

## **ABSTRACT**

### **MINORITY RECOGNITION OR EXCLUSION: DEFINING CITIZENSHIP IN “DEMOCRATIZING” CAMEROON**

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Paul Biya has presided over Cameroon for almost 30 years, maintaining his power through Cameroon's single-party years and through its transition to a multiparty system.

This paper will explore how Biya has used constitutional change to maintain his grip on power by shifting public discourse on identity and citizenship. While this may have succeeded in protecting him from rivals, the long run effects may be much more dangerous for Cameroon's political cohesiveness.

The high-water mark of a threat to Biya's hold on power was in 1992, when in Cameroon's first multiparty elections, the ruling party (CPDM) failed to win an outright majority in Parliament, and incumbent Biya nearly lost to a presidential challenger. Since then, however, the CPDM steadily has enlarged its dominance in Parliament, and Biya has increased his proportion of the vote to secure the presidency. Some of this may be explained by a fragmented opposition and apathetic and disillusioned voters, but I believe much of it is a result of a calculated institutional strategy.

My previous research has noted that Cameroon's revision of its Constitution in 1996 gave more recognition to Cameroon's many ethnic groups, guaranteeing protection and promotion for all of Cameroon's national languages and cultures. It was unclear in that research, however, why the government had made these changes, since local groups did not seem to be agitating for special rights. Recently, some authors have suggested that this constitutional change, along with changes in Cameroon's electoral rules, is part of a conscious strategy to disenfranchise large portions of the population (Jua 2001; Takougang 2003; Fonchingong 2005) by altering definitions of citizenship. This corresponds to a wider literature on a broader trend in Africa and elsewhere toward discourses of autochthony and the politics of belonging (Geschiere 2009; Geschiere and Jackson, 2006).

With a research trip to Cameroon this summer, I hope to discover exactly how Cameroon's mixed electoral system, decentralization and recent changes in qualifications for voting registries have transformed Cameroon's electoral constituencies in order to favor the ruling party. If the apparent constitutional 'concessions' and recognition of minority groups are indeed more sinister strategies of dividing an opposition, this is a critical area to bring to light, and it may have severe long-term consequences for Cameroon's political stability.