

## THE IMPACT OF FRENCH INFLUENCE ON THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN CAMEROON

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### Abstract

Cameroon is a former French territory that has maintained very strong ties to key French political leaders to this day, but struggles to build a strong electoral democracy and has failed to uphold international human rights standards. Reports by watchdog organizations have noted various abuses of human rights and lack of freedoms that continually undermine the development of democracy and respect for human rights in Cameroon. This paper explores the legacy of French policy and influence in Cameroon and its impact on democracy and human rights today. It argues that it is the nature of Franco-Cameroon relations that has negatively impacted the development of democracy and human rights standards in Cameroon. The author will draw comparisons with other former French colonies and will examine the ways in which France can positively influence Cameroon to improve its record on democracy and human rights issues in the future.

**Keywords:** Cameroon, democracy, human rights, governance, electoral system, French colonies Franco-Cameroon relation.

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## 1. Introduction

French influence in sub-Saharan Africa since the end of colonialism has been the subject of much analysis and criticism, partly because French political, military and economic involvement in its former colonies has had significant impacts on those countries – in almost all cases leading to an imbalanced relationship between Paris and its African partners. As with almost all of its former colonies in Africa, France has maintained a close relationship with Cameroon,<sup>1</sup> remaining capable of influencing Cameroon's politics, military capacities and economic advancement. Despite extensive French involvement in Cameroon, progress in the promotion and protection of and respect for human rights in Cameroon is still less than satisfactory. Similarly, little has been done to promote the development of a true representative democracy, despite a number of elections in recent years and relative political stability. While existing literature on Cameroon emphasizes the influence and role that France has played in the economic and political development of Cameroon, this paper argues that French involvement in Cameroon has specifically undermined the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy in Cameroon by supporting and strengthening a political leadership that has little interest in allowing either to develop and that has been given little incentive to do so.

Franco-Cameroon relationship has affected Cameroon's capacity and willingness to develop into a true democracy capable of enacting the reforms necessary for the protection of human rights for all Cameroonians. While the extent of France's involvement in Cameroon's current politics permits France to benefit from the arrangement, it also impedes possibilities for reform by strengthening leadership that stands to benefit from the status quo. While the focus of this paper is on the particular impact that French policy in Cameroon – as with much of francophone Africa – has had on the development of democracy and the respect for human

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<sup>1</sup> Cameroon was never technically a French colony, as it was split between France and Britain by a League of Nations mandate in 1919. However, the relationship between France and Cameroon reflects many of the essential components of French colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

rights, it is important to first take note of the current state of human rights and democracy in Cameroon. This paper will then give an overview of the characteristics of French policy and involvement in Cameroon, and then discuss the impact of those policies on the state of human rights and democracy. Finally, this paper will argue that because France has had such an impact on Cameroonian policies, it has the capacity to influence those positively and to push for reforms allowing for greater development of democracy and greater respect for human rights.

## **2. The State of Human Rights and Democracy in Cameroon**

Respect for human rights in Cameroon lacks credibility, as recent reports by several watchdog organizations demonstrate. A 2009 Amnesty International report on human rights in Cameroon details the ways in which impunity underpins extensive human rights violations, including denial of the rights to freedom of expression and association, a weak judicial system that leads to arbitrary arrests, unfair trials and extrajudicial executions, and violations of the rights of individuals based on their gender or sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> The Committee to Protect Journalist similarly remarks on the restrictions on Cameroon's news media in 2008, noting that journalists "operated under significant pressure" and that "influential political leaders used threats, regulatory action, and judicial harassment to censor political coverage of national affairs".<sup>3</sup> Throughout 2009, the organization reported several cases of journalists being potentially wrongfully imprisoned and/or convicted of libel and "insulting the head of state".<sup>4</sup> The organization has equally condemned the recent death of a journalist in jail in Cameroon, while calling for a transparent investigation into the circumstances of

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *Impunity Underpins Persistent Abuse* (2009). AI Index: AFR 17/001/2009.

