

CAMEROON**ISSUE**

Despite a slight improvement, Cameroon's human rights record is far from perfect. Arbitrary arrests for political reasons still occur and the judiciary is often corrupt and not entirely at arm's length from the executive branch. Freedom of the press is not complete. No program or ministry has a mandate to promote and protect minority rights. Cultural pressures continue to make women victims of discrimination.

BACKGROUND

During the controversial 1992 presidential elections, acts of violence were observed against ethnic minorities in the western, northwestern and southwestern provinces, as well as the Douala region. The Government has since created a National Human Rights Commission to monitor abuses. The January 1996 local elections were generally free of violence.

Threatened by continuing and growing unpopularity as a result of the economic crisis and mismanagement, the regime has largely fallen back on the Beti, President Biya's Bantu ethnic group, thus playing into the hand of tribalism. The Beti hold most of the key positions in the civil service and the military, and benefit from widespread favouritism.

Cameroonian justice is influenced by tribalism, like most spheres of society. The judiciary is often corrupt and not entirely at arm's length from the executive branch. A decision in favour of the plaintiff may not even be honoured for lack of means to execute it. Owing to the economic difficulties that Cameroon has experienced in the past six years, security forces, even at the highest levels, are increasingly involved in growing and often violent crime, especially in Yaoundé and Douala. Territorial disputes between villages in the northwest claimed many victims before the central government's delayed actions ended these conflicts.

Budget restraint has forced the Government to withdraw from investing in health services. Free health care is less and less available, and patients are obliged to provide their own dressings and medicine. The decline in budgetary revenue has also ended government investment in the school system. In principle, education is free, but it is now subject to significant informal charges that put it out of reach for a growing segment of the population (20%). Outside major cities, infrastructure is either lacking or dilapidated. The literacy rate stands at 59.6% for adults, with lower rates among women and in the northern provinces. Eighty percent (80%) of school-age children attend classes, mainly at the primary level.

Officially, no political prisoners are detained in Cameroon. In reality, arbitrary arrests are sometimes made for political reasons. They are short-lived results of initiatives of local authorities which cause difficulties for the regime. In response to a general strike by the public service, the Government tried several times to interfere in the membership of the executive of the central labour congress. It even went so far as to have the Secretary General removed from his office by force.