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Cameroon

Cameroon is a diverse, resource-rich, majority Francophone country bordering the Gulf of Guinea. Its strategic location and ports (Douala, Kribi) make it an economic conduit for Central Africa, connecting landlocked nations like Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) to Atlantic trade routes. Nevertheless, its stability and ability to realize its substantial economic potential are hindered by significant internal conflicts—notably the Anglophone crisis and the Boko Haram/IS-WA insurgency—as well as underlying governance challenges. Cameroon is largely French-speaking, with a minority population of English-speakers; in 2017 separatists claiming to represent the Anglophone minority launched a rebellion against the government. Conflicts, particularly in the north and west, continue to drive widespread displacement and humanitarian crises. Significant political uncertainty also surrounds the health, reelection intentions, and succession plans for President Paul Biya (at 92, the world’s oldest head of state; in power since 1982).

U.S. congressional attention has focused on conflicts within Cameroon, particularly during the 116th-118th Congresses. Lawmakers addressed the Anglophone crisis and its humanitarian consequences through multiple resolutions and appropriations measures. For the 119th Congress, potential issues for consideration may also include Cameroon’s deepening relationship with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), regional security dynamics, and the potential impacts of changing U.S. assistance policies.

Politics

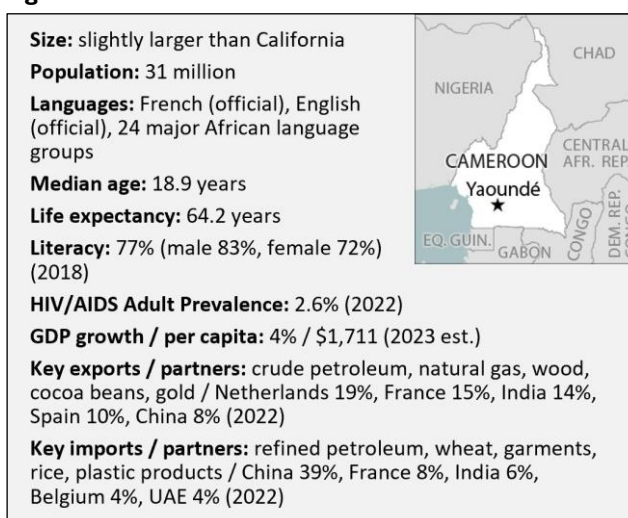
Cameroon, nominally a unitary presidential republic, is slated to hold general elections in October. Biya has not clarified whether he plans to run for reelection. The state violently suppressed widespread protests following the removal of constitutional term limits in 2008. As in past elections, allegations of fraud, voter intimidation, and irregularities, in addition to violence and low turnout in Anglophone regions, marked Biya’s reelection to another seven-year term in 2018. A top opposition candidate and hundreds of his supporters were jailed for months after calling for post-election protests.

Biya’s Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM, or RDPC after its French acronym) dominates the country’s political landscape. Cameroon’s political system grants the head of state extensive executive powers, including authority to appoint and dismiss key officials such as the prime minister, cabinet members, judges, generals, and governors. According to Freedom House, a nonpartisan nongovernmental organization, Biya has “maintained power by rigging elections, using state resources for political patronage, and limiting the activities of opposition parties.” Authorities banned two prominent opposition coalitions in

2024. The divided opposition fields notable figures, including coalition leader Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement, who challenged Biya in 2018.

The absence of a clear succession plan for President Biya, combined with speculation over his health and growing ethno-regional polarization, fuel concerns among analysts about potential instability and power struggles.

Figure 1. Cameroon at a Glance



Source: Data from CIA World Factbook, World Bank, & UNAIDS, 2024 unless stated otherwise.

Economy and Development

Cameroon, a lower-middle-income country according to the World Bank, relies heavily on commodity exports, including oil, natural gas, timber, coffee, cotton, and cocoa. It exports Chadian oil via the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, while also producing and seeking to expand its own oil and gas exploitation including though an offshore gas field shared with Equatorial Guinea. While crude oil is Cameroon’s top export, the country’s lack of refining capacity forces it to import refined petroleum to meet domestic demand. Cameroon also possesses strategic minerals and other resources, including iron ore, gold, bauxite, nickel, and cobalt.

Economic and development challenges persist despite resource wealth, with GDP growth trailing population increases. According to the World Bank, poverty reduction has “stagnated” over the past 20 years, with approximately four in 10 Cameroonians living below the national poverty line. Poverty is particularly concentrated in the Far North. Conflict in the Anglophone regions, a former agricultural hub, have further strained the business climate. Leading health challenges include malaria, neonatal conditions, lower respiratory infections, and HIV/AIDS. Other reported

development challenges include women's limited access to land ownership and control.

