

Chapter 4

Election Campaign and Media

Election Campaign

The 1992 law as amended provides guidelines for the election campaigns of Presidential candidates. While the general management of the elections is conducted by ELECAM, campaigning material and its distribution is controlled by MINATD.

Two copies of circulars, manifestos and posters of the candidates meant for campaigns must be submitted to MINATD to obtain permission (described in the law as a visa) for their use. It is instructive to note that the request for a visa can be withheld if in the judgment of the Minister, the campaign material appeals to violence, undermines national unity and territorial integrity or incites hatred against public authorities or citizens or a body of citizens. Section 66 (4) states that: 'No approval shall be accorded after the twelfth day preceding the poll'. The visa shall indicate the colour and initials assigned to each candidate. The law provides for sanctions, including criminal proceedings for any breach of these guidelines.

Under Section 69 of the 1992 law as amended, the Administration shall allocate sites for the display of posters around every polling station and near sub-divisional, district and council offices, and it is required to allocate equal space to each candidate.

With regard to campaign rallies themselves, Section 72 provides for election meetings to be held without prior authorisation, but section 73 also stipulates that the Administration could prohibit a meeting if it is of the view that such a meeting could threaten public law and order.

The Team was informed by ELECAM that each political party received a sum of CFA 30,000,000 for their campaigns, disbursed in two halves. A sum of CFA 15,000,000 was granted at the onset of their campaigns, with the balance provided upon proof that there was evidence of some presidential campaign activity. One major opposition party complained that the allocation was not sufficient to run an effective campaign.

The official campaign period for the 2011 Presidential election commenced on 25 September 2011 and lasted until 8 October 2011. Some opposition parties complained that the ruling party began its campaign before the official start. The Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) announced the launch of President Biya's campaign website on 13 September 2011, 12 days before the official start date.

There were reports of campaign disruptions, for example by John Fru Ndi, the SDF presidential candidate, who complained that his campaign schedules on 4 October were disrupted when his flight could not take off on schedule to the rally site because a no-flight order was imposed on Cameroon airspace to accommodate the ruling party candidate's campaign.

The SDF also alleged that officials had travelled to their home constituencies to help boost the electoral prospects of the ruling party candidate in the election, leaving government offices under-resourced.

The Team observed two rallies in the capital Yaoundé, organised by the CPDM and the SDF. Both rallies were peaceful and appeared to proceed without restraint.

Media Coverage and the Election

The Ministry of Communications and MINATD are charged with different aspects of regulating the print, radio and television industries, while the National Communications Council (NCC) also plays a regulatory role. No independent media regulator currently exists.

There is one public television station in Cameroon, eight private television stations, 15 public radio stations and 54 private radio stations (see Annex 4). No figures on audience reach were available from the Ministry of Communication, but radio is considered to be the most popular way of receiving information followed by television and print.

Cameroonians also have access to ten private rural radio stations and 18 community radio stations. The community radio stations are not permitted to broadcast political content.

According to the Ministry of Communication there are more than 200 newspapers that publish regularly in the country. Major newspaper publications include the state-owned English language daily *The Cameroon Tribune*, as well as French language dailies *Le Messager*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Mutations*, *Le Jour* and *Actu*. Several interlocutors considered internet news to be an elite way of accessing information. There are only about 749,600 internet users in a population of more than 19 million people⁸.

Laws which govern media include the following: law N°. 90/052 (1990) on social communication; law N°. 96 (1996) on freedom of communication; decree N°. 2000/158 (2000) on creating and running media outlets; decree N°. 91/287 (1991) on the National Communication Council; decree N°. 92/030 (1992) on access by political parties to media; and Decision N°. 10 (2003) about crypting radio and TV signals.

Media Freedom

Cameroon has a plethora of French and English media outlets where a variety of opinions about the elections and the various presidential candidates were expressed, including some sharply critical insight. However, a variety of stakeholders noted to the Team the ruling party's ongoing domination of news coverage during the campaign period, especially in state-owned media. This was contrary to efforts set out to prohibit such a disparity, including those in ELECAM's Code of Conduct for Election Stakeholders in Cameroon.

The Code of Conduct specifically discouraged media from 'any partial treatment of the various political actors before, during and after elections', as well as publishing results of opinion polls or provisional results of elections. The Ministry of Communication was in charge of issuing accreditation to journalists who wanted to cover the ruling party candidate's activities on the campaign trail, though no such accreditation was required to cover opposition candidates.

⁸ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html>

It was clear from a variety of forms of media coverage that the ruling party dominated reportage with detailed as well as lengthy coverage dedicated to its candidate's activities. This included physical advertising such as posters and billboards in regional centres across the country. Officials from the SDF told the Team that their access to advertising space had been limited after the space was purchased months before the election by the ruling party, and their campaign activities across the country obstructed by the movement of the ruling party candidate. The Team noted that much of the advertising that focused on the ruling party's candidate remained on display during election day and beyond, even though according to ELECAM it was supposed to be removed by midnight on 8 October 2011.

State-owned Media and the Campaign

Unbalanced coverage in favour of the ruling party was attributed by stakeholders to the party's capability of organising events attractive to newsmakers, as well as facilitating trips for journalists to accompany them on the campaign trail. State-owned media outlets like the newspaper *The Cameroon Tribune* and radio and television broadcaster CRTV expressed to the Team that they were dedicated to covering the competing political parties equally during the campaign period. However, the line between independent journalism and state-financed coverage of the campaign was unclear to stakeholders. They alleged that subsidised travel for journalists and government resources were used to bolster the campaign activities of the ruling party. They alleged further that the ruling party had undue influence over editorial content.

