



Preventing Unrest in the Run-up to Cameroon's Presidential Poll

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What's new? Cameroon is set to hold a presidential election on 12 October. President Paul Biya, 92, will seek to extend his 42-year tenure, despite growing concerns about his undecided succession. Meanwhile, the space for political dissent is shrinking, while the causes of disputes that tainted previous polls remain unresolved.

Why does it matter? The election will take place amid multiple crises. Voting is likely to be disrupted in conflict areas such as the Anglophone regions, where government forces are pitted against separatists, and the Far North, where jihadist attacks are intensifying. Ethno-political tensions and disaffection among young people could also spark unrest.

What should be done? Cameroonian leaders should heed the risks of succession and begin preparing for the post-Biya era. Ahead of the poll, the government should ease tensions by releasing activists from jail and agreeing with the opposition to scale down inflammatory rhetoric. Finally, Yaoundé should consider signing an electoral ceasefire with Anglophone separatists.

I. Overview

Cameroon's presidential election on 12 October will be a stress test for the country's stability. Calls for 92-year-old President Paul Biya to step down after 42 years in power are emanating from beyond the opposition. Meanwhile, frustration is mounting over the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement's (CPDM) repressive tactics, grip on state institutions and refusal to shed light on its thinking about Biya's eventual successor. As in 2018, insecurity could disrupt voting in conflict-affected areas such as the Anglophone regions and the Far North, while inflammatory ethnic rhetoric is gaining ground elsewhere. To calm tensions, Yaoundé should acknowledge the risks surrounding the lack of planning for the post-Biya era, while the CPDM should

organise an elective congress after the poll so supporters can discuss the terms of a succession. As for the election, all candidates should agree to refrain from hate speech by signing a code of good conduct, while the authorities should take exceptional measures to protect civilians in conflict zones, including considering a temporary ceasefire with Anglophone separatists.

Few observers expect Cameroon to hold a free and fair election. The government has made little effort to remedy flaws in the electoral system that caused political turmoil in 2018. At the time, opposition leader Maurice Kamto refused to accept President Biya's victory at the polls, prompting legal battles, street protests and the persecution of opponents. At least four top officials in Kamto's party are among around 50 of his supporters sentenced to years in jail following the unrest. Since that vote, government forces have repeatedly threatened opposition leaders with arrest and banned their events.

Yaoundé has also imposed restrictions on civil society organisations, which previously played a leading role as independent electoral observers. Senior figures in the country's two main electoral bodies, Elections Cameroon and the Constitutional Council, are mainly former government officials appointed by the president, raising public concerns as to their real independence.

Despite the ruling party's hold on power, doubts also loom about Cameroon's political future. Biya's age and long tenure fuel uncertainty about what might happen after the polls. The world's oldest head of state, Biya will be 99 if he completes an additional seven-year term. He has, however, remained elusive regarding his succession and resisted calls to organise internal party elections for fourteen years. In July, he announced that he will be seeking re-election for an eighth term.

His determination to stay in office unsettles many Cameroonians. In 2020 and 2024, his lengthy public absences sparked rumours that he was seriously ill and stoked a power struggle among loyalists, which in turn diverted the government's attention from various security and social crises. Prominent figures from civil society in the north, traditionally a bastion of support for Biya, have called on him to step down, as has the Catholic Church, while key northern political allies have quit his presidential coalition. Military takeovers in other Francophone African countries have demonstrated the risks to stability that Cameroon could face.

Alongside constraints on political freedom and concerns about who might pick up the reins of government, the election could also spur violence. Firm government control of electoral institutions, coupled with a crackdown on opposition figures and civil society bodies, could trigger protests of the results, particularly from young Cameroonians who feel they have been denied a voice in mainstream politics by an ageing elite.

In conflict areas, where hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced, violence could disrupt the ballot itself. Separatist rebels in the North West and South West regions have vowed to obstruct voting in Anglophone regions, which could result in the exclusion of an estimated 15 per cent of voters. A rising tide of jihadist attacks in the Far North, coupled with flooding during the rainy season, could also discourage people from getting to polling stations. More generally, threats of violence are proliferating both online and offline, stirring ethno-political tensions across the country.

To ward off these risks, the Cameroonian government should attempt to defuse tensions and strengthen the credibility of the polls. With a view to allaying fears surrounding Biya's succession, should he win, the CPDM should hold a congress shortly after the presidential election that could openly discuss an eventual succession. For his part, Biya should grant amnesty to all individuals imprisoned in the 2018 post-election disputes, as well as lift sanctions on civil society organisations. All candidates should curb inflammatory rhetoric, online and offline, by adopting a code of good conduct that includes amicable dispute resolution mechanisms. Cameroon's regional and international partners, such as the African Union (AU), the UN and the European Union, as well as France, the U.S., Germany and the UK, should support the code and the cause of transparent, free and fair elections.

Finally, Yaoundé should adopt exceptional measures to ensure the safety of voters in conflict zones. The government and separatist militias should ideally take steps to reduce tensions ahead of the polls, such as releasing Anglophone political prisoners and lifting separatist-imposed lockdowns. They should also agree to cease hostilities during the electoral week and commit at the very least not to harm civilians. The government should also reinforce patrols and border control in the Far North region. Even if time is short before polling day, Cameroon's leaders can still do much to prevent violence, make sure that the vote is as credible as possible and signal to the public that the political future is not laden with dangers.

II. Hegemony and Its Backlash: Cameroon under Biya

After more than four decades with Biya at the helm, the ruling CPDM has yet to develop a credible plan for an orderly transition of power. Since winning re-election in 2018, Biya has managed to navigate economic crises and bitter rivalries among regime loyalists, shoring up his hold on power despite his diminishing public presence. Amid growing calls for him to step down, he declared in July that he would run again on 12 October, to the chagrin of many Cameroonians who

long for a change in leadership.¹ The ruling party's control of state institutions and the judiciary has severely eroded public trust in electoral bodies, while government restrictions and harassment have fragmented the opposition and weakened civil society.²

A. *Biya's Term since 2018*

Cameroon has navigated mounting economic pressures with a degree of success. Biya's administration mitigated the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by creating a solidarity fund and introducing business and social support measures that dampened rising food prices.³ In 2024, he cut government spending and convened regional heads of state to align financial policies in the central African monetary union, keeping the economy stable and curtailing inflation.⁴ In February, the government said it had raised \$1 billion to repair roads and bridges in the Far North, which have experienced a resurgence of attacks by the Islamist insurgency Boko Haram as well as devastating floods the preceding September and October that destroyed public infrastructure, killed livestock and inundated tens of thousands of hectares of farmland.⁵

That said, Biya has adopted a hands-off approach to governing, delegating daily affairs to senior figures in the administration for much of his term since the 2018 election. As a result, for the first time in decades, regime loyalists began to vie openly for power and resources, leading to various political crises. In 2023, senior government officials used the trial of those accused of murdering journalist Martinez Zogo to settle personal scores. Zogo was kidnapped, tortured and killed in Yaoundé in January 2023, reportedly with the involvement of secret service agents and a prominent businessman.⁶ Elite competition for control of the state oil holding company also led to deadlock over the nomination of a new CEO in 2024.⁷

¹ Arrey Elvis Ntui, "Cameroon's 92-year-old President Seeks Re-election as Allies Withdraw Support", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 16 July 2025.

² Crisis Group interviews, senior officials of opposition parties, Mbankomo and Yaoundé, June 2025.

³ "Vie chère : le ministère du Commerce va intensifier les ventes promotionnelles", CRTV, 7 February 2025.

⁴ "The Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community", Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 16 December 2024.

⁵ This amount represents 33 per cent of the budget for the 2023-2027 reconstruction program for the region. "Cameroun : 600 milliards de Fcfa mobilisés en 2 ans pour reconstruire l'Extrême-Nord", *EcoMatin*, 20 February 2025.

⁶ Martinez Zogo was a whistleblower and the host of popular radio programs denouncing corruption and miscarriages of justice. According to fellow journalists, he was murdered to silence the press and prevent the leak of potentially incriminating evidence pointing to government corruption. "Cameroun : début du procès de l'assassinat du journaliste Martinez Zogo", RFI, 25 March 2024.

⁷ "Cameroun : bras-de-fer pour la direction de la stratégique Société nationale des hydrocarbures", RFI, 24 July 2024.

