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**POLITICAL RISK IN CAMEROON**

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**DRAFT**

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## POLITICAL RISK IN CAMEROON

Cameroon is half the geographic size of Nigeria, with 8.5 to 9 million people from approximately 200 ethnic groups. In addition to the indigenous population, Cameroon is home for approximately 135,000 Nigerians, 130,000 Chadians, and 12,000 Europeans of whom 9,000 are French. Per capita income is higher than in most African countries, but about half of that in the Ivory Coast. Uneven development has led to considerable migration, which in turn has complicated the already serious ethnic tensions of Cameroon in society. The country is divided among Christians, predominately in the prosperous south; animists; and various Muslim groups who predominate in the north. It is also divided between the francophone majority and the anglophone minority deriving from the former state of West Cameroon. As a rough rule of thumb, each group has a long tradition of intense hostility to each neighboring group.

Cameroon's transition to independence and initiation of development has not been particularly easy. The original political party demanding independence was the radical left-wing Union of the People of Cameroon (UPC), which fought a sporadic guerrilla war with France from 1957 to 1962. The government at independence in January 1960, and since, has been the moderate, technocratic National Union of Cameroon (UNC), but the last leader of UPC rebellion was not captured until 1970.

Despite all these sources of division, Cameroon has achieved a 23 year record of political stability and economic growth. To some extent, the very multiplicity of divisions within Cameroonian society makes it more feasible for wise leadership to govern the country than if the society were divided into, for instance, only two major groups. The country has been blessed with leadership which understood this fact and exploited it. President Ahidjo imposed a highly centralized and rather repressive state to control the centripetal forces of Cameroonian society, while creating a government with broad representation of all the major Cameroonian social groups.

To ensure unity in the face of diversity, Ahidjo created a one party political system, and in May of 1972 obtained popular approval by referendum for creation of a unitary state. In 1971 the trade union confederations were dissolved and the entire labor movement was reconstituted into an arm of the governing party. The press and students are tightly controlled. Security is ensured by a tough, centrally controlled combination of police and military forces.

The achievement of Ahidjo in creating a developing economy and a stable polity with the raw material of Cameroonian society can be gauged by comparing the country's achievements with those of countries of societies with similar problems elsewhere. By appointing representatives of all major ethnic groups, Ahidjo avoided the any analogue of neighboring Nigeria's Biafra problem. Since the poorer parts of Cameroon, notably the Muslim north and the Bamileke of the center, have benefited disproportionately from development despite their poverty compared with the more cosmopolitan southern coastal regions, and since President Ahidjo came from the relatively deprived Muslim north, the nation has avoided the East Pakistan problem which plagued Pakistan until the secession of Bangladesh. President Ahidjo has succeeded in creating a sense of national identity and unity in an extraordinarily diverse and poor country without the nationalistic excesses which Sukarno employed in a similar situation in Indonesia at extraordinary costs to the nation's economic

welfare. By emphasizing agricultural development, and avoiding the temptation to subsidize organized labor groups in the major cities, Cameroon has avoided the characteristic food crises and urban overpopulation of Zambia and many other African countries. By keeping the French more at arms length than for instance the Ivory Coast, while still obtaining most of the benefits of association with the former colonial power, Cameroon has averted the risk of a nationalistic reaction against the French. By pursuing a policy of gradual and balanced development, rather than overinvestment in the oil sector, Cameroon has also avoided the financial crises and maldistribution of other oil states such as Mexico and Venezuela.

Cameroon's national leadership has put national unity first and economic development a close second as the critical national priorities. The top leadership comes from all the key areas of the country, and a rather top heavy bureaucracy has drawn upon many segments of Cameroonian society. There has, in short, been no shortage of patronage in Cameroon. Central controls, softened by an emphasis on policies of compromise and accomodation, and heightened by an ideological campaign for national unity, have achieved the goal of creating a nation out of disparate tribes.

At the same time, patronage has not been achieved by sacrificing economic development. The leadership has been strongly interested in economic development and has come to its task with considerable education and experience. The policies developed by the leadership have been effectively implemented by a bureaucracy which, although excessively large and excessively fond of red tape, is well trained by African standards and loyal. Policy is supported by the UNC, which is an effective and enduring political institution, not just an entourage of particular politicians. Policy has been implemented in a context of stability defended by a relatively professional military under the control of the UNC. Development policy has emphasized agriculture and agribusiness, which employ most of the population, but has in a balanced way also supported manufacturing and the development of the oil sector. The state has played a strong role in development, promoting Cameroonization of management and ownership, providing indicative plans for the private sector and obligatory plans for the public sector, promoting state participation in favored industries but keeping those industries competitive and largely privately owned, and seeking to ensure that adequate resources are channeled into small and medium firms as well as large firms. The combination of nationalism, widespread representation, and widespread distribution of the benefits of development has yielded extraordinarily broad support for the UNC government.

The transition of power from President Ahidjo, who served from independence in January 1960 until November 1982, to Paul Biya, who has been president since that time, has strengthened these trends. Ahidjo was a Muslim northerner while Biya was a non-Muslim from a minor tribe in the center-south, and Biya in turn has appointed a prime minister from the Muslim north. While Ahidjo had to emphasize political unity above all else, even at occasional cost to economic development programs, Biya may well be able to stand on the shoulders of his predecessor and give even higher priority to economic development. Biya has chosen cabinet of younger, but experienced technocrats who are believed likely to speed up the economic decision-making process.

