are sometimes life threatening. Torture and abuse of detainees are widespread.

In May, Boko Haram kidnapped 10 Chinese road construction workers. In July, 17 Cameroonians were kidnapped, including the wife of Vice Prime Minister Amadou Ali. All 27 people were released in October. Seven Cameroonian soldiers were killed in a December 27 attack on a military base in Achigachia. In response, the Cameroonian military launched airstrikes against the militants, reportedly killing 41 Boko Haram fighters.

The roughly 30,000 members of the Baka pygmy community face discrimination in Cameroon. Many are born in isolated forest areas and lack birth certificates needed to obtain a national identity card, which excludes them from many government services.

Discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is also rife. 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. Two women were arrested and imprisoned on such suspicion in early 2014. In January, Roger Jean-Claude Mbede, who had been imprisoned in 2011 after sending a text message to another man that said “I am very much in love with you,” died after his family reportedly took him out of the hospital. Mbede had been serving a three-year sentence but was given a provisional medical release in 2012.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16**

Travel is largely unrestricted, though Boko Haram activity in Cameroon's Far North has increased insecurity in the region.

Cameroon's ranking in the World Bank's 2014 *Doing Business* report dropped to 148 out of 189 economies. Agribusinesses operate with little or no consultation with local inhabitants, and a lack of transparency means people are usually unaware of potential environmental hazards. Concerns have been raised about the government's failure to recognize indigenous forest peoples' right to prior consent when logging concessions are granted.

The constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, but traditional legal values often take precedence and do not always provide women full rights. Although the penal code criminalizes rape against women, perpetrators are declared innocent if the victim has reached puberty and freely consents to marriage. Female genital mutilation is still practiced, particularly in isolated areas of the extreme north, east, and southwest regions. Women won 56 National Assembly seats in the 2013 elections, a significant increase over previous years, and 20 Senate seats.

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.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

### **Full Methodology**

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