Meanwhile, the plunder of state resources has become increasingly brazen.⁸ In 2021 and 2023, leaked Supreme Court reports blamed officials in two ministries for embezzling funds allocated to ease the economic fallout of the pandemic.⁹ In 2023, the national anti-corruption agency issued a report revealing that vast sums had been lost to graft and mismanagement, but there were no arrests and prosecutions in the aftermath.¹⁰

Power struggles also help explain the stasis in government. Whereas Biya regularly reshuffled his cabinet prior to 2019, he has failed to replace four ministers who died in office between 2021 and 2023, as well as two others who resigned in June.¹¹ Much of this paralysis can be attributed to ruling-party stalwarts, who manoeuvre to block any move that could put rivals into positions of influence.

Though Biya left administrative affairs largely in the hands of ruling-party loyalists, a series of coups in Francophone African countries seemingly spurred him to pay closer attention to the armed forces.¹² After the August 2023 palace coup in neighbouring Gabon, Biya made appointments aimed at breaking up informal networks connecting officers and military units while maintaining the loyalty of the top brass.¹³ He made similar military appointments in October 2024, just hours after returning from a long absence, and again in July, two days after announcing his intention to run for the presidency again. These rotations and promotions involved military personnel from logistics; communications and intelligence; and equipment units, as well as the leadership of different military branches.¹⁴ Though

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, journalist, political analyst and government aide, Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁹ “Au Cameroun, des milliards de francs CFA dédiés à la lutte contre le Covid-19 détournés”, *Le Monde*, 1 June 2021.

¹⁰ “Au Cameroun, la corruption persiste selon un récent rapport de la CONAC”, VOA, 24 September 2024.

¹¹ Prior to March 2019, the average life span of Biya’s cabinets was one year and three months. Despite rumours of imminent reshuffles, the current cabinet has been in place for six years. Crisis Group interviews, senior government aide, Yaoundé, April 2025. “Les quatre ministres du gouvernement qui sont décédés en fonction n’ont pas toujours été remplacés; qu’est ce qui bloque?”, *Le Bled Parle*, 19 May 2023.

¹² Between 2020 and 2023, coups occurred in Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Mali and Gabon. On 29 May 2024, the AU Peace and Security Council noted that coups are linked to governance failings, adding that “greed, selfishness, mismanagement of diversity, mismanagement of opportunity, marginalisation, abuse of human rights, refusal to accept electoral defeat, manipulation of constitution, as well as unconstitutional review of constitution [sic] to serve narrow interest and corruption, among other factors, are potent triggers” of coups. “Coups in Africa”, VOA, 3 October 2023.

¹³ “Au Cameroun, Paul Biya a-t-il remanié son armée à cause du putsch gabonais?”, *Jeune Afrique*, 1 September 2023. “Central Africa’s dinosaur regimes and the art of coup-proofing”, *African Arguments*, 27 November 2023.

¹⁴ “Biya hits the ground running with military appointments”, *The East African*, 23 October 2024. “Cameroun : Paul Biya remanie des hauts gradés de l’armée”,

Cameroon has not experienced a coup attempt since Biya survived one in April 1984, a poll revealed potential public tolerance for a military takeover.¹⁵

The results of this survey reflected the disillusionment of many Cameroonians with their lot, particularly what they perceive to be stagnant living standards. People complain of public-sector corruption, the high cost of living, an underfunded education system (leading to lengthy teacher strikes), an inadequate transport network and a shortage of national identity cards.¹⁶ The government is aware of these issues but has only partially addressed them.

Between March 2022 and May 2025, it paid teachers' arrears and bonuses totalling \$447 million.¹⁷ Even so, secondary school teachers, 40 per cent of whom are women, continued their strike, demanding a special professional status.¹⁸ In February, the government introduced a new national identity card system to clear the backlog that had prevented many citizens from getting access to administrative services and registering for elections. The new card has, in turn, been met with a wave of public indignation since it is almost four times more expensive to acquire than the old one.¹⁹

Africa News, 17 July 2025. "Cameroon: Biya reshuffles army top brass ahead of elections", *Africa Intelligence*, 22 July 2025.

¹⁵ Cameroonian officials sanctioned a newspaper for reporting on the Afrobarometer poll. Although 62 per cent of Cameroonians disapproved of military rule (compared to an African average of 74 per cent), the poll showed that 66 per cent might find it legitimate if democratically elected leaders had abused their power. Overall, the poll results showed that the majority of respondents considered democracy in Cameroon to be flawed. "How do Africans view military interventions?", Afrobarometer, 28 September 2023. "Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren't listening", Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 5, January 2023. In a debate on Equinoxe TV in September 2023, a CPDM supporter suggested that the army could take over if the opposition Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun wins the October election. On 16 June, via a post on X, opposition leader Maurice Kamto expressed fears of an electoral or military coup. "As coup follows coup in West Africa, could Cameroon be next?", RFI, 17 September 2023. "Cameroon governor bans *The Post* over military coup headline", Committee to Protect Journalists, 15 September 2023. "Cameroun : 'Si le MRC gagne l'élection présidentielle en 2025, l'armée peut faire un coup d'État contre Kamto', les propos incendiaires de Patrick Rifoé font jaser", 237Actu.com, 6 September 2023.

¹⁶ "Hausse des prix : le Cameroun au bord d'une spirale inflationniste, alerte l'INS", *Investir au Cameroun*, 22 February 2023. "Cameroun-CNI : 'Faut-il dépouiller à ce point le Peuple?', Célestin Bedzigui", *Journal du Cameroun*, 15 July 2024.

¹⁷ "Dettes salariales : 558 enseignants en attente de rappel pour un montant de 33,5 milliards de FCFA", *StopBlaBlaCam*, 4 April 2025.

¹⁸ State-employed teachers participated in periodic sit-ins as part of the movement, which was called "On a trop supporté" (or "Enough is Enough" in English). Crisis Group interviews, women teachers, Bafoussam and Douala, September 2024. "Secondary education, teachers (% female)", UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

¹⁹ For years, many citizens did not have identity cards and had to rely on receipts of ID applications, which some institutions rejected, to prove their identity. The old card cost around 2,800 CFA francs (\$5), whereas the new version costs 10,000 francs (\$18). In his opening statement at the National Assembly's June session,

B. *Calls for Biya to Step Down*

Biya's age and health have long been major concerns for Cameroonians. In 2024, uncertainty about his condition caused outright alarm.²⁰ After a visit to China in early September, the president abruptly disappeared from public view, only to reappear in Yaoundé 50 days later.²¹ During his absence, various government ministers dismissed rumours that Biya was terminally ill or deceased.²² Notwithstanding Biya's eventual return and seemingly robust health, this episode underscored the murkiness surrounding the country's transition mechanisms in the event of a sudden power vacuum. It also led to feverish speculation regarding Biya's candidacy in the October presidential election. In a speech on New Year's Eve and again in February, Biya said he wished "to continue to serve the nation", without making clear whether he intended to seek another term.²³ On 13 July, he finally announced on social media that he would run.²⁴

The dominant view among observers is that Biya appears likely to win the election and remain in power. His command of the ruling party, the CPDM, is central to his political longevity. The party has not held an elective leadership conference since 2011, and no one has ever dared to challenge Biya for the party presidency.²⁵ The CPDM is intolerant of dissent: it tends to reward supporters with government positions and punish those who turn against it.²⁶ Furthermore, the party has in many ways become synonymous with the state by entrenching itself in key institutions: it holds about 90 per cent of elective offices nationwide. This institutionalised dominance has made meaningful opposition difficult. Lastly, the CPDM draws support from an alliance known as the Presidential Majority, which has traditionally

Speaker Cavaye Djibril acknowledged the high cost and called on parliament to offer financial support to people to pay for the new identity cards so they can register to vote. Crisis Group interviews, politician and university researcher, Bamenda; development aid worker, Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

²⁰ "Cameroon's Paul Biya is increasingly absent from global events", *The Africa Report*, 7 October 2021.

²¹ "Paul Biya, de retour au Cameroun après plusieurs semaines d'absence", *Le Monde*, 21 October 2024.

²² "Cameroon bans discussing president's health as absence fuels speculation", *The Guardian*, 11 October 2024.

²³ "Présidentielle au Cameroun : Paul Biya, candidat à mots couverts – par Georges Dougueli", *Jeune Afrique*, 17 March 2025.

²⁴ Ntui, "Cameroon's 92-year-old President Seeks Re-election as Allies Withdraw Support", op. cit.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader and journalist, Douala and Yaoundé, May 2025.