<sup>3</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, 2008 report, <http://cpj.org/2009/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2008-cameroon.php>.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, the case of Jean-Bosco Talla: <http://cpj.org/2009/12/cameroonian-editor-under-arrest.php>.

his death.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Department of State's 2009 Human Rights Report on Cameroon agrees with NGOs, adding concerns regarding human trafficking, discrimination against Anglophone Cameroonians, restrictions on workers' rights and independent labor organizations, and child labor.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of protection for basic civil and political rights has likely also hindered the development of democracy, as political opposition is often stifled and freedoms of speech and assembly are restricted. At the same time, lack of progress in the development of democracy in Cameroon has likely negatively affected the state of human rights. A little over a decade ago, Francis B Nyamnjoh argued that "democracy is yet to become a way of life – a culture – in Cameroon; so far it has served mainly as a face powder, an empty concept or slogan devoid of concrete meaning."<sup>7</sup> Thus far, all of Cameroon's elections have exemplified what Joseph Takougang describes as a state where the "formal trappings of democracy coexist with neopatrimonial political practices."<sup>8</sup> Freedom House's 2009 country report on Cameroon points to the 2008 constitutional amendment removing term limits for the presidency and allowing President Biya to stand for reelection in 2011, as well as increasing centralization of power and additional restrictions on the political opposition, as major impediments to freedom (defined as political and civil liberties) in Cameroon.<sup>9</sup> One scholar further notes that the "repeated human rights and other abuses committed during the recurrent and prolonged periods of emergency rule in Cameroon are a reminder of the danger of open-ended and unchecked powers given to the President of the

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<sup>5</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, *Cameroon must investigate jailed editor's death*, <http://cpj.org/2010/04/cameroon-must-investigate-jailed-editors-death.php>, April 25, 2010, accessed May 2010.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, *2009 Human Rights Report: Cameroon* (March 11, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135942.htm>, accessed April 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Francis B Nyamnjoh, "Cameroon: A Country United by Ethnic Ambition and Difference," *African Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 390 (1999): p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Takougang, "The 2002 Legislative Election in Cameroon: A Retrospective on Cameroon's Stalled Democracy Movement," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2002), p. 433.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7580&year=2009>.

Republic with practically no controls.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, allegations of corruption and election fraud have long undermined the appearance of democracy and fair elections in Cameroon. The Corruption Perceptions Index of 2009, compiled by Transparency International, ranks Cameroon at 146 of 180.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. France and Cameroon in Historical Perspective

The wave of independence that swept France’s many colonies in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s undeniably diminished French power and influence in Africa. Nevertheless, the process of independence of these colonies permitted France to maintain a sphere of influence on the continent. Specifically, the manner in which France permitted the independence of its former colonies ensured that, as Tony Chafer explains, France “maintained most of the agencies responsible for colonial policy towards the region into the post-colonial period.”<sup>12</sup> Elements of French African policy such as its numerous military assistance and defense agreements, the CFA Franc Zone and Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs have helped France to maintain significant control over events and policies in its former colonies.

Although Cameroon was never technically a French colony but rather a trust territory, it nevertheless became and has remained part of the “core of the Franco-African ‘family.’”<sup>13</sup> Ndiva Kofele-Kale argues that despite beliefs that Cameroon is “among the former French colonies which have sought to lessen their ties with Paris,” “France remains a preponderant power in Cameroon.”<sup>14</sup> Through various agreements and forms of assistance, France maintains a close relationship with Cameroon that benefits both parties. This has significantly

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Manga Fombad, “Cameroon’s Emergency Powers: A Recipe For (Un)Constitutional Dictatorship?” *Journal of African Law*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2004), p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2009/cpi\\_2009\\_table](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table).

<sup>12</sup> Tony Chafer, “French African Policy: Towards Change,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 362 (1992), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Martin, “Continuity and Change in Franco-African Relations,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1995), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ndiva Kofele-Kale, “Cameroon and Its Foreign Relations,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 319 (1981), p. 199-200.

helped France to play an important role in shaping the state of democracy in Cameroon, and incidentally that of human rights as well. France's extensive involvement and influence in Cameroon allows France a degree of control over Cameroonian policies, ensuring that they do not run contrary to France's interests. Yet as Jean-Germain Gros points out, "the relationship between France and Cameroon is clearly asymmetrical and points to the dependency of the latter on the former."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, while the political leadership in Cameroon benefits from an arrangement that ensures their continued hold on power, the relationship benefits France in a greater capacity, by helping maintain a French sphere of influence in Africa.

