

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN CAMEROON

### ISSUE

Cameroon is a country where human rights violations are neither systematic nor flagrant, but where isolated miscarriages and abuses do occur. Continued vigilance is necessary.

### BACKGROUND

Cameroon is emerging from a lengthy period of single-party government. During this period, President Biya concentrated all the decision-making powers in his own hands and made all bureaucratic and political appointments. Theoretically, the National Assembly had the power to table and to propose legislation, but in reality, proposals contrary to the government's wishes were doomed to failure. The need to reflect the country's ethnic composition was one of the few elements that kept abuses from being more widespread. Faced with a rising tide of protest from an ever-increasing opposition made up of journalists, students, politicians of various stripes and the general public, President Biya was obliged to open up the political system in 1990.

There were instances of fraud during the 1992 elections, but this did not dissuade a majority of the population from voting for the parties and presidential candidates of the opposition. However, since the electoral system allows for a multiplicity of parties and candidates, the former governing party and the former authoritarian President registered narrow victories. The opposition, feeling swindled, expressed its disagreement, triggering a repressive reaction on the part of the government, which decreed a state of emergency in one region, and placed John Fru Ndi, the second place presidential candidate under arrest. The subsequent appointment of a national unity government stabilized the situation. However, international funding agencies remain sceptical and want concrete evidence that Cameroon indeed plans to adopt policies and practices more respectful of human rights. Discontinuation of the state of emergency in December 1992 was an important step as was the decision in November 1994 to resume the constitutional dialogue and hold municipal elections in 1995.

There has been, nevertheless, little improvement since 1993. The opposition is regularly harassed by the police which makes liberal use of a law allowing recourse to unlimited powers of administrative detention. Students and strikers suffer intermittent suppression. Several years of economic crisis have fanned criminality. Press liberty is problematic. Television and radio is a government monopoly. Censure of private newspapers has intensified but several remain highly critical. Any public activity requires prior authorization which is often refused to the opposition. The legal system is subject to multiple pressures. Real democracy will require constitutional reform establishing the rule of law, limiting the power of the executive, ensuring the independence of the judiciary and creating an autonomous electoral commission.