Barriers to Editorial Freedom

Poor pay for journalists and unclear distinctions around professional status make the industry susceptible to lowered standards like bribe-taking or biased reporting. Not all journalists who work in Cameroon are accredited or belong to organisations like the Cameroon Union of Journalists (CUJ) or Cameroon Association of English Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ). Standards of accuracy and factualism in reportage vary widely in media outlets, and the Centre for Conflict Resolution Journalism (CCRJ) has noted that 'newspaper content in the independent press is largely political commentary that makes scanty [*sic*] use of factual material', and says the problem derives in part from a lack of training for those involved in the industry.

Another barrier facing journalists is the prospect of intimidation or being targeted legally for critical reportage. During the campaign it was reported that an editor from a private newspaper was detained by military police in the wake of an August 2010 story about alleged embezzlement by a tax collector. Other opposition candidates also reportedly found their activities limited, according to news reports and a diplomatic source.

A release by international non-governmental organization, *Reporters Without Borders*, on the state of media freedom during the campaign commented on clearly unbalanced coverage in favour of the ruling party, and said that 'decriminalisation of media offences' was needed to remove the threat of imprisonment for reporters.

A government official acknowledged the need for an independent media regulatory body, as well as a review of the law concerning press freedom. The official said that while press freedom and democracy are likened to each other, the broad press freedom in Cameroon still has a weak impact on the political process. Another government official said that ELECAM should be in charge of issuing press accreditation during the campaign period, and not the Ministry of Communication.

Public Interest in the Campaign Process

It should be noted that there appeared to be a large interest by some Cameroonians in consuming news related to the political process. This stood in contradistinction to stakeholders' assessment of a pervasive sense of public apathy. There were also efforts to sensitise journalists to fair and responsible coverage of the elections process, such as a training seminar organised by one non-governmental organisation during the election period.

On the streets of Yaoundé, the Team observed people crowding around newsstands that carried dozens of French and English newspapers. At one, there were more than 50 tabloid-style newspapers on display, almost all focused on election-related matters. Small battery-powered radios were used in areas without electricity for people to gather the news.

One promising development noted by interlocutors was the beginning of television debates featuring members of different political groups. But while there was evidence of some lively public debate on the airwaves and in newsprint, the prospect of spreading news or organising political activities through means such as social networking websites seemed to be an underdeveloped concept. For example, while the ruling party candidate and some opposition candidates used tools like Twitter or Facebook to publicise their campaigns, the practice was not universal. One media report by Dibussi Tande, analysing social networking use in the campaign, said 'the SDF seems to be a very reluctant player on the social media scene, if at all'. The same report said 'none of the campaigns seem to have incorporated mobile phone communication which allows them to share ideas and gather critical data'.

Issues and Recommendations

We appreciate the natural advantages that may accrue to an incumbent government. However, the magnitude of resources that to us appeared to have been deployed by the ruling CPDM party during the election campaign and its overwhelming advantage of incumbency challenged the notion of a level playing field in the entire process.

It is therefore important that the existing laws on campaign financing and media coverage during the campaign period be reviewed and properly enforced with the aim of strengthening accountability and transparency.

The use of visas to regulate the allocation of space and sites for the display of election posters and manifestos raised concerns about having to seek permission to campaign and the possibility of the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation rejecting the request on a partisan basis.

Election Campaign

- We recommend that ELECAM should be empowered to formulate campaign regulations to assure equitable political coverage for all parties at election time. Such campaign regulations shall be enforceable on both State and private radio and TV stations. This arrangement will make any further role of the Ministry of Communication in this area redundant.
- MINATD continued to retain some legal responsibilities for the election. Taking advantage of its fore-knowledge as to the date of election, the ruling party was

allegedly able to purchase virtually all billboard spaces, resulting in a disproportionate display of the posters of the ruling presidential candidate and drowning out room for competition. We recommend that the allocation of billboards for posters needs to be reviewed to assure equitable access to all parties and appropriate sanctions be imposed for any wilful breach of the established rules in this respect.

- The Ministry of Communications is yet to set up a credible level playing field with regard to access to electronic media and television among all presidential aspirants. Equity and balance in the level and allocation of funds supplied by the state for the campaigns demands review. We recommend that the current provisions should be revisited to ensure that state funding of campaigns is provided at a realistic level, which allows for competition on an equal footing.

Media

- During the election period the Ministry of Communication was in charge of granting accreditation to journalists who wished to cover the ruling party's candidate. We recommend that all election accreditation should be done through an independent body such as ELECAM.
- Journalists report a climate of legal intimidation or the possibility of incarceration in the course of their work. No independent media regulatory body exists, that does not answer to the head of state or is part of government. We recommend that the government consider creating such a body, as well as seriously evaluating laws that criminalise the work of journalists.
- Members of the media hold the view that there are widely varying standards of factualism and accuracy in reportage. We recommend that increased training should be offered on covering election campaigns fairly and responsibly. A body such as ELECAM may consider partnering or leading such training, or working with organisations like the Union of Cameroon Journalists.
- Critics allege that state-owned media are used by the ruling party as a tool during election campaigns. We recommend the establishment of an independent media regulator to monitor the content on state-owned outlets and release findings on possible biases or uneven coverage.
- Different media outlets do not have the logistical manpower or internal training of staff to thoroughly cover a nation-wide campaign. We recommend that media outlets examine the use of technology in order to leverage their resources with other outlets in Cameroon and access training from other jurisdictions on reporting practices.