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Cameroon

Cameroon is a diverse, resource-rich, majority Francophone country bordering the Gulf of Guinea. President Paul Biya, age 86, is one of Africa’s longest-serving leaders. He was reelected in 2018 and has no clear successor. Cameroon faces security and humanitarian challenges on three fronts: the Nigerian-origin Boko Haram insurgency in the north, a separatist conflict in the Anglophone provinces in the west, and cross-border threats from the Central African Republic (CAR) in the east, where some 275,000 CAR refugees reside. The state’s militarized response to Anglophone unrest has inflamed that conflict, while an early 2019 crackdown on Biya’s top Francophone political rival may spark a broader crisis. Cameroon also faces wildlife poaching and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

U.S.-Cameroon relations came to emphasize counterterrorism cooperation as the Boko Haram crisis expanded regionally in 2014-2015. Cameroon has become a major recipient of U.S. security assistance in Africa, and U.S. military personnel have deployed there to conduct regional surveillance operations. Since 2018, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has signaled plans to withdraw some military personnel due to broader efforts to realign its activities toward countering “great power competition” in Africa. U.S. officials also have curtailed some planned security aid for Cameroon, citing human rights concerns.

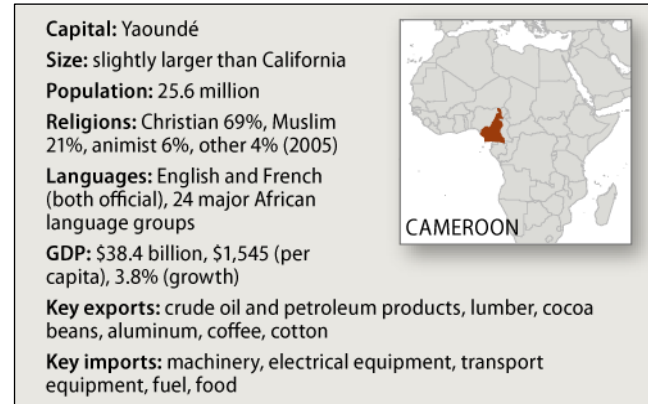
Politics

President Biya has been in office since 1982, having previously served as prime minister. Parliament removed constitutional term limits in 2008, provoking large protests that state security forces violently suppressed. Biya won another seven-year term in October 2018 amid claims of fraud, voter intimidation, and irregularities as well as violence and low turnout in the Anglophone regions. Each past contest has featured allegations of fraud, institutional bias, street violence, and/or opposition boycotts.

Cameroon’s political system endows the head of state with strong executive powers, including the ability to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, cabinet, judges, generals, and governors. Numerous parties compete in elections and the local press is diverse, but opposition activism is constrained by restrictions on political freedoms and the media. Repression has escalated in the context of the Boko Haram conflict and the Anglophone crisis, as authorities have detained journalists and imposed a “climate of fear” on the media, per Reporters Without Borders.

The ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM, or RDP in French), holds 148 of 180 seats (82%) in the National Assembly. The CPDM also holds 90% of elected seats in the Senate, in which 70 out of 100 members are indirectly elected and 30 are appointed by the president. Local and parliamentary elections were delayed from 2018 to late 2019, and could serve as flashpoints for violence amid an ongoing crackdown on civil space.

Figure 1. Cameroon at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook + IMF (2018).

Cameroon’s opposition has long been fractious as the CPDM has co-opted or repressed political challengers. In January 2019, authorities arrested dozens of members of the opposition Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) who were protesting alleged electoral fraud. Among those detained was MRC leader Maurice Kamto, a former state minister who came in second in the 2018 election. Kamto and other MRC officials remain in detention on state security charges; if convicted, they could face the death penalty. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, has called for their release. Authorities also have banned public rallies, including by the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the largest opposition party in parliament. Historically rooted in the Anglophone regions, the SDF’s performance in the 2018 polls was likely hampered by low turnout in its traditional stronghold.

Boko Haram Insurgency

Boko Haram has carried out hundreds of attacks in northern Cameroon, which shares a porous border with the group’s stronghold in northeast Nigeria. The group appears to have used northern Cameroon as a rear base for years before beginning to operate more openly there in 2013. As of early 2019, Cameroon’s Far North hosted 245,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 136,000 refugees from Nigeria, according to U.N. agencies. Cameroonian authorities allegedly have repatriated some Nigerians by force, in violation of international refugee conventions. The crisis has devastated the local economy and contributed to food insecurity in an already poor and remote region.

Cameroon—along with Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Benin—is a member of an African Union-authorized Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to counter Boko Haram and its Islamic State-affiliated splinter group. The MNJTF has received U.S. and other donor support. The regional force has weakened Boko Haram’s territorial control, but the group continues to pose a threat in Cameroon. In late 2018, the government announced plans for the disarmament and

reintegration of Boko Haram members and Anglophone militants, but the way forward remains uncertain.

