

Research Article

Cameroon in Context: Rethinking Democracy in Central and West Africa

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Abstract

This article examines Cameroon within the broader discourse on democratic governance in Central and West Africa, challenging conventional assumptions about political transition, democratic consolidation, and state reform. Existing scholarship often evaluates African democracies using normative models that emphasise linear progression towards liberal democratic institutions. However, such approaches frequently overlook the historical, social, and geopolitical conditions that shape governance outcomes across the region. Cameroon is a particularly significant case because its political development reflects the enduring influence of colonial legacies, complex security challenges, neo-patrimonial political structures, and external pressures that continue to affect state institutions and democratic practices. These factors have produced a distinctive political order that cannot be adequately understood through universalised democratic frameworks alone. This study reassesses prevailing interpretations of democracy by situating Cameroon within its regional context and examining how governance operates amid institutional complexity and political contestation. The article seeks to determine whether Cameroon should be viewed as an exceptional case or as a representative example of broader patterns evident across Central and West Africa. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, comparative analytical approach. It draws on existing literature, historical analysis, debates on regional governance, and a contextual examination of political institutions and state-society relations. By comparing Cameroon's political trajectory with wider regional experiences, the research identifies common structural dynamics that shape democratic development, governance stability, and reform processes. The findings suggest that Cameroon's political experience is not an anomaly but reflects recurring governance features across the subregion. The interplay of historical legacies, security concerns, patronage networks, and external influences has contributed to the persistence of hybrid political arrangements that blend democratic and authoritarian characteristics. The article concludes that democracy in Central and West Africa should be understood through context-sensitive analytical frameworks rather than linear or universal models. Such an approach offers a more accurate basis for assessing governance performance, political stability, and prospects for democratic reform across the region.

Keywords

Cameroon, Democracy, Democratic Governance, Central Africa, West Africa, Comparative Political Analysis, Political Institutions, Hybrid Regimes

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1. Introduction

Across Central and West Africa, the trajectory of democracy remains deeply contested. Three decades after the wave of political liberalisation that followed the end of the Cold War, formal democratic institutions, including multiparty elections, constitutional reforms, and decentralisation frameworks, have become widely institutionalised. Yet these procedural reforms coexist with entrenched executive dominance, constrained civic space, and the persistence of hybrid regimes. This paradox raises a pressing question for scholars and practitioners alike: Is democracy in the region consolidating, eroding, or transforming into new political forms? This article examines the question through the case of Cameroon, a state whose political evolution encapsulates many of the tensions that shape governance across Central and West Africa. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, Cameroon has held regular elections and maintained formal democratic institutions while preserving a highly centralised executive structure and enduring incumbency [57]. At the same time, the country faces overlapping crises, including the Anglophone conflict, security threats in the Far North linked to insurgency, and pressures from economic inequality and demographic change, all of which test the resilience of its political system. Cameroon, therefore, offers a critical lens for examining how regimes maintain stability while adapting to internal and external pressures. Regionally, governance patterns reveal a complex interplay between democratic aspiration and authoritarian adaptation [22]. While some states have experienced democratic alternation and institutional strengthening, others have witnessed constitutional manipulation, extended presidential tenure, military interventions, and shrinking civic freedoms. Rather than a linear democratic decline, the region appears to be experiencing a process of authoritarian resilience coupled with democratic reconfiguration, in which regimes selectively adopt democratic norms to secure legitimacy while preserving centralised control.

This article argues that Cameroon exemplifies a broader pattern of adaptive governance, in which democratic forms are preserved yet substantively reshaped. By situating Cameroon within regional trends, the study challenges binary narratives of democratic success versus failure and instead conceptualises regime evolution as a spectrum ranging from resilience and hybridisation to authoritarian adaptation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about democratic backsliding, regime hybridity, and political legitimacy in Africa. The article's key contribution is threefold. First, it reconceptualises Cameroon not as an outlier but as a representative case for understanding governance transformations across Central and West Africa. Second, it introduces an analytical framework that contrasts democratic resilience with authoritarian adapta-

tion to explain regime durability amid crisis and reform pressures. Third, it reframes regional democratic trajectories by asking whether observed changes reflect erosion, evolution, or transformation of democratic governance. By placing Cameroon in a comparative and regional context, this study advances the central question of the analysis: *Is democracy in Central and West Africa evolving, eroding, or transforming into new hybrid political forms?* Addressing this question is essential not only for understanding the region's political future but also for rethinking how democracy is conceptualised in contexts characterised by institutional pluralism, state fragility, and enduring struggles over legitimacy and inclusion.