²⁶ In April 2025, Thelie Onana – a ruling-party member and elected councillor in the small town of Monatele, in the Centre region – asked a court to declare the CPDM's chairmanship vacant and called for Biya to retire. In response, the CPDM threatened to expel Onana. On 18 June, the judge disqualified himself from the case and Onana took the matter to the court of appeals. It seems unlikely that the lawsuit will result in a judgment that will prompt changes in the CPDM. "Cameroun : Léon Theiller Onana affronte la justice après ses propos sur Biya", *Le Bled Parle*, 6 May 2025.

included four opposition parties with a solid base in the northern regions, home to around 40 per cent of the electorate.²⁷

Even so, parts of Biya's power base appear to have become more brittle, potentially making the outcome of the election less predictable. The CPDM's alliance with northern opposition parties appears in particular to be crumbling. Under pressure from their supporters, two government ministers from the Presidential Majority, Issa Tchiroma Bakary and Bello Bouba Maïgari, in June announced their intention to stand in the election.²⁸ Both ministers expressed frustration with the country's economic and security problems and their growing estrangement from Biya.²⁹

For the last two decades, support from Tchiroma's Front pour le Salut National du Cameroun and Bouba's Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès had done much to guarantee victories for the president, thanks to their support in the country's north. Signs of discontent are also visible within the ruling party: a group of low-ranking CPDM members, undaunted by the party's aversion to dissent, declared in June that Biya is too old to run.³⁰

A groundswell of voices outside the presidential coalition is also urging Biya to retire. The most prominent is the Catholic Church, the country's largest religious denomination and a keen observer of its political affairs.³¹ The Church has often mentioned the social and political grievances of Cameroonians, and its bishops have spoken out against rising tribalism and ethnic tensions.³² In December 2024, Archbishop Samuel Kleda of Douala shocked the government by asking Biya to step aside, arguing that it was time for a peaceful, democratic transition.³³ A wave of Catholic bishops followed suit,

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government aides, opposition party members and election analyst, Yaoundé, June 2025. The four parties are Bello Bouba Maïgari's Union nationale pour la démocratie et le progrès; Issa Tchiroma Bakari's Front pour le salut national du Cameroun; Hamadou Moustapha's Alliance Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès; and the Mouvement pour la défense de la République, formerly led by the late Dakole Daïssala. Eleven parties plus the CPDM make up the Presidential Majority. "Majorité présidentielle : Soutien réaffirmé à Paul Biya", RDPCPDM, 28 July 2020. Crisis Group interview, senior civil servant, Yaoundé, June 2025.

²⁸ "Cameroun : Issa Tchiroma Bakary et Bello Bouba retournent à la case départ", *Journal du Cameroun*, 30 June 2025.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Residents of Biya's native South region, who were unaffiliated with the ruling party, released a letter criticising his hold on office and calling for new leadership. The letter prompted others in the area to declare their support for the incumbent. Crisis Group interviews, government aides and civil society leaders, Buea and Yaoundé, April-June 2025.

³¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°138, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue*, 25 April 2018.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Cameroon: Catholic bishops urge President Biya to step aside ahead of October elections", *Vatican News*, 10 January 2025.

either openly calling upon Biya not to run or urging people to register and protect the ballot from fraud.³⁴ A group of Protestant pastors then aligned themselves with the Catholic Church until their leaders prohibited them from criticising the president.³⁵

Meanwhile, the uncertainty surrounding Cameroon's future leadership is likely to continue. Biya's resistance to holding a CPDM national congress or appointing a replacement has so far prevented any succession planning.

For several years, CPDM technocrats toyed with the idea of grooming Biya's son Franck to succeed his father. The "Franckiste movement" gained momentum following the younger Biya's return from Europe in 2020, when he quickly became a prominent figure in Cameroon's political scene. He travelled with great fanfare to the North and West regions and was formally introduced by his father to French President Emmanuel Macron during the latter's state visit in July 2022. Senior CPDM officials for their part refrained from openly supporting or criticising the plan, signalling a degree of unease about the prospect of a dynastic transition. The elder Biya reportedly dismissed the idea sometime in 2023.³⁶ At present, no one in the party is openly promoting a successor or discussing how a transition should be managed.

To avert a power vacuum, some presidential advisers have previously suggested that Biya create the position of vice president.³⁷ In the event of a presidential vacancy, the constitution tasks the Senate president or his deputy with leading the country to the next elections.³⁸ Some observers believe that assigning this role to a vice president – who would be elected on the presidential ticket – could foster unity among the ruling elite, reduce the risk of a military takeover and prevent a clan war after Biya's death.³⁹ But the president has never been keen on a visible successor, fearing that it could hasten his political downfall and put an end to the competition for loyalty that keeps potential successors in check.⁴⁰ In any case, changing the constitution will be impossible in the short time before the presidential vote.

³⁴ A group of cabinet ministers responded by gathering declarations of support for Biya from Muslim preachers and traditional rulers. "Présidentielle 2025 : Les autorités traditionnelles et religieuses du Grand Nord derrière Paul Biya", Ministry of Territorial Administration, 28 January 2025.

³⁵ "L'Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun interdit à ses pasteurs de se prononcer sur la situation politique du pays", *Actu Cameroun*, 13 January 2025.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, government aides and analysts, Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

³⁷ "Cameroun : Paul Biya va-t-il se choisir un vice-président ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 6 April 2022.

³⁸ "Law No. 2008/001 of 14 April 2008 to amend and supplement some provisions of Law No.96/06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June 1972", Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, woman civil society leader, Douala, May 2025.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior government aide, Yaoundé, June 2025.

C. *Repression of Opposition and Civil Society*

The field of opposition candidates is little changed since 2018, demonstrating both the high political cost of challenging Biya and the suffocating grip of the ruling-party machine.⁴¹ The three main opposition figures who ran in 2018 – Maurice Kamto, Cabral Libii and Joshua Osih – all made bids to run again but an elections supervisory body banned Kamto.⁴²

Kamto, the 71-year-old leader of the Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun (MRC) and former deputy justice minister, enjoys strong support in the Littoral region and in his native West region.⁴³ Libii, a 45-year-old journalist and university lecturer from the centre of the country, leads the Parti Camerounais pour la Réconciliation Nationale and is popular among young people living in Francophone urban areas.⁴⁴ Osih, aged 56, a Douala-based parliamentarian and businessman from the South West region, is the candidate for the Social Democratic Front (SDF). Once Cameroon's main opposition party, the SDF has lost a lot of ground since the early 2000s and weakened further as conflict in the Anglophone regions, its traditional stronghold, has dragged on.

Most leading opposition figures openly support restructuring the state into some form of federal system.⁴⁵ They argue that a carefully designed federation could reduce ethnic tensions and contribute

⁴¹ Some analysts attribute the lack of credible political alternatives to the fact that Cameroonians with presidential ambitions, particularly those in the CPDM, fear Biya's retaliation. Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader and analyst, Buea and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁴² In 2018, Kamto got 14 per cent of the vote, coming in second behind Biya. Libii won 6 per cent and Osih a little over 3 per cent. "Cameroun : Voici les résultats détaillés et complets de la Présidentielle 2018", *Le Bled Parle*, 22 October 2018. On 27 July, Cameroon's electoral authority, Elecam, removed Kamto from the electoral list. On 5 August, the Constitutional Council confirmed this decision. "Première affaire appelée, celle du #Manidem. Les recours de Maurice Kamto et Dieudonné #Yebga rejetés parce que non fondés #Présidentielle2025". Post on X by *Cameroon Tribune*, @CamerounTribune, 10:37am, 5 August 2025.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Buea and Bamenda; journalists, Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁴⁵ Kamto, who became a proponent of federation following the Anglophone conflict, argues for the division of Cameroon into four or five federated states based on cultural, ethnic, historical and geographical criteria. Libii advocates transforming the country's 58 existing administrative divisions into ethno-cultural regional entities. Osih continues the SDF's longstanding campaign for a two- or ten-state federation. Issa Tchiroma, who was Biya's communication minister and government spokesperson when the Anglophone crisis broke out in 2016, promised a federation and a referendum to "listen" to Anglophones when he resigned from government in June 2025. Other opposition candidates, such as Akere Muna, as well as newcomers Hiram Samuel Iyodi and Ateki Seta Caxton, also back a federal structure and talks to resolve the Anglophone conflict. Crisis Group interviews, presidential candidate, senior opposition politicians, analysts and researchers, Bamenda, Buea and Yaoundé, April-August 2025.