Anglophone Crisis

Current-day Cameroon was formed through the merger of French and British colonial territories in 1961; in 1972, the central government unilaterally replaced a federal system with a unitary state. Northwest and Southwest provinces (formerly UK-held “Southern Cameroons”) remain predominantly English-speaking, with distinct educational and legal systems. In 2016, Anglophones protested over state appointments of Francophone lawyers and teachers to English-speaking areas. The government granted minor concessions but cracked down on unrest, arresting hundreds (including peaceful activists, some of whom were charged with terrorism) and deploying the military to affected areas.

In October 2017, protesters marked the anniversary of Cameroon’s 1961 unification by symbolically proclaiming the secession of Anglophone areas. Some groups also took up arms in the name of an independent state of Ambazonia. The ensuing conflict between government forces and a fractious array of rebel groups has featured widespread abuses against civilians. Security forces have been accused of torture, extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate arrests, and burning of villages. Armed groups have reportedly carried out assassinations, kidnappings, mutilations, and attacks on schools and teachers. Attackers have targeted health facilities, spurring a mounting health crisis. As of late 2018, at least 437,000 Cameroonians were internally displaced due to the conflict, with a further 29,000 living as refugees in Nigeria, per U.N. agencies. Civil society-led efforts to convene talks to resolve the crisis have stalled amid a lack of support from government and armed secessionists.

“The last thing we need is for the radicals in Anglophone Cameroon to just add to their numbers because of the overreaction of the Cameroonian security forces...I fear that [the crisis] could get much, much worse.” – U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy, December 6, 2018

Human Rights Issues

The State Department’s 2017 (latest) human rights report cites torture and abuse by security forces, arbitrary detentions, and violations of freedoms of expression and assembly. The Department also has expressed concern over the treatment of 47 Anglophone leaders forcibly repatriated from Nigeria in 2018. As of early 2019, ten had been charged with crimes punishable by death. Their continued detention may further hinder efforts to foster negotiations.

Human rights groups have documented abuses by elements of Cameroon’s Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), an elite military corps that receives U.S. counterterrorism support. Amnesty International has accused the BIR of torture and extrajudicial killings, including at a facility in northern Cameroon where U.S. military personnel were reportedly present. AFRICOM has asserted that no U.S. personnel were implicated. Reported abuses and troop redeployments to the Anglophone region pose potential challenges for U.S. security assistance, including for end-use monitoring and congressionally mandated human rights vetting.

The Economy

Cameroon’s economy relies heavily on primary commodity exports, notably crude oil and petroleum products (including Chadian-origin oil exported via the World Bank-financed Chad-Cameroon pipeline), timber, aluminum, and agricultural products such as coffee, cocoa, and cotton. Cameroon ranked 151 out of 188 countries on the 2018 U.N. Human Development Index, above many African countries. Despite several large cities and developed infrastructure in some areas, about 70% of the labor force is engaged in agriculture. Annual economic growth has averaged 4.3% over the past decade, not consistently outpacing population growth. Corruption, policy barriers to trade and regional integration, fiscal mismanagement, security threats, and volatile global commodity prices are key challenges. Growth has suffered due to the crisis in the Anglophone regions, a hub for commercial agriculture.

U.S. Aid and Trade

Most State Department- and USAID-administered bilateral aid to Cameroon is for health programs, accounting for \$59 million out of \$83 million in total FY2017 funding. The balance included \$24 million in Food for Peace (FFP) aid (P.L. 480 Title II) and \$607,000 in International Military Education and Training (IMET). The Administration requested \$44 million for health aid and \$700,000 for IMET in FY2019, and would eliminate FFP globally.

These figures exclude security aid allocated on a regional or global basis, of which Cameroon has been a significant recipient in recent years. Cameroon participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the military has received other U.S. training and equipment in support of peacekeeping deployments to CAR. Internal security forces also have received sizable assistance via the State Department’s Counter-Terrorism Partnerships Fund. The Department of Defense (DOD) has provided further counterterrorism aid under its global train-and-equip authority (currently, 10 U.S.C. 333). Cameroon also benefitted from a 2014 Boko Haram-focused Global Security Contingency Fund program administered by the State Department and DOD.

In February 2019, citing human rights concerns, the State Department stated it would withhold over \$17 million in planned military aid, though some would continue. Some affected aid had been subject to congressional “holds.” DOD also has rescinded plans for a National Guard State Partnership Program and withheld some counterterrorism support. In early 2019, AFRICOM Commander General Thomas Waldhauser told Congress that “small engagements as well as exercises” would continue, asserting that the BIR “have been a good partner with us counterterrorism-wise, but you can’t neglect... alleged atrocities.”

U.S. imports from Cameroon totaled \$213 million in 2018, with U.S. exports totaling \$192 million. Cameroon is eligible for U.S. trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The two countries have a bilateral investment treaty, but U.S. foreign direct investment has fallen in recent years.

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