French interests in Cameroon stem from several factors, most of which fall under economic, military or cultural lines, or some combination of these factors. Most evident in the French-Cameroon relationships is the economic benefits that Cameroon represents for France. According to Martin Staniland, Cameroon was in 1978 one of three countries which provided over two-thirds of French imports from Africa and simultaneously absorbed 60 percent of French exports to Africa.<sup>16</sup> Cameroon presents important economic potential, which has led France to pursue policies that enable it to maintain a degree of control over Cameroon's economic resources. According to Paul Williams, "a variety of companies including Guinness, Shell, Standard Chartered Bank and British American Tobacco have sought to use the country as a gateway into West Africa."<sup>17</sup> While Cameroon may not be the biggest oil producer in Africa, it still presents major benefits for countries and companies able to invest in Cameroon. In addition, France ensures that it retains control of Cameroon's economic policies. Jean-Germain Gros notes that lack of transparency in Cameroon's management of its

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Germain Gros, "Cameroon in Synopsis" in Jean-Germain Gros (ed) *Cameroon: Politics and Society in Perspectives* (2003), p. 19. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Staniland, "Francophone Africa: The Enduring French Connection," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 489 (1987), p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Williams, "Britain and Africa after the Cold War: beyond damage limitation?," in Ian Taylor & Paul Williams (eds) *Africa in International Politics: External Involvement on the Continent* (2004), p. 53. New York: Routledge.

natural resources means that only the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the French Government “really knows how much revenue Cameroon earns from oil sales.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, economy hegemony of France in Cameroon is exacerbated by the reliance of Cameroon on the CFA franc zone and its corresponding inability to control its financial policy. Although many expected the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 to lead to increased normalization of Franco-African relations, in fact France has remained equally as involved in African economic policies, albeit at a reduced cost for the French state.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to exemplifying France’s economic interests in Africa, Cameroon presents a strong instance of French interest in using Africa to advance the primacy of the French language. As has been posited by critics and admirers of French policy in Africa alike, France’s former colonies in Africa have played a singular role in the promotion of the French language, embodied in the concept of the francophonie. In discussing the preponderance of French influence in Cameroon over that of English and American influences, Ndiva Kofele-Kale argues that “French hegemony has survived this long in Africa in part not only because of the economic bonds but also because of the successful penetration of French culture and language in these countries.”<sup>20</sup> The francophonie, which Daniela Kroslak defines as a “concept revolving around the organization of French-speaking countries whose people share French civilization and identity,” then has permitted France to wage what she calls a “cultural and linguistic crusade.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, France has had a significant interest in ensuring the continuity of francophone hegemony in Cameroon at the expense of the Anglophone population and Anglophone interests. The presence of neighboring Nigeria, which is not only Anglophone but a major regional power, underlines

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Germain Gros (note 15 above), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Chafer, “French African Policy in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2001), p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> Ndiva Kofele-Kale (note 14 above), p. 205-206.

<sup>21</sup> Daniela Kroslak, “France’s policy towards Africa,” in Ian Taylor & Paul Williams (eds) *Africa in International Politics: External Involvement on the Continent* (2004), p. 66. New York: Routledge.

France's concerns in losing Cameroon as a member of the francophone community. France's military engagements in Cameroon lend weight to this argument.

Cameroon has played a significant role in France's security policy in Africa. Military cooperation between France and Cameroon, including both a defense agreement and military technical assistance accords between France and Cameroon, assistance militaire technique (AMT) signed in 1960<sup>22</sup> and renewed in 1974<sup>23</sup> meant the establishment of a permanent French military presence as France sought to preserve its military power throughout the continent despite the independence of its former colonies. The accords gave France the authority to intervene militarily in Cameroon, at the request of the Cameroonian authorities, and in the event of external attack. It eventually led to two French military interventions: one from 1957 to 1971 to help suppress the UPC rebellion; and a second from 1996 to 2007 in the context of Operation Aramis and the territorial dispute with Nigeria over the Bakassi peninsula. During both operations, France provided significant military support to the leadership they saw as most likely to align their policies with France's interests. In the earlier case, the UPC's program of "independence and unification with the British Cameroons" was strongly opposed by France, who hence found it favorable to intervene on behalf of Ahmadou Ahidjo.<sup>24</sup> Operation Aramis can be seen through similar lenses, as France was protecting its interests in the face of an Anglophone power, Nigeria, which France found threatening to its economic, social and geopolitical interests.