to local development. More importantly, it could fulfil Anglophone aspirations for more autonomy and pave the way for an end to the separatist conflict.⁴⁶

As in 2018, men continue to dominate the presidential race. So far, no major party has put forward a woman as a candidate.⁴⁷ The highest-profile woman candidate so far is Tomaino Ndam Njoya, mayor of Foumban, who announced her candidacy in February.⁴⁸ She is the leader of the opposition Union Démocratique du Cameroun, a role she inherited from her late husband. The few other women who are prominent in Cameroonian politics lead civil society campaigns for human rights and democracy.⁴⁹ Issues central to women's well-being, such as a rise in gruesome cases of femicide, do not feature in political debate at the highest level.⁵⁰

The overall weakness of Cameroon's opposition can be attributed in large part to state repression, particularly the imprisonment – or the threat of imprisonment – of prominent figures. Following the 2018 ballot, the authorities kept Kamto and his deputy, Mamadou Mota, behind bars from 2019 to 2022 for organising election protests.⁵¹ Other MRC members, including spokesperson Olivier Bibou Nissack and secretary-general Alain Fogué, are still serving prison sentences for allegedly organising those protests. In July 2024, gendarmes summoned Kamto and two MRC officials for questioning regarding an undisclosed matter, but later withdrew the summons.⁵² The next March, officials from the Wouri Division in the Littoral region summoned Albert Nzongang, a politician who backs Kamto, for questioning over publication of a video criticising the territorial administration minister.⁵³

⁴⁶ Many members of the Presidential Majority also support a federal system. In the north, some privately say it would be an effective means of reducing their region's neglect by the southern ruling elite. Others see a transition to a federation as a way to protect Biya's South region from retribution when he eventually leaves power. Crisis Group interviews, senior opposition campaigners, analysts and journalists, Yaoundé, April-June 2025.

⁴⁷ Two lesser-known women announced they will run: Véronique Eboutou of the Parti National pour l'Action Citoyenne au Cameroun and independent candidate Bijou Gérardine Ongmakagne Heu. Crisis Group interviews, woman civil society leader, Douala, May 2025.

⁴⁸ "Présidentielle 2025 : Tomaino Ndam Njoya officialise sa candidature", *Jeune Afrique*, 21 February 2025.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, women civil society leaders, Buea and Douala, December 2024 and May 2025.

⁵⁰ The major parties and candidates are not promoting gender equality policy in their campaign declarations; nor are they addressing the high level of violence against women. "The Alarming Rise of Femicide in Cameroon", *Humangle*, 10 March 2025.

⁵¹ "Cameroun : Mamadou Mota, numéro 2 du MRC, condamné à deux ans de prison", *Jeune Afrique*, 10 September 2019.

⁵² "Cameroun-Bafoussam : pourquoi Maurice Kamto est convoqué à la Légion de Gendarmerie de l'Ouest", *Journal du Cameroun*, 9 July 2024.

⁵³ "Douala : Albert Dzongang convoqué par le préfet du Wouri pour ses propos sur Atanga Nji", *Le Bled Parle*, 26 March 2025.

The government deploys other manoeuvres to harass the opposition. It consistently refuses to authorise opposition events or sends in its forces to interrupt them.⁵⁴ Sabotage attempts are common. For example, officials tried (and failed) to stoke a leadership dispute in Libii's party in 2024 by backing a faction that opposed his candidacy.⁵⁵ Opposition leaders who have formed micro-coalitions in a bid to challenge Biya's political supremacy often saw their efforts banned by the government.⁵⁶

Persecution of the opposition is frequently combined with the CPDM's well-tested strategy of co-optation to ensure that its adversaries are unable to form a coalition with chances of winning. Though they had previously been targets of government repression or had disagreed with Biya's rule, opposition leaders Bello Bouba, Maurice Kamto and Issa Tchiroma joined the executive at various points, undermining efforts to challenge him in the polls.⁵⁷ While the SDF has not formally entered an alliance with the CPDM, the two parties have held talks in the past, leading the SDF to be widely perceived as being closer to the government than to the opposition.⁵⁸

Besides political opponents, civil society organisations and critics of government policy also find themselves facing increasing restrictions on freedom of speech. In a case that sparked a public outcry, police arrested TikTok influencer Junior Ngombe in July 2024 for posting videos accusing the ruling party of rigging previous elections. A military tribunal in Yaoundé released him a week later.⁵⁹ That same month, social media activist Steve Akam (also known as Ramon Cotta) was arrested in Gabon and extradited to Cameroon in what human rights lawyers said was an extrajudicial procedure. Akam remains in jail, with authorities deeming his videos too critical of Biya.⁶⁰

In December 2024, the government suspended three and banned two human rights and pro-democracy associations, claiming that they had breached financial compliance and administrative reporting require-

⁵⁴ "Cabral Libii interdit d'activités dans l'Adamaoua : Richard Tamfu pousse un coup de gueule", *Actu Cameroun*, 20 February 2025.

⁵⁵ "Au Cameroun, Cabral Libii en passe de perdre son par(t)i?", *Jeune Afrique*, 18 May 2024.

⁵⁶ In March 2024, the territorial administration minister declared two opposition coalitions, the Alliance pour le changement and the Alliance politique pour la transition, illegal. "Cameroun : Le gouvernement juge illégales les coalitions de l'opposition", RFI, 13 March 2024. "Guibai Gatama : 'une coalition de partis du Grand-Sud peut-elle réellement battre Paul Biya en octobre 2025?'" *Actu Cameroun*, 26 May 2025.

⁵⁷ The CPDM poached the following opposition figures and appointed them ministers: Augustin Kodock (1992, Union des Populations du Cameroun), Bello Bouba (1997), Maurice Kamto (2004) and Issa Tchiroma (2007).

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, politicians and civil society leaders, Bamenda and Buea, April-May 2025.

⁵⁹ "Social Media Activist Arrested in Cameroon over Social Media Posts", Human Rights Watch, 29 July 2024.

⁶⁰ "Cameroonian Social Media Activist Feared Forcibly Disappeared", Human Rights Watch, 13 August 2024.

ments.⁶¹ This move has raised fears that civil society representatives will be barred from monitoring the vote.

The crackdown on the opposition and civil society bodes ill for the conduct of the presidential election. In previous polls, the government had allowed civil society to monitor the vote and report incidents of electoral fraud.⁶² Without scrutiny from independent observers, the presidential election could lose what credibility it retains in a country governed by one of Africa's longest-serving leaders.

D. *A Flawed Electoral System*

Although elections under Biya have rarely yielded surprises, the opposition and civil society have long pushed to level the playing field. Their calls have largely gone unheeded. Little effort has been made by the government to remedy the electoral shortcomings that marred the 2018 polls.⁶³

One major concern is the perceived partisanship of the two main electoral bodies – Elections Cameroon (Elecam), which organises voting, and the Constitutional Council, which settles disputes and announces results.⁶⁴ Most senior officials in both institutions are appointed by the president and widely seen as aligned with the ruling party. Some Elecam board members have a proven track record of standing up for transparency, and some of the staff are frustrated by the perception that they are at the government's beck and call.⁶⁵ But the two most recent appointees to Elecam's board, both handpicked by Biya, are reported to have previously been active members of the ruling party.⁶⁶ In November 2024, the president of the Constitutional Council attended an event rallying support for Biya's candidacy, sparking protests from the opposition.⁶⁷ Then, the following April, Biya appointed a party loyalist to replace a deceased council member.⁶⁸

⁶¹ "Cameroon: Minister Suspends Prominent Human Rights Group", Human Rights Watch, 17 December 2024.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, woman civil society leader, Douala; government aide, Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, journalists, politicians and researchers, Bamenda, Buea and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group Africa Report N°295, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, 3 December 2020.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Elecam senior officials and senior opposition party members, Yaoundé, May-July 2025.

⁶⁶ "Cameroun-Elecam : des interrogations autour des nouveaux membres nommés au Conseil électoral", *Journal du Cameroun*, 23 December 2024.

⁶⁷ In his defence, Clement Atangana, president of the Constitutional Council, said he left the event in Mbalmayo before the motion of support for Biya was read out. "Constitutional Council President Denies Endorsing Biya for 2025 Elections", *MimiMefoInfo*, 12 November 2024.

⁶⁸ "Conseil constitutionnel : Monique Ouli remplace Emmanuel Bonde", *StopBlaBlaCam*, 9 April 2025.