1.1. Research Problem

More than three decades after the wave of political liberalisation that swept across Africa in the early 1990s, the trajectory of democracy in Central and West Africa remains deeply contested. Although formal multiparty systems, electoral processes, and constitutional reforms have proliferated, these institutional changes have not consistently delivered accountable governance, the rule of law, or meaningful political inclusion. Instead, many states exhibit hybrid regimes marked by electoral rituals, executive dominance, constrained civic space, and persistent patronage networks. This paradox raises an urgent scholarly and policy question: is democracy in the region consolidating, eroding, or transforming into new forms of governance? Cameroon offers a critical lens for examining this puzzle. Often categorised as a competitive authoritarian or hybrid regime, Cameroon has held multiparty elections since the 1990s while preserving entrenched executive power, centralised authority, and limited political alternation¹. The country's prolonged incumbency, constitutional engineering, security-driven governance responses, and management of dissent illustrate patterns across the region. At the same time, Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, decentralisation debates, and evolving civil society activism reveal pressures that challenge conventional understandings of regime stability and democratic practice.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined democratisation, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian resilience in Africa. However, less attention has been paid to how regimes adopt democratic norms and practices while recalibrating mechanisms of control, thereby producing governance systems that cannot be fully captured by the dichotomy of democratic progress versus regression². Cameroon, at the intersection of Central and West African political dynamics, offers an analytically rich case for examining these adaptive strategies and their implications for democratic legitimacy and citizen participation [41].

¹ Agbor, A. N., 2026. In what ways do political factors and relations of power interfere with the legal protection of human rights in Cameroon? (Doctoral dissertation, University of Plymouth).

² Norris, P., 2012. Making democratic governance work: How regimes shape prosperity, welfare, and peace. Cambridge University Press.

This article, therefore, addresses the following central research question: to what extent does Cameroon's political trajectory reflect democratic resilience, authoritarian adaptation, or systemic transformation, and what does this reveal about the evolving nature of democracy in Central and West Africa? By situating Cameroon within regional governance trends and examining the interplay between formal democratic institutions and informal power structures, the study seeks to reconceptualise democratic change beyond binary narratives of success or failure. The article's key contribution is to advance a contextualised understanding of democracy as an evolving political practice shaped by historical legacies, security pressures, elite strategies, and citizen agency. Through this lens, Cameroon is not merely a national case study but a window into broader regional transformations, offering insights relevant to scholars of comparative politics, governance reform, and democratic theory in Africa.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

The analysis is guided by a framework that integrates democratic resilience, the persistence and adaptive capacity of democratic norms, institutions, and civic engagement; authoritarian adaptation, the strategic modification of authoritarian practices through legal reforms, electoral management, co-optation, and securitisation; and regime transformation, shifts towards hybrid governance that blend democratic procedures with illiberal power consolidation³. Rather than employing a binary democratic–authoritarian classification, the study conceptualises political change along a continuum of regime adaptation, allowing for simultaneous erosion, resilience, and transformation. This article places Cameroon's political trajectory within broader debates on democratisation, hybrid regimes, and governance transformation in Africa. Rather than treating democracy and authoritarianism as mutually exclusive regime types, the analysis adopts a dynamic, relational understanding of political order, emphasising adaptation, resilience, and transformation across institutional, societal, and regional dimensions [49].

2. Rethinking Democracy

Conventional assessments of democracy in Africa have long been grounded in a liberal-procedural framework that prioritises competitive elections, the protection of civil liberties, opposition participation, and adherence to the rule of law. These indicators, enshrined in widely used measures such as Freedom House scores and Polity indices, have served as the dominant benchmarks for evaluating democratic performance. Within this paradigm, democracy is understood as a system in which political authority derives from free and fair elections, citizens enjoy protected rights to expression and association,

opposition parties can organise and compete without undue constraint, and legal institutions operate independently to uphold constitutional order [21]. These criteria have shaped external assessments of governance across Central and West Africa and continue to inform donor policies, diplomatic engagement, and scholarly analysis. However, the political trajectories of many states in the region, including Cameroon, increasingly call into question the adequacy of these traditional indicators. Electoral processes persist, opposition parties remain formally legal, and constitutions continue to enshrine democratic principles. Yet the substance of political competition and civic freedom has shifted. This gap between institutional form and political practice necessitates a reconceptualisation of democracy that captures not only procedural compliance but also the evolving mechanisms through which power is consolidated and maintained⁴. Parallel to these developments is the growing deployment of digital repression. As political mobilisation increasingly shifts online, governments have responded by expanding surveillance, regulating digital spaces, and intermittently restricting internet access. Cybercrime legislation and national security provisions are often invoked to criminalise dissent, while online monitoring enables pre-emptive control over opposition coordination and civil society activism [50]. These practices complicate traditional assessments of civil liberties by relocating repression from overt coercion to technologically mediated oversight.