France renewed its defense agreement with Cameroon in early 2009, underlining France's interest in maintaining its ability to project military power in the region.

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<sup>22</sup> Accord Concernant l'Assistance Militaire Technique entre le Gouvernement de la République Française et le Gouvernement de la République Fédéral du Cameroun aux forces armées camerounaises. Signé à Yaoundé le 13 novembre 1960.

<sup>23</sup> Accord de Coopération Militaire entre le Gouvernement de la République Française et le Gouvernement de la République Unie du Cameroun. Fait à Yaoundé le 21 Février 1974.

<sup>24</sup> Martin R Atangana, "French Capitalism and Nationalism in Cameroon," *African Studies Review* Vol. 40, No. 1 (1997), p. 90.

France's current military presence in Central Africa, with troops positioned in Chad and the Central African Republic, and the restructuring of French military power in Africa, exemplified by *Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix (RECAMP)* and the "Europeanization" of military action<sup>25</sup>, both demonstrate France's capacity to intervene in its former colonies and where it considers its interests worth protecting. In the case of Cameroon, not only is France interested in protecting the interests of the francophone leadership, but also in protecting its economic interests. Leonard and Strauss argue that "France has made it clear repeatedly that it will intervene militarily to prevent disorder in Cameroon and Gabon, on which it depends of oil."<sup>26</sup> Military control hence enables France to ensure that the leadership in Cameroon continues to pursue policies that benefit French economic, political and cultural interests.

In the 1990s, France began to hint at potential changes in its African policy that would include greater interest in the promotion and development of democracy and human rights in its former colonies. Since the end of the Cold War, France has been increasingly under pressure from external forces to shift towards policies that align themselves more closely with the policies of other major powers. Moreover, France has had to adapt to several aspects of the post-Cold War landscape, including greater competition over Africa's resources, reduced capacities to maintain its presence on the continent, and the increasing role of the European Union in determining military, economic and political policy. This has in turn put pressures on France to normalize its relations with African leaders, especially where the behavior of the latter undermines the development of democracy and the respect for human rights. Nevertheless, it appears that many of those changes were more rhetoric than action.

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion of French security policy in Africa, see Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2008). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

<sup>26</sup> David K Leonard & Scott Straus, *Africa's Stalled Development: International Causes & Cures* (2003), p. 75. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

Former French president Francois Mitterrand's 1990 speech in La Baulle during the Franco-African summit showed signs of a new policy, one that would instill greater pressure on those states which did not commit to economic and political reforms and respect for human rights. Yet, as Joseph Takougang points out, in the case of Cameroon, it seems that France was "more interested in symbolic political change than real regime change."<sup>27</sup> Victor T LeVine makes a similar argument, explaining that, "in a crunch recalcitrant leaders in countries with major French business and political interests, such as Cameroon's Paul Biya [...], would be preferred over democratic oppositions."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in the years following La Baulle, French ODA to Cameroon actually increased from FF628 to 963 million. Overall trends for Africa reflect increases in ODA for authoritarian regimes and decreases from countries in transition to democracy.<sup>29</sup> The October 1992 creation of a "Debt Conversion Fund for Development" provided debt relief for several countries, including Cameroon. While the speech at La Baulle provided hope for greater pressures on African leaders to allow for the development of democracy, French interests in keeping certain leaders in power, such as Cameroon's Paul Biya, provided little incentives to fulfill the promises made at La Baulle.

#### **4. The Impact of French Influence on Democracy and Human Rights**

Despite hints of changes and reforms in French African policy, the political leadership in Cameroon has felt little if any incentive to improve its human rights record and allow the political space to expand. Indeed, in the 20 years that have passed since Mitterrand's speech at La Baulle, little has been done in terms of political and economic reforms, and respect for human rights. However, France's widespread influence over several aspects of Cameroonian politics, it is clear that France has the tools and the means to influence Cameroonian policy. Yet it can be deduced that French reluctance to push Cameroon to promote reforms

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph Takougang (note 8 above), p. 432.

<sup>28</sup> Victor T LeVine, *Politics in Francophone Africa* (2004), p. 249. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

<sup>29</sup> Guy Martin (note 13 above), p. 15.

and improve on its record can also negatively influence the state of democracy and human rights, by sending the message that these reforms and improvements may not be necessary. These trends can be observed in several francophone African countries.