Another longstanding demand from advocates of more transparent elections is the introduction of a single-ballot voting system. At present, voters receive multiple ballots and select their candidate by placing the paper with his or her name into the ballot box. Civil society groups have warned that ballots of opposition candidates sometimes run out, potentially disenfranchising voters.⁶⁹ Under the single-ballot system, the candidates' names are listed on one sheet and voters select their preferred option by ticking a box. This system is not only more cost-effective but also more secure, reducing the risk of fraud and easing logistical burdens.⁷⁰ Cameroon's authorities, however, have ignored calls from domestic groups and international observers to adopt this reform.

Vote tallying is also a recurrent source of dispute. The outdated practice of physically transmitting result sheets through multiple electoral offices to the national vote-counting commission in Yaoundé has proven vulnerable to fraud. In 2018, poorly completed result sheets led to numerous fraud allegations from opposition candidates.⁷¹ The \ current setup gives the Constitutional Council jurisdiction over such disputes, requiring complaints to be filed in the capital within only 72 hours. Many experts say the deadline is unfair due to the time it would take to travel to the relevant polling stations and collect evidence.⁷²

The 2025 electoral cycle did not get off to a good start. Elecam failed to publish the updated electoral register by the 30 December 2024 legal deadline, citing incomplete voter registration and unresolved duplicate entries.⁷³ Gaps in voter registration reflect, among other factors, gender inequality. As it stands, men outnumber women by half a million on the electoral register, despite women constituting 50.6 per cent of the population.⁷⁴ Kamto's party has taken legal action to compel Elecam to publish the polling register, but several courts have declined jurisdiction over the matter.⁷⁵ In May, Elecam

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society member and analyst, Yaoundé, May 2025.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, op. cit.

⁷¹ "Présidentielle au Cameroun : plusieurs partis d'opposition dénoncent des 'fraudes'", *Le Monde*, 9 October 2018.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, senior opposition party and elections officials, Mbankomo and Yaoundé, June 2025.

⁷³ As of July, 8.2 million voters were on the register, pending verification by Elecam. Jean Michel Nintcheu, a parliamentarian whose Alliance Politique pour le Changement backs Kamto, called Elecam's data "a declaration of war", arguing that the number should be much higher. Analysts estimate the number of eligible voters at between 12 and 15 million. Crisis Group interviews, elections officials and senior political leaders, Yaoundé, June 2025. "Cameroun : polémique autour du dernier fichier électoral de 2024 et ses 7,8 millions d'inscrits", RFI, 3 January 2025. Elecam data, July 2025.

⁷⁴ Elecam data, July 2025.

⁷⁵ "Cameroun : la justice se déclare incompétente, la publication de la liste électorale bloquée", VOA, 19 February 2025. In addition to enabling parties to check for

deployed one thousand new biometric kits in an effort to enrol the last tranche of voters before the president announced the election date.⁷⁶

Decisions made since then by the electoral bodies regarding the official list of candidates have reinforced Cameroonians' perceptions of bias. In late July, Elecam provisionally approved thirteen of the 83 candidates, excluding Kamto on the grounds that the Mouvement africain pour la nouvelle indépendance et la démocratie (Manidem) party, which fielded him, had a second candidate, a decision that sparked a court challenge.⁷⁷ On 5 August, the Constitutional Council dismissed most of the 35 petitions challenging Elecam's list, including Kamto's.⁷⁸

Efforts by donors to enhance the credibility of Cameroon's elections have borne little fruit. Western partners have historically supported the electoral process by funding electoral institutions, civil society and election observers.⁷⁹ The AU issued a report in 2018 with practical recommendations to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections, none of which has been adopted.⁸⁰ Some civil society groups say international partners are gradually disengaging from efforts to promote electoral transparency.⁸¹ Opposition forces, meanwhile, criticised the UN Development Programme's offer to Elecam to provide technical assistance, claiming that they were not consulted and warning that the initiative could simply reinforce the status quo.⁸²

fraudulent or multiple enrolments, the register also allows them to locate polling stations. Opposition politicians have pointed out that in the last elections in 2020, Elecam kept polling stations in places associated with the ruling party, including military barracks and residences of traditional rulers, which could intimidate voters. Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders and journalists, Buea and Yaoundé, April-May 2025. On 14 July, Kamto requested that the Constitutional Council compel Elecam to publish the enrolment data before validating the election date Biya had announced. "Présidentielle 2025 / Cameroun : Maurice Kamto conteste la convocation du corps électoral", *EcoMatin*, 16 July 2025.

⁷⁶ "Élections 2025 : Elecam déploie 1,000 nouveaux kits biométriques pour moderniser l'inscription des électeurs", *StopBlaBlaCam*, 8 May 2025.

⁷⁷ Of the 83 initial applicants, Elecam approved thirteen. Anicet Ekane, leader of the Manidem party, described Kamto's rejection as a provocation but called for the public to remain calm while he challenged the decision at the Constitutional Council. "Cameroon opposition leader banned from challenging world's oldest president", BBC, 27 July 2025.

⁷⁸ The Constitutional Council removed Hilaire Macaire Dzipan from Elecam's original list, bringing the number of authorised candidates to twelve. Crisis Group interviews, legal officer and senior government aide, Yaoundé, August 2025.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Douala and Yaoundé, May 2025.

⁸⁰ "Press releases: Preliminary Statement African Union Election Observation Mission to the 7 October 2018 Presidential Election in the Republic of Cameroon, Yaoundé, 9 October 2018", African Union, 11 October 2018.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Douala and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁸² Afterward, Elecam invited most opposition parties, along with government and civil society representatives, to consultations. Crisis Group interviews, senior UN officials, senior Elecam staff, civil society and political leaders, Mbankomo and Yaoundé, June 2025. The UNDP 2025-2027 elections assistance program aims to

With trust in the electoral system low, the lack of transparency and meaningful reforms could jeopardise the forthcoming poll. Over the past seven years, the government has done little to bolster public confidence in electoral bodies. As a result, opposition parties and civil society groups are likely to continue challenging official decisions through legal action or protest, particularly if major opposition candidates are excluded. The exclusion of Kamto is likely to increase Cameroonians' loss of faith in the democratic system and could motivate many to reject the outcome outright, potentially triggering unrest.

III. The Risks of Electoral Unrest

Armed conflict and unresolved economic grievances threaten the integrity of the October election. In 2018, Anglophone separatist violence curtailed voter participation and obstructed electoral operations in the North West and South West regions. In the Far North, jihadist threats and extreme weather could again hamper voter turnout. Meanwhile, inflammatory ethnic rhetoric and the government's inaction on the issue of hate speech are ratcheting up tensions. Lastly, the surge in voter registration among young Cameroonians – partly driven by online activism – signals their growing frustration at being excluded from the political mainstream.

A. *Conflict in the Anglophone Regions and the Far North*

The persistence of armed conflict in Cameroon's volatile west and north poses a serious challenge to credible elections. The Anglophone conflict in the west, as well as Islamist insurgent attacks in the Far North region, threatens the smooth conduct of the vote. These areas are home to more than 40 per cent of Cameroon's 3.3 million internally displaced people, many of whom are likely to face difficulties in registering to vote or may encounter hostility from long-time residents who have different political loyalties.⁸³

1. The vote in the Anglophone regions

In 2018, the separatist revolt against the government's longstanding exclusion from legal and education systems was in its early stages. Yet the conflict still tainted the vote.⁸⁴ Separatist militias called for

promote dialogue, improve Elecam's technical capacity and increase the participation of women, young people, people with disabilities, members of socially vulnerable groups and media figures. Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and civil society leader, Yaoundé, April 2025.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, internally displaced Anglophones, Yaoundé, May 2025.

⁸⁴ After nine years of fighting in which more than 7,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, the Anglophone conflict grinds on. The government has avoided talks and allowed the crisis to escalate into a prolonged guerrilla war involving mass atrocities by both sides. In 2023, a separatist faction

a boycott and violently enforced a lockdown on residents of the two regions on voting day.⁸⁵ As a result, voter turnout in the two affected regions, the North West and South West, was 9 per cent, compared to 54 per cent nationally. As the two regions comprised around 15 per cent of Cameroon's registered voters before the conflict began, opposition parties cited the low turnout as one of the grounds for contesting the election results.⁸⁶

Separatist militias also targeted subsequent elections. In February 2020, they attacked Elecam facilities in the North West region and kidnapped personnel prior to municipal and parliamentary polls.⁸⁷ The following month, the Constitutional Council postponed the parliamentary polls in eleven constituencies in the Anglophone regions due to insecurity.⁸⁸ In March 2023, separatists seeking to disrupt the senatorial elections killed two election officials.⁸⁹

As the conflict rumbles on, voters in the Anglophone regions are unenthusiastic about the presidential vote. Residents say they are dismayed that the status quo remains unchanged despite nine years of conflict.⁹⁰ Many see casting a ballot as validating Yaoundé's reluctance to resolve the crisis peacefully and preference for letting

signed a military alliance with pro-Biafran insurgents in Nigeria. The year 2024 saw the highest number of recorded violent events in the Anglophone regions. Crisis Group interviews, men and women belonging to civil society groups, Bamenda, Buea and Limbe, April-May 2025. Crisis Group Briefing N°188, *A Second Look at Cameroon's Anglophone Special Status*, 31 March 2023.