Closely linked to these trends is the strategic use of constitutional manipulation to recalibrate political tenure and authority. Amendments that extend presidential term limits, restructure electoral timelines, or centralise executive powers often proceed through formal legal procedures, preserving a veneer of constitutionalism while altering the competitive landscape. Such changes illustrate how legality can be mobilised to entrench incumbency, blurring the boundary between constitutional governance and political engineering.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that democracy in Central and West Africa is neither wholly absent nor fully consolidated. Rather, it is being reshaped by adaptive strategies that preserve democratic institutions while reconfiguring how they operate. The persistence of elections, legislatures, and constitutions indicates that democratic norms retain symbolic and political value. Yet the modalities of authority reveal a shift towards hybrid governance systems that combine electoral legitimacy with sophisticated mechanisms of control. Understanding Cameroon in this evolving landscape requires moving beyond binary classifications of democratic versus authoritarian regimes. Instead, it calls for an analytical framework attentive to the interplay between formal democratic structures and informal power-consolidation practices [45]. In this context, democracy is not simply eroding under pressure; it is being recalibrated to accommodate new technologies, se-

³ Croissant, A. and Lott, L., 2025. Democratic resilience in the twenty-first century: search for an analytical framework and explorative analysis. *Political studies*, p. 00323217251345779.

⁴ Agbor, A. N., 2026. In what ways do political factors and relations of power interfere with the legal protection of human rights in Cameroon? (Doctoral dissertation, University of Plymouth).

curity paradigms, and political strategies. Therefore, democracy is not collapsing; it is being re-engineered.

2.1. Beyond the Democratic–Authoritarian Binary

Classical democratization theory conceptualised political change as a linear transition from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy. However, empirical developments across Central and West Africa challenge this teleological model⁵. Multiparty elections, constitutional rule, and formal democratic institutions coexist with entrenched executive dominance, patronage networks, and restrictions on civil liberties. To capture these complexities, this study draws on scholarship on hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, and electoral authoritarianism, which highlight the coexistence of democratic procedures and illiberal power practices [37]. Yet, while these frameworks illuminate institutional hybridity, they often emphasise regime classification rather than the processes through which governance systems adapt and evolve. This article, therefore, adopts a continuum-based approach, viewing regimes as adaptive systems rather than static types. This perspective allows for the simultaneous preservation of democratic resilience and the consolidation of authoritarian rule within the same political order.

2.2. Authoritarian Adaptation

Authoritarian adaptation is the strategic recalibration of power by ruling elites to preserve dominance while maintaining democratic legitimacy [30]. Rather than relying solely on overt repression, contemporary regimes often employ subtler mechanisms, including constitutional amendments and term-limit revisions; electoral management and legal regulation of the opposition; co-optation of elites and fragmentation of opposition coalitions; securitisation narratives to justify restrictions on political freedoms; and decentralisation reforms that redistribute administrative responsibility without meaningful political autonomy [26]. This perspective emphasises that authoritarian durability increasingly depends on institutional flexibility and legalistic governance, rather than solely on coercive control.

2.3. Regime Transformation and Hybrid Governance

Beyond erosion or persistence, political systems may undergo regime transformation, yielding hybrid governance forms that blend democratic procedures with centralised authority. These transformations often emerge through iterative adjustments rather than an abrupt rupture [60]. In Central and

West Africa, regime transformation is shaped by constitutional engineering and legal reform; security crises and conflict governance; regional democratic norms and peer-pressure mechanisms; economic pressures and international conditionality; and youth mobilisation and digitally mediated political participation. Hybrid governance thus reflects a negotiated political order rather than transitional instability [48].