Foreign Affairs

Cameroon has strong economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), while maintaining relations with France, in contrast to some Francophone African countries that have distanced themselves from their former metropole. The PRC, which according to the International Monetary Fund held 26% of Cameroon's external debt as of February 2024, is a leading trade partner and a key financier of infrastructure projects, including the Kribi deep-water port, industrial hub, and associated road and rail networks. In 2023, China's Silk Road Investment Fund pledged \$30 billion for additional infrastructure initiatives.

In April 2022, Cameroon and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement focused on areas like training and intelligence sharing. This occurred despite Cameroon having relatively modest overall ties with Russia compared to some other African countries. It is still too early to assess the concrete results or full extent of activities under this agreement. Reports suggest that "shadow fleet" tankers transporting Iranian, Venezuelan, and Russian oil have used Cameroonian-flagged vessels to evade sanctions and shipping regulations.

Cameroon appears to be one of the African nations with the closest ties to Israel. Cameroon abstained from voting on various UN resolutions during 2024, including one in December regarding a possible Gaza ceasefire, and one in November regarding a "peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine." Israel has reportedly supplied Cameroon with military assistance, including support to elite forces that report directly to the presidency.

The Anglophone Crisis

Rooted in colonial history, the conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions arose from the 1961 unification of formerly British-ruled territories with the mainly French-ruled nation. National authorities replaced a federal system with a unitary state in 1972, entrenching Francophone dominance in government institutions. The Northwest and Southwest regions, formerly British "Southern Cameroons," retained English-speaking populations with distinct legal and educational systems. Over time, some Anglophone activists have called for greater autonomy, a return to federalism, or full secession.

In 2016-2017, protests against the appointment of Francophone officials in local institutions escalated into a popular uprising, government crackdowns, and the emergence of armed separatist groups. Some of these groups declared an independent state of "Ambazonia." The conflict has been marked by widespread abuses, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, torture, and the destruction of civilian property. As of early 2025, nearly 600,000 Cameroonians were internally displaced due to the conflict and over 76,000 had fled as refugees to Nigeria. Efforts to resolve the conflict have failed. The absence of key leaders from a 2019 dialogue and granting minimal autonomy via "special status" for English-speaking regions failed to resolve separatist demands; clashes continue.

Boko Haram and IS-WA

Two U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations, Boko Haram and its offshoot and rival the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA), operate in Cameroon's Far North and the surrounding Lake Chad Basin region (Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon). While conflict fatalities have significantly decreased since their 2015 peak, security incidents in northern Cameroon reportedly surged in 2023 and clashes continued in 2024 and 2025. The State Department's latest country reports on terrorism identify IS-WA as the largest Islamic State affiliate in Africa.

Conflict in the Far North is driven by water scarcity, poverty, ethnic ties across borders, banditry, and grievances against the central government. Cross-border trade restrictions, intended to curb insurgent attacks, alongside alleged security force and militia abuses, risk increasing local IS-WA recruitment. IS-WA, compared to Boko Haram, has reportedly carried out less violence against Muslim civilians and provided some form of local governance.

Cameroon contributes troops to the Nigerian-led, African Union-authorized Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram and IS-WA. The MNJTF's gains against Boko Haram from 2015 to 2017 have been eroded in the face of the militants' adaptability and inconsistent pressure from the task force. Cameroon's focus on the Anglophone conflict and heightened regional tensions following Niger's 2023 coup arguably have further undermined counterterrorism efforts.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S. foreign assistance in Cameroon has been focused on health programs, accounting for \$120 million out of \$123 million in total FY2023 bilateral allocations (latest public data). The remainder supported civil society strengthening (\$3 million) and international military education and training (IMET, \$600,000). In 2025, reductions in federal funding, the reorganization of U.S. agencies, and the recall of some staff posted abroad have reportedly affected the implementation of U.S. foreign aid and security and humanitarian assistance programs.

U.S. human rights concerns have hampered trade and counterterrorism ties with Cameroon. In late 2019, the first Donald J. Trump Administration announced the termination of Cameroon's eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Title I of P.L. 106-200, as amended), citing state-perpetrated human rights abuses. The decision followed reports implicating Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR), a U.S. counterterrorism partner, in torture, killings, and other abuses in the Far North and Anglophone regions. Such reports also prompted policymakers in 2019 to suspend some military aid and halt plans to establish a National Guard partnership program. The first Trump Administration also ended a U.S. intelligence and surveillance operation involving 300 personnel in Cameroon in 2020, amid a broader review of the U.S. regional military footprint.

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