⁸⁵ "Présidentielle au Cameroun : énorme abstention et violences en zone anglophone", *La Croix*, 7 October 2018.

⁸⁶ "Trois candidats demandent l'annulation du scrutin présidentiel au Cameroun", VOA, 11 October 2018.

⁸⁷ In recent years, separatists have systematically targeted individuals involved in Cameroonian politics in the Anglophone regions, both before, during and after elections. They have used intimidatory tactics such as burning down homes and kidnapping to force people to stop electoral activities. In December 2021, one year after his election as president of the North West Regional House of Chiefs and vice president of the North West Regional Assembly, separatist rebels kidnapped Fon Kevin Yakum and held him captive for eighteen months. Targeted killings have also been widespread. In 2020, for example, gunmen killed the mayor of Mamfe in the South West region. Between November 2023 and May 2024, separatists assassinated the deputy mayor of Balikumbat, an assistant mayor of Babessi, and the mayor of Belo – all of which are localities in the North West region. In October 2024, they kidnapped and killed the woman deputy mayor of Bamenda II, also in the North West. Other mayors have survived kidnappings and assassination attempts. "Cameroon's February 2020 Legislative & Municipal Elections: Electoral Stakes, Political System Implications, and Fallout from the Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions: Data Annex", Constitutional Options Project, 2020.

⁸⁸ "Cameroon separatists ignore calls for peaceful elections", VOA, 24 January 2020.

⁸⁹ "Cameroun : les législatives reportées dans les régions anglophones auront lieu le 22 mars", *Jeune Afrique*, 7 March 2020.

⁹⁰ "Two election officials killed in NW Cameroon as separatists vow to disrupt Senate elections", VOA, 20 January 2023.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, men and women civil society group officials, Bamenda, Buea and Limbe, April-May 2025.

Anglophone opposition and civil society leaders languish in prison. Some question why they should take part in an election run by a Francophone-led government, when the main candidates are all Francophone and their own political leaders are in jail.⁹¹

Insecurity also makes it difficult for Elecam to carry out electoral activities in the North West and South West. Not surprisingly, the two regions have recorded the lowest number of new registered voters.⁹² In addition, as the conflict has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, many of those who registered before the crisis erupted are unlikely to be in their polling wards today.⁹³

For their part, separatist militias have vowed to disrupt the polls. Leaders of various armed groups have announced plans to coordinate their actions, viewing their ability to prevent voting as an indication of their control of territory.⁹⁴ Some militia leaders, backed by social media activists, have warned people not to register.⁹⁵ In July, others reacted warily to attempts by the Francophone opposition to seek a rapprochement with the Anglophone public by calling on militias to suspend fighting and allow voting in order to oust Biya.⁹⁶ Although government troops are already trying to secure roads and government offices, Elecam is unlikely to deploy in most polling wards in the two regions, as its priority is staff safety. Even if the electoral body manages to organise special voting centres in safer urban areas such as Bamenda, Limbe and Kumba, a heavy military presence near these locations could deter people from casting a ballot.⁹⁷

2. The vote in the Far North

The Far North is an important source of support for Biya's government. With over 1.2 million registered voters, the region has the highest number of CPDM voters and the second-highest total enrolment after the Centre region. In 2018, it was the only region where Biya cam-

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Bamenda; internally displaced people, Douala and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

⁹² "Fichier électoral : En 17 ans, Elecam n'a inscrit que 7 millions d'électeurs", Data Cameroon, 30 March 2023.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, political analyst and civil society member, Bamenda and Buea, April-May 2025.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, separatist faction leaders and activists in the U.S. and Denmark, May 2025.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, U.S.-based separatist activists and civil society members in Bamenda and Buea, April-May 2025.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group monitoring and analysis of statements and social media posts featuring separatist faction leader Chris Anu, pro-Southern Cameroons activists Mark Bareta and Fabiano Deco, human rights lawyer Felix Agbor Nkongho, Francophone blogger Boris Bertolt and opposition leader Issa Tchiroma Bakary, July 2025. Separatists are planning to impose a lockdown of the regions from 1 to 12 October, while some residents are arranging to flee the area during that period. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Buea, Bamenda and Limbe, April-July 2025.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Bamenda, Buea and Limbe, April-May 2025.

paigned in person.⁹⁸ Northerners often complain that members of the southern ruling elite refer to them derogatorily as “sheep” because of their perceived blind support for the ruling party despite its failure to address their problems.⁹⁹ These frustrations led many supporters of the northern parties to call on their political leader to withdraw from the alliance with the CPDM.¹⁰⁰

Still, it is hard to gauge the real extent of the region's loyalty to the ruling party. Independent scrutiny of the election was almost non-existent in 2018, due to the threat of jihadist attack and the obstacle it posed for civil society observers.¹⁰¹ Opposition parties had no representatives at polling stations, not even in Maroua, the regional capital. Nevertheless, allegations that the parties of the Presidential Majority had fraudulently completed polling sheets circulated widely.¹⁰² This time, the crumbling of Biya's northern political alliance and the open dissent shown by residents toward government officials visiting the region suggest that voters would not remain silent if they suspected election fraud.¹⁰³

Because of its proximity to Nigeria, the Far North has long been plagued by insecurity.¹⁰⁴ From 2014 onward, attacks by the Nigeria-based Islamist insurgency Boko Haram displaced thousands and severely disrupted education and health services. Violence against civilians eased after Cameroon's military stepped up its presence in the region and strengthened collaboration with troops from neighbouring countries around Lake Chad. But insurgents stepped up attacks again in 2025, particularly in the Mayo Tsanaga, Mayo Sava and Logone-et-Chari divisions.¹⁰⁵ Militants from Boko Haram splinter

⁹⁸ “2018 Presidential Elections: Campaign speech by H.E. Paul Biya, President of the Republic and Candidate of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, to the population of the Far-North Region. Maroua, 29 September 2018”, Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, September 2018.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society members, Maroua, April-May 2025.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Cameroun – Présidentielle 2018 : A l'Extrême-Nord, l'inquiétante absence des scrutateurs des partis de l'opposition”, *Actu Cameroun*, 9 October 2018.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, diplomatic staff, Yaoundé, June 2025. “Le ministre de l'Administration territoriale annonce de potentielles poursuites judiciaires contre Aboubakar Ousmane Mey, le frère du ministre de l'Economie Alamine Ousmane Mey”, *Journal du Cameroun*, 7 July 2025.

¹⁰⁴ For more on jihadist violence, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°241, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, 16 November 2016; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019. Boko Haram has split, with one major faction adopting the name Islamic State West Africa Province and another keeping the original group's preferred moniker Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°196, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters*, 28 March 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Boko Haram has directed its deadly attacks mostly at civilians but also at military positions. On 6 May, insurgents attacked a police station in Hile-Alifa in the Logone-et-Chari Division, killing three soldiers and ransacking the mayor's house. On 9 June, Boko Haram killed at least four soldiers in a drone attack in

factions primarily carry out raids to steal food and supplies, making farmland, bodies of water and grazing areas around Lake Chad hazardous for farmers and fisherfolk.¹⁰⁶

Poverty has climbed in recent years. In 2021, clashes between ethnic groups competing for water and farmland displaced more than 100,000 people.¹⁰⁷ In September and October 2024, huge floods damaged houses, schools and bridges, disrupting the livelihoods of nearly half a million people.¹⁰⁸ At the time the presidential election is due to be held, in October, the region is more likely to experience heavy rains and flooding. Adverse weather could hinder preparations and discourage people from travelling to polling stations on voting day.¹⁰⁹

In response to the hardships, the government has embarked on an ambitious reconstruction program for the Far North, which could cost \$3 billion by the time it is completed in 2027.¹¹⁰ But the initiative remains fraught with risk and uncertainty. It is unclear how the government will raise and deploy the substantial funds required for such a large-scale intervention, particularly given the resurgence of Boko Haram attacks. Also, Logone-et-Chari, one of the worst-hit areas, is prone to extreme weather events that could delay infrastructure building.