2.4. Regional Political Dynamics and Diffusion

Political change in Cameroon cannot be understood in isolation. Central and West Africa have experienced cycles of democratic opening, constitutional manipulation, popular protest movements, and military intervention. These developments create a regional environment in which governance practices diffuse across borders [5]. Regional dynamics shaping governance trajectories include: the resurgence of coups and military guardianship narratives; electoral legitimacy crises; constitutional reinterpretation; transnational civil society activism and protest repertoires; regional organisations' normative frameworks; and enforcement gaps. This regional lens highlights how political elites and opposition movements alike draw on neighbouring experiences, contributing to converging patterns of governance adaptation.

2.5. State Legitimacy, Conflict, and Political Order

State legitimacy plays a central role in shaping both democratic resilience and authoritarian adaptation. In contexts marked by internal conflict and security crises, governments often justify expanded executive authority in the name of national unity and stability. This dynamic is particularly relevant in Cameroon, where security governance intersects with constitutional rule, decentralisation debates, and questions of political inclusion. The framework, therefore, treats legitimacy as negotiated across multiple arenas: electoral legitimacy, security and territorial control, service delivery and governance performance, and recognition from regional and international actors.

2.6. Rethinking Democratic Change in Central and West Africa

Drawing these strands together, this article conceptualises democratic change as a multidirectional process. Political systems may simultaneously exhibit the erosion of civil liberties, the resilience of participatory norms, the adaptation of authoritarian strategies, and a transformation towards hybrid governance arrangements. This approach reframes the central question of whether democracy in Central and West Africa is

⁵ Hinnebusch, R., 2016. Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique. *Twenty Years of Studying Democratization*,

pp. 76-98.

evolving, eroding, or transforming as an inquiry into how political authority is renegotiated amid shifting domestic and regional pressures [42]. By situating Cameroon at the intersection of regional political currents, this theoretical framework advances a more nuanced understanding of democratic change, moving beyond transition paradigms towards an analysis of governance adaptation and the transformation of the political order.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a comparative qualitative case study methodology, centred on Cameroon as the primary case, to examine broader patterns of democratic governance across Central and West Africa. The study integrates historical institutional analysis, comparative regional assessment, and interpretive political analysis to assess whether democracy in the region is evolving, eroding, or transforming. Methodologically, this study contributes to the literature by bridging area studies and comparative democratisation scholarship; moving beyond regime typologies towards a dynamic model of governance adaptation; positioning Cameroon as a cross-regional analytical hinge linking Central and West African political trajectories; and integrating security, conflict governance, and institutional reform into assessments of democratic change [47].

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

Cameroon is selected as a critical and representative case at the geopolitical and institutional crossroads of Central and West Africa. Its hybrid political trajectory, marked by prolonged incumbency, multiparty elections, Anglophone conflict, decentralisation reforms, and constitutional manipulation, offers a lens for assessing competing democratic and authoritarian dynamics. The case provides analytical leverage because Cameroon embodies:

- 1) Electoral continuity without alternation of power
- 2) Formal democratic institutions coexisting with centralised executive dominance
- 3) Regional pressures from both Francophone Central African and Anglophone West African political traditions
- 4) Security crises and state responses shaping governance practices

To situate Cameroon within regional patterns, the study draws on structured comparisons with governance trends across Central and West Africa, including cycles of military intervention, constitutional engineering, hybrid regimes, and civil resistance movements⁶.

⁶ Agbor, A. N., 2026. In what ways do political factors and relations of power interfere with the legal protection of human rights in Cameroon? (Doctoral dissertation, University of Plymouth).

3.2. Secondary Scholarly Literature

Secondary sources shall include academic analyses of hybrid regimes and African democratisation; studies of civil-military relations and constitutionalism; and research on conflict governance and state legitimacy. Media and Civil Society Reports. Domestic and international reporting on elections, protests, and state responses. Civil society and NGO assessments of political freedoms and accountability. The study employs process tracing to examine key political turning points in Cameroon's governance trajectory, including constitutional revisions, electoral cycles, decentralisation initiatives, and security responses to internal conflict. This approach enables identification of the mechanisms by which democratic norms are maintained, weakened, or reconfigured⁷. A comparative regional analysis then situates Cameroon within broader trends, including democratic backsliding and a resurgence of coups in the Sahel and Central Africa; electoral authoritarianism and entrenchment of incumbency; judicial and constitutional manipulation; and citizen mobilisation and digital activism.