Meanwhile, Biya has now governed for a full year, and the successful replacement of the country's first president by his constitutionally ordained successor, particularly a successor from a different tribal and religious background, enhances national unity and stability.

### Opposition to the Government

In achieving these successes, Cameroon has of course encountered difficulties and experienced frictions. As noted earlier, there was still sporadic fighting with the UPC throughout the first decade of independence. The UPC retains a fringe following among intellectuals, some religious groups, students, some media members, a few lower rank military officers, disenfranchised youth, and the unemployed. (However, the Bamileke, previously the predominant ethnic support of the UPC, have become the most successful economic group and have therefore been coopted.) The anglophone areas resent francophone dominance, just as francophone Quebec resents anglophone dominance in Canada, and this has occasionally resulted in semi-clandestine political organization against the government. There was a planned coup against Ahidjo in 1979 and an alleged presidential guard plot against Biya in August 1982. An uprising occurred in a northern department in October of 1979. The complexities of ethnic politics have caused frequent cabinet shuffles under both Ahidjo and Biya. When Biya took over, Ahidjo initially remained head of the UNC and sought to control his successor. Moreover, four key cabinet members who were unwilling to tolerate a Muslim president had to be purged from the UNC. However, all dissident efforts have been unsuccessful and have been relatively minor in the number of people involved, the number of people killed or injured, and in the impact on the economy.

Despite the tradition of authoritarian rule in many of the tribes comprising Cameroon, there is considerable pressure for more openness in the way the country is managed. In particular, there is widespread hope that Biya will allow somewhat greater freedom of the press and perhaps allow multiple candidates to run for positions as representatives in the country's single party, the UNC. These pressures are significant, and it will be a positive sign if Biya does make some moves toward greater openness, but there is little early potential for explosion even if he does not.

Cameroonian economic management has been as moderate as its politics. Unlike many new states, particularly in Africa, the Cameroonian government has not smothered entrepreneurial initiative with state firms; the state does participate in many industries, but usually as a minority partner. As noted earlier, the government has given balanced attention to different sectors. Unlike many states where patronage is a critically important political concern, Cameroon has not overspent; remarkably, the government is able to finance its entire budget from tax receipts. Foreign borrowing, as well as domestic, has been kept to very low levels. All sectors have the freedom and the access to credit necessary to entrepreneurial development.

Internationally, Cameroon faces the many potentially destabilizing forces experienced by most African countries. Its most important international relationship is still with France, which provides military support, guarantees

the convertibility of the currency, and is an important investor and trading partner. But Cameroon has insisted on promoting Cameroonization of joint companies, has remained aloof from most of the African political organizations promoted by France, and has diversified its economic ties to the point where the United States is a larger overseas market than France. Thus, Cameroon has received the principal benefits that France offers its foreign colonies without risking a nationalistic reaction against its ties with the former colonial power.

While remaining firmly in the western economic orbit, Cameroon has pursued an relatively independent foreign policy which has enabled it to deal with all of the world economically and to receive some aid from the Peoples Republic of China, as well as from western powers.

Cameroon borders Nigeria, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and the Central African Republic. It has undemarcated boundries with several of these countries, and had a border clash with Nigeria in 1981. However, Cameroon's approach to these issues has been conciliatory, and the dispute with Nigeria, crucial because it involved potential oil fields, was settled through mediation by the Organization of African Unity. Cameroon is a potential target of destabilization efforts by Libya's Colonel Qaddafi, who would like to use his recently gained position in Chad to subvert several states of the region. However, Libya has not achieved control of southern Chad, near the Cameroon border, and is not likely to become an effective threat. Cameroon has wisely sought to remain aloof from most regional and ideological clashes. Biya has reaffirmed Ahidjo's central policies, including Cameroon's ties to France, and seems likely to be able to contain the sporadic problems with Nigeria which appear likely to remain the country's key foreign policy problem.

### Scenarios For The Future

A year after the accession of Paul Biya to the Presidency, a business as usual scenario would seem to be the most likely. The political pattern of maintaining centralized rule, coopting the leaders of all the major ethnic groups, and spreading the benefits of development may well be enhanced by a new president from another ethnic group. The economic pattern of balanced development with due concern for incentives and for distributional issues may well be enhanced by a more technocratic cabinet. Even if the government makes a few mistakes, the financial prudence that the government has demonstrated for the last generation, both domestically and in its foreign financial relationships, provides some cushion. The firm relationship with France also provides a cushion.

At the same time, one must always remain aware of the numerous tensions in Cameroonian society and the variety of ways in which leadership can stumble. Cameroon's management performance to date may well be the most impressive in Africa. Its prospects for the future are certainly among the most impressive. But Cameroon is far from being a highly institutionalized polity and economy like Singapore. Sporadic flareups of ethnic tension and frequent cabinet shuffles demonstrate the need for a continuous high level of leadership skill and agility. It is necessary to keep an eye on: 1) the level of ethnic

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tensions; 2) the persistent will of the government to maintain a balanced approach to development, maintain financial prudence, and particularly avoid overinvestment in the oil sector; 3) the response of both Biya and his constituents to widespread demands for liberalization; and 4) the ability of Biya to maintain political and economic control in the shifting ethnic sands which seem to force such frequent cabinet changes. The exhaustion of Ahidjo testifies to the strain on any Cameroonian president of meeting these imperatives.