B. *Incendiary Ethnic Rhetoric*

Inflammatory rhetoric on television, radio and social media has increased as the election approaches, revealing worrying levels of political polarisation.¹¹¹ The ruling party and the opposition accuse each other of orchestrating ethnically charged hate campaigns aimed at discrediting their members ahead of the election. Some pundits and online influencers have reduced the presidential contest to a power struggle between Biya's ethnic Bulu group and the Bamileke community from the country's west, home to opposition leader Kamto.¹¹² While ethnic affiliation certainly plays a role in voters' decisions, Cameroonians generally take a much wider range of considerations

Sagme, near Makary town, in the Logone-et-Chari Division. Crisis Group interview, journalist and humanitarian worker, Far North, April-May 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°197, *Curbing Feuds Over Water in Cameroon's Far North*, 25 April 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ "AfDB and WFP support families affected by flooding in Cameroon's Far North", World Food Programme, 30 January 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Although rainfall in the Far North is forecast to be moderate in October, the three preceding months are likely to see heavy downpours that could lead to flooding. "Maroua Weather in October", National Climate Change Observatory.

¹¹⁰ "Cameroun : 600 milliards de Fcfa mobilisés en 2 ans pour reconstruire l'Extrême-Nord", *Ecomatin*, 20 February 2025.

¹¹¹ "Cameroun : prolifération des discours de haine à moins d'un an de l'élection présidentielle", RFI, 23 March 2025.

¹¹² Ibid. Crisis Group interviews, researchers and journalists, Buea and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

into account when casting their ballots.¹¹³ Observers nonetheless worry that a surge in ethnic vitriol, easily shared via mobile phones, could lead to local outbreaks of violence. Demands for power to be rotated on the basis of ethno-regional representation are also intensifying.¹¹⁴

The response of the authorities to hate speech has been minimal. Established in 2017 in response to the emerging conflict in the Anglophone regions, the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism is supposed to monitor and enforce bilingualism, as well as to address the use of discriminatory language in public life. It has had a limited impact.¹¹⁵ As an advisory body to the president, the commission is not accountable to the public and has been unable to issue or enforce sanctions on those who use divisive, ethnically charged language on public platforms.¹¹⁶

C. *Exclusion of Young Cameroonians*

Cameroon's ageing leadership has long excluded young people from politics. Yet the country's demographics are changing rapidly: 80 per cent of the population is now 40 years or younger.¹¹⁷ Thus, most citizens have never experienced a transfer of power. Many young Cameroonians, particularly those living in cities, are frustrated by a lack of job opportunities and perceive government hiring practices as riddled with nepotism and corruption.¹¹⁸ Seeing no future for themselves in Cameroon, thousands have embarked on dangerous journeys to the U.S. and Canada via Latin America, and to Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹⁹

Despite a pervasive political fatalism, many young people actively engage in discussions about the presidential election, mostly on platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. Influencers and activists are also encouraging young people to register for the vote.¹²⁰ The July 2024 arrest of TikToker Junior Ngombe has proven a particular rallying point, prompting many to register on the understanding that voting is a means of protesting government attempts

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Cameroonian diplomat, Yaoundé; development worker, Bamenda; civil society leader, Buea, April-June 2025.

¹¹⁴ "Abel Elimbi Lobe : 'Soutenons l'idée de rotation du pouvoir en direction de la communauté anglophone'", *Actu Cameroun*, 12 May 2025.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Cameroon National Institute of Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook 2023*.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Douala and Yaoundé, April-May 2025.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, young women and men, Bamenda, Douala, Limbe and Yaoundé, April-May 2025. "L'exil des Camerounais face au manque de perspectives", *Deutsche Welle*, 1 March 2024.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, youth civil society leader, Yaoundé, March 2025.

to limit free speech.¹²¹ Of some 755,000 new voters who registered in 2024, nearly 65 per cent are between 20 and 35 years old.¹²²

The 2025 ballot could channel the exasperation of a generation at a political establishment that has sidelined them for too long. On 10 February, Biya warned young Cameroonians not to resort to violence during the election, while accusing the opposition of plotting to manipulate people in this age group.¹²³ Given the online activism among youth, the government may restrict social media access around the time of the vote, especially if there is an electoral crisis. The authorities have cut off internet service on previous occasions, including during the Anglophone protests in 2017, citing inflammatory rhetoric on social media as justification.¹²⁴

IV. Preventing an Electoral Crisis

With less than three months to go until the presidential election, the government has already missed the opportunity to solve some of the most critical problems surrounding the polls. If the government had made reforms based on the lessons learned from the 2018 vote, the country would be in a better position to address challenges. Nevertheless, there is still time for decisive action to reduce the likelihood of electoral unrest.

A. *Handling the Post-Biya Era*

Observers agree that the most serious threats to political stability are directly or indirectly linked to the absence of a transparent transition plan that could help the administration navigate the post-Biya era. Biya is likely to win an additional term, given the ruling party's control of state resources and the absence of a single strong opposition candidate. Uncertainty about Biya's physical condition and his ability to act as president for another seven-year term, however, will play a big role in the October polls and the early months of the next presidential mandate.

¹²¹ "Akere Muna, colleague, secure the release of activist Junior Ngombe", *The Guardian Post*, 2 August 2024.

¹²² By 30 December 2024, almost 2.6 million young people had registered to vote, accounting for around a third of the electoral register. Libii, however, argued that some 4.5 million young people who are eligible have yet to register. "Inscription sur la liste électorale : Les jeunes aux premières loges dans l'arrondissement de Douala 5e", *Data Cameroon*, 22 January 2025. By 25 June, Elecram had enrolled a total of about 8,250,000 people, pending the removal of deceased individuals and duplicate entries. Crisis Group interviews, Elecram officials, Mbankomo and Yaoundé, June 2025.

¹²³ "Head of State's Message to the Youth on the 59th Edition of the National Youth Day", Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 10 February 2025.

¹²⁴ "Unfreedom Monitor Report: Cameroon", Global Voices Advox, 5 May 2023.

So far, neither the president nor any senior ruling-party figure has openly proposed a succession plan.¹²⁵ According to the constitution, in the event that the sitting president is incapacitated, the Senate president or his deputy is to lead a transition of up to four months and organise a fresh election, in which this person is banned from running. Many Cameroonians find this arrangement unrealistic, given the extent to which power has been concentrated in the personalised rule of Biya, and some fear that rivalries could split the CPDM in Biya's absence. Party officials are also concerned that designating a clear successor could trigger a struggle for power that would further hinder decision-making at the top of the state. In these circumstances, it is crucial that Cameroon's senior officials carefully consider the risks and that everyone act responsibly to ensure an orderly, legitimate transition when the time comes.

In the meantime, President Biya has an opportunity to defuse tensions within the CPDM ahead of the poll. For instance, he could announce an elective congress to be held shortly after the vote, regardless of the result. Doing so would signal an intention to breathe new life into the party's decision-making bodies, such as the central committee and the Political Bureau, and help alleviate any ill feelings arising from its exclusionary behaviour, particularly if it gives young supporters a say in the proceedings. The congress could also serve as a platform for dissenting voices within the party, enabling them to raise public concerns not just over preparedness for the post-Biya era, but also flaws in democratic governance, regional autonomy and the peaceful resolution of armed conflict.

B. Calming Political Tensions

The government should not underestimate the risks that contested elections might pose to the country's stability, as a repressive political climate, ethnic grievances and the disaffection of many young Cameroonians create fertile conditions for outbreaks of unrest and violence.

Authorities should take a number of steps to stave off the risks of a fraught electoral process. The first of these would be to ease the restrictions that it imposed on civil society organisations in December 2024 (see Section II.C) and cease legal action against their leaders. By enabling these organisations to carry out civic education work and boost public participation in the electoral process, including vote monitoring, this move could help rebuild trust in the government's willingness to organise a credible presidential election and reduce the risk of future protests. Although it has thus far appeared reluctant to do so, Yaoundé should also consider granting amnesty to the opposition figures it imprisoned in connection with the 2018 post-election clashes and drop cases against its civil society critics.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, political leaders, senior government aide and journalist, Yaoundé, May-June 2025.