3.3. Why Cameroon Matters: Authoritarian Durability, Hybrid Governance, and Regional Security

Cameroon presents a critical case for rethinking democracy and political order in Central and West Africa. While the country formally adheres to multiparty elections and constitutional governance, President Paul Biya has remained in power since 1982, making his tenure one of the longest continuous civilian presidencies in the world [54]. This remarkable longevity challenges assumptions about democratic consolidation and offers a valuable lens for examining authoritarianism's durability within electoral systems. Cameroon's political trajectory reveals how democratic institutions can coexist with entrenched executive dominance, unresolved identity tensions, and regional security pressures [12].

4. Leadership Longevity and Authoritarian Resilience

Biya's extended rule exemplifies how incumbents can institutionalise regime continuity while preserving the outward architecture of democracy. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, constitutional reforms, centralised executive authority, and patronage-based political networks have enabled regime stability while limiting meaningful political alternation. Electoral victories have reinforced the

⁷ Chia, N. C., Saturnin, K. T. N. and Nkene, Y. C., 2020. The Cameroon Decentralization Project: Tool of Conflict Resolution or Seed of Discrepancies in the Governance of a Heterogeneous State? *EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 2(3), pp. 105-115.

regime's legitimacy, yet the structural advantages of incumbency, including control over state resources, administrative influence, and a fragmented opposition, have constrained genuine political competition. This longevity complicates linear narratives of democratic deepening that equate elections with it [25]. Instead, Cameroon illustrates how electoral processes may reinforce authoritarian resilience when embedded in systems of elite co-optation, bureaucratic loyalty, and institutional asymmetry. The persistence of a dominant executive also raises broader questions about generational leadership transitions, regime adaptability, and the personalisation of political authority in postcolonial African states [25].

4.1. Hybrid Regime Dynamics: Elections and Repression

Cameroon is a hybrid regime in which democratic procedures coexist with systematic restrictions on political freedoms. Multiparty elections are held regularly, opposition parties operate legally, and formal democratic rights are constitutionally protected [56]. However, these democratic structures operate within a political environment marked by electoral irregularities, uneven media access, harassment of opposition actors, and the selective application of security laws. This duality illustrates how regimes blend democratic forms with authoritarian practices to maintain domestic legitimacy while preserving international credibility [40]. Elections provide procedural validation and diplomatic recognition, while repression curtails threats to regime stability. Cameroon, therefore, offers an instructive case for understanding how hybrid regimes sustain authority by balancing coercion and consent [40]. The Cameroonian case also challenges binary regime classifications by showing that democratic erosion does not always stem from institutional breakdown but from gradual constraints on participation, accountability, and civil liberties.

4.2. The Anglophone Crisis and the Politics of State Legitimacy

What began as protests by lawyers and teachers against perceived marginalisation within the bilingual legal and educational systems evolved into widespread civil unrest and, ultimately, into armed separatist mobilization [55]. The state's securitised response, including military deployments and restrictions on communication and civil activity, has deepened mistrust between local populations and central authorities. The crisis illustrates how linguistic, legal, and administrative asymmetries, rooted in the British and French colonial bifurcation of the territory, continue to shape contemporary grievances. More broadly, it demonstrates how governance deficits, political exclusion, and unresolved identity claims can catalyse protracted internal conflict. The Anglophone conflict also highlights tensions between sovereignty and self-determination, raising questions about decentralisation, federalism, and inclusive governance. As such, it offers an important entry

point for examining how hybrid regimes respond to legitimacy crises and how state authority is negotiated in contexts of contested national identity [9].

4.3. Security Pressures and Regional Instability

Cameroon's internal conflict intersects with broader regional security challenges, underscoring the link between governance and stability. The Far North has faced repeated attacks linked to the Boko Haram insurgency, with dynamics spilling over from northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. These threats have strained state capacity and necessitated sustained military engagement, diverting resources from governance and development priorities. [3] The coexistence of separatist conflict in the Anglophone regions and a jihadist insurgency in the north underscores the multidimensional nature of security threats facing hybrid regimes. Cameroon's experience illustrates how internal governance challenges can compound regional instability, particularly where borders are porous and security threats are transnational.

4.4. Regional Political Influence in Central Africa

Cameroon occupies a strategic position in Central Africa, both geographically and diplomatically. It borders Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo, and serves as a regional hinge between West and Central Africa [7]. Despite internal tensions, Cameroon has maintained relative state continuity compared with some neighbours and has contributed to regional security cooperation and peacekeeping. Its role in regional organisations and security initiatives positions the country as an important factor in conflict mediation and regional stabilisation. Cameroon's governance model and political trajectory, therefore, have implications beyond its borders, influencing regional norms on leadership continuity, electoral governance, and responses to internal dissent.