In May 2009, Nigerien President Mamadou Tandja's plans to change the constitution in order to remain in power after his second term elicited no criticism from French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who continued to pursue talks with Tandja regarding French investment in uranium mines in Niger. This particular example underlines France's overriding interests in pursuing policies in Africa which tend to overlook democratic development. All over Africa, France continues to support leaders who stifle opposition and impede free and fair elections in Côte d'Ivoire, Congo-Brazzaville, Niger, Gabon, and Chad, just to name a few. In the case of Cameroon, increasing ODA to Cameroon after the speech at La Baulle despite its poor democratic record sent the message that Paris will continue supporting Cameroon regardless of these factors and that there would be no consequences for not reforming its political and economic policies.

Another strong example of the link between French policy and abuses of human rights is the behavior of the Cameroonian security forces, which Amnesty International notes "routinely use excessive and unnecessary lethal force."<sup>30</sup> In the context of extensive military technical assistance and cooperation, it is evident that France could positively influence the behavior of security forces in Cameroon by incorporating, for instance, human rights during training. Furthermore, assistance and cooperation, both military and in other sectors, could easily be made dependent on improvements in the human rights records, including civil and political rights, rather than disconnected as it currently seems to be. Yet France continues to cooperate in a military capacity, and even sell

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<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International (note 2 above), p. 34.

weapons, in many countries where human rights abuses occur on a regular basis. According to Raphaël Granvaud, it was with primarily French weaponry that a popular uprising in Cameroon was repressed in February 2008.<sup>31</sup>

Despite France's less than satisfactory record in promoting democracy and human rights in Cameroon thus far, there is nevertheless potential for improvement. In the past two decades, France has indeed attempted to shift its policy in Africa to align itself more closely with other stakeholders and to at the very least appear in a more positive light than it has in the past. While one can still see numerous examples of France continuing its long-standing policies with regards to its former colonies in France, some individual examples do show that there is potential for France to positively influence the state of democracy and human rights in Africa. For instance, France's role in convincing Chad's President Idriss Deby to allow a United Nations peacekeeping mission to protect refugees and humanitarian aid workers in the conflict-ridden eastern regions shows that France can indeed sow the seeds for positive change in its former colonies. Similarly, France had been a major support of Guinea's former president, Lansana Conte, and had sold approximately 6 million Euros worth of arms between 2003 and 2006.<sup>32</sup> However, France's tough stance towards Guinea's military junta following the September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 massacre in Conakry underlines France's reluctance to continue supporting regimes that show tremendous disregard for human rights and democracy.

Of course, there remains much to be learned about these particular examples and the implications for French policy in Africa, but one can still see that growing concern for civilians and human rights in Africa can impact the way France devises and conducts policy. In particular, it seems that interest on the part of other major powers, such as the United States, and pressure from international

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<sup>31</sup> Raphaël Granvaud, *Que fait l'armée française en Afrique?* (2009), p. 119. Marseille, France: Agone.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

civil society, can have a major impact on French policy in Africa. The international focus on the crisis in Darfur, for instance, helped bring a significant amount of attention on the refugee and security issues in eastern Chad, which made it much harder for both France and Chad to pursue policies that would disregard major human rights concerns. Similarly, the international outcry after the September 28<sup>th</sup> massacre in Conakry made it almost impossible for external players, including France, to continue supporting Guinea's military junta. This is not to argue that a crisis in Cameroon is necessary to stimulate a change in French policy, but rather that international interests and pressures for change can impact policy.

## **5. Conclusion**

The biggest lesson to be learned from France's influence on Cameroonian politics and on the development and promotion of democracy and human rights, however negative to this date, is its potential to have a positive impact. While French influence on Cameroonian political life, economics and military capacities have so far served to undermine democracy and human rights, French influence could and should have just the opposite effect, or at the very least lead to improvements in certain aspects of democracy and human rights. France, as with other foreign governments interested in Cameroon's future, could play a positive role by using its close relationship with President Paul Biya and other key political figures in Cameroon to press for change. As France continues to face both external and internal pressures to normalize its African policy, it is necessary to incorporate a human rights framework into the discussion that would force France to develop policies and attitudes towards its African partners that provide for the development of democracy and a culture of respect for human rights.