Cameroon's politicians should also heed the advice of the Episcopal Conference, which in March 2025 urged all presidential candidates to sign a code of good conduct.¹²⁶ Though such a code could be considered ineffectual, given the flaws in the electoral system, both the Presidential Majority and opposition candidates should still seize this opportunity to tone down hate speech. The code of good conduct could set out minimum requirements of respectful behaviour, both on- and offline, and include an agreement to scale back inflammatory rhetoric by party members and supporters of all political forces. It could also lay out mechanisms for tackling electoral disputes before litigation begins. Elecam should be responsible for drafting the code, while political leaders should commit to promoting its principles during their campaigns. The National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism should give its public backing to the code.¹²⁷

External pressure could also help. The AU, the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) and the main Western diplomatic missions in Yaoundé (such as the European Union and its member states, notably France and Germany, as well as the UK and the U.S.), should lobby the Cameroonian government to adopt the code of good conduct and reiterate their commitment to a free and fair electoral process, including through public statements. In particular, the AU should deploy election observers to follow up on the recommendations made in its 2018 report. The chair of the AU commission could also consider visiting Cameroon before the poll to urge adherence to AU guidelines on credible and transparent elections.¹²⁸

Finally, Elecam should strive to ensure the transparency of the voting process to prevent unrest after the polls close. Cameroonians are likely to scrutinise this election closely for any misconduct, especially if Biya continues to lose support before polling day, and they will be reluctant to accept the results if there is evidence of fraud. Elecam should address the concerns of candidates and their representatives without delay during the vote count; it should also communicate the outcome of any alleged cause of fraud to the public immediately to pre-empt the build-up of mistrust.

C. *Safe Voting*

The credibility of the October presidential election will partially depend on voter turnout in conflict-affected areas. The government could introduce exceptional measures for displaced people, such as

¹²⁶ "Pastoral Letter", Cameroon National Episcopal Conference, 28 March 2025. "Cameroon's bishops urge electoral reform ahead of 2025 presidential election", *Crux*, 31 March 2025.

¹²⁷ As part of its election assistance program, the UNDP could also encourage Elecam to work on the code of good conduct. Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Yaoundé, June 2025.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°205, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2025*, 6 February 2025.

enabling anyone with a voter card to cast their ballot at the nearest polling station and using indelible ink to prevent people from voting more than once.

In the Anglophone regions, the government and separatist leaders should ideally take steps to lower tensions ahead of the polls. Yaoundé could make a gesture of good-will by releasing Anglophone leaders who are still in prison. Doing so would undermine the separatist groups' accusations that the government has deliberately neglected English-speaking Cameroonians and help boost confidence in state institutions. For their part, even if they are unlikely to change their approach to elections, separatist groups should respond to government overtures by not obstructing the poll – for example, by cancelling lockdowns and roadblocks – and, at the very least, commit to preserving the safety of civilians.

In addition, the government and the separatist militias should agree to cease hostilities during the election. Anglophone religious leaders or other neutral facilitators could possibly help them reach such an agreement. Getting to a deal may be challenging in the short time remaining before the presidential election, but the parties could build on previous diplomatic efforts to find common ground. If a formal agreement cannot be reached, they could declare a week-long unilateral ceasefire as a way to demonstrate their commitment to a non-violent vote. This step would protect civilians from harm and could also signal good-will, potentially leading to more extensive peace talks after the election.

Finally, in the Far North, a traditional stronghold of the ruling party, Yaoundé should strengthen patrols along the border with Chad and Nigeria to prevent jihadist attacks. In addition, as the region usually experiences heavy rain and floods in October, Elecam should plan to relocate its polling stations to areas where people may have been displaced.

V. Conclusion

The presidential election in October could mark a turning point for Cameroon. While the country has remained politically and financially stable in recent years, the ruling party's grip on Cameroon's state institutions and political life, as well as its resistance to finding a peaceful solution to the Anglophone conflict, have left many Cameroonians feeling profoundly disillusioned.

Moves to shore up the election's integrity, relax the persecution of opposition activists and reduce possible outbreaks of violence around the vote will be essential to generate public trust in the outcome. If safe, credible polls are accompanied by greater clarity over how President Biya may eventually hand over power, these elections could

also usher in a new era, irrespective of the winner. Despite high levels of public mistrust and threats of unrest, the country's international partners should support this process and urge the government to hold an election that allows the opposition a fair run and civil society a free voice. Otherwise, Cameroon's future could be marred by more uncertainty and instability.

Yaoundé/Nairobi/Brussels, 8 August 2025

Appendix A: Timeline of Key Events Relating to the 2025 Presidential Election

October 2018

President Biya wins the election with 71 per cent of the vote.

Opposition leader Maurice Kamto contests the result, triggering legal battles, protests and the arrest of opposition members, some of whom remain in prison.

On election day, Anglophone separatists enforce a lockdown in the North West and South West regions, resulting in an official voter turnout of only 9 per cent compared to 54 per cent nationally. The opposition cites this low turnout to contest the result.

February 2020

Separatist militias attack Elecam facilities in Ndu, Kumbo and Ndop (North West) and kidnap their staff ahead of the municipal and parliamentary elections.

March 2020

The Constitutional Council postpones parliamentary elections in eleven constituencies in the Anglophone regions due to violence and insecurity.

July 2022

President Biya formally introduces his son, Franck Biya, to French President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to Yaoundé, fuelling speculation about a potential succession.

January 2023

Martinez Zogo, a journalist and corruption whistleblower, is found dead. The power struggles among the ruling elite stall the investigation, with the authorities suspecting secret service agents of kidnapping, torturing and murdering him.

March 2023

Armed separatists in the Anglophone regions reportedly kill two election officials before the senatorial elections.

March 2024

The government bans two opposition coalitions, labelling them illegal and restricting their activities nationwide.

July 2024

The police arrest 23-year-old TikTok influencer Junior Ngombe for posting videos in which he accuses the ruling

Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party of electoral fraud. A military tribunal in Yaoundé releases him on bail a week later following a wave of national and international outrage.

Authorities also arrest online activist Steve Akam (also known as Ramon Cotta) in Gabon and extradite him to Cameroon, where he is detained over videos critical of President Biya.

September 2024

President Biya disappears from public view for 50 days. Rumours about his poor health and even death circulate, while several ministers scramble to reassure the public.

November 2024

The president of the Constitutional Council attends an event in support of President Biya's candidacy, sparking protests by the opposition.

December 2024

President Biya appoints two new Elecam board members who are both former active officials of the ruling party.

Archbishop of Douala Samuel Kleda issues a call by several Catholic bishops for President Biya to step aside. In response, imams and traditional rulers issue declarations of support.

The government suspends three associations and bans two others, citing breaches of financial and administrative regulations.

Elecam misses the legal deadline to publish the updated electoral register, citing incomplete voter registration and unresolved duplicate entries.

February 2025

In his National Youth Day speech, President Biya reiterates his commitment to serving the nation, a sentiment he had expressed weeks earlier in his New Year address. The reference suggests his interest in clinging to power.

Woman opposition parliamentarian Tomaino Ndam Njoya announces her presidential candidacy.

March 2025

The Episcopal Conference publishes a sixteen-page pastoral letter criticising biased electoral laws and proposing a code of conduct for presidential candidates.

Officials from the Wouri Division (Littoral region) summon Albert Nzongang, a politician allied with opposition leader Kamto, for questioning over a video in which he criticised the territorial administration minister.

April 2025

A CPDM councillor from Monatele (Centre region) asks a Yaoundé court to declare the party chairmanship vacant and urges President Biya to retire.

Biya replaces a deceased Constitutional Council member with a loyalist from the ruling party.

Anglophone separatist leaders in Ghana announce a coordinated armed struggle to enforce election boycotts in the North West and South West regions.

May 2025

Elecam deploys 1,000 new biometric kits to boost voter registration.

The UN Development Programme and Elections Cameroon sign an electoral assistance agreement. Some opposition parties, however, criticise it.

June 2025

The Presidential Majority coalition uniting President Biya's CPDM and two opposition parties based in the north of the country collapses as ministers Issa Tchiroma Bakary and Bello Bouba Maigari announce their intention to stand for president.

July 2025

Secretary General of the Presidency Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh holds a week of consultations with MPs and ministers to prepare the incumbent's candidacy, amid internal rifts over party and government leadership roles.

President Biya announces his candidacy for an eighth presidential term and sets the election date for 12 October 2025.

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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August 2025

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