4.5. Exclusion of Maurice Kamto from the Presidential Race

The most consequential pre-electoral development was the disqualification of opposition leader Maurice Kamto, widely regarded as the incumbent's most credible challenger. Cameroon's electoral commission excluded Kamto from the October 2025 presidential ballot, a decision later upheld by the Constitutional Council. Authorities justified the exclusion on technical grounds relating to party eligibility and dual candidacies, but critics argued that the move undermined electoral credibility and fairness. Human rights organisations warned that barring a major challenger raised serious concerns about the integrity of the electoral process and reduced the competitiveness of the vote. Kamto's exclusion reinforced the ruling party's long-standing structural advantages and effectively

limited voters' ability to choose among viable alternatives. In a dominant-party system where opposition fragmentation already weakens competition, the removal of a leading contender further tilted the electoral field.

5. Arrests and Detention of Supporters and Protesters

Kamto's exclusion sparked protests and demonstrations, which were met with forceful state responses. Security forces dispersed the demonstrations with tear gas and detained numerous supporters. Following the election, amid allegations of fraud, broader protests erupted nationwide; security forces arrested dozens of protesters, some of whom were tried by military courts [13]. Post-election unrest led to hundreds of arrests and multiple fatalities, reflecting a securitised approach to political dissent. The detention of opposition activists and demonstrators signals a pattern in which protest is framed as a security threat rather than a legitimate democratic practice [13]. Such responses reinforce deterrence, discouraging civic mobilisation and weakening public participation in political life.

5.1. Media Restrictions and Intimidation Ahead of Elections

Restrictions on press freedom intensified during the electoral period. Observers documented bans on political debate, arrests of journalists, and broader constraints on freedom of expression, creating a climate in which journalism operated "under siege." Reports highlighted harassment, intimidation, and the suppression of critical reporting in the pre-election period, contributing to a tightly controlled information environment [29]. These pressures align with broader warnings from human rights advocates that critics, including journalists and activists, risk arrest and prosecution, particularly during election periods. The cumulative effect is a constricted public sphere in which independent scrutiny of political processes becomes increasingly difficult. During the election period, authorities reportedly prohibited public discussion and reporting on the president's health, an issue of public concern given Biya's advanced age and prolonged absences abroad [15]. These restrictions curtailed political debate on leadership capacity and succession, topics central to democratic accountability [19]. The prohibition reflects broader patterns of narrative control, in which sensitive information is cast as a threat to national stability. By constraining reporting on the president's condition, authorities curtailed legitimate public scrutiny and restricted deliberation on governance continuity [19].

5.2. Implications: A Shrinking Political and Democratic Space

Developments surrounding the 2025 election illustrate a

convergence of mechanisms that collectively narrow democratic space: electoral exclusion weakened competition by removing a principal opposition challenger. Repression of protests criminalised dissent and discouraged civic participation. Media constraints curtailed independent scrutiny and pluralistic debate. Information controls limited transparency on issues central to leadership accountability. Together, these measures signal not isolated irregularities but an integrated pattern of political control [31]. The result is a progressively constricted arena for opposition activity, civic engagement, and public deliberation. In this sense, Cameroon's recent political trajectory reflects a broader regional trend towards procedural elections without substantive democratic openness. The endpoint of these developments is a shrinking political and democratic space, in which formal electoral processes persist, yet the conditions for meaningful political competition, accountability, and citizen participation continue to erode [31].

5.3. Opposition Rejection and Legitimacy Crisis

Even before the official announcement, opposition figures declared victory and accused the ruling establishment of orchestrating systematic manipulation of the electoral process. The Constitutional Council's rulings, final and legally unchallengeable, reinforced perceptions that institutional avenues for contesting the results were structurally foreclosed, deepening distrust of electoral governance [67]. This institutional closure illustrates a persistent legitimacy deficit in Cameroon's electoral architecture: elections occur regularly, yet their outcomes are widely perceived as predetermined. The opposition's refusal to recognise the results catalysed a broader political crisis. Calls for civil resistance, including nationwide "ghost town" protests and lockdowns, reflected both organised dissent and widespread popular disillusionment. These actions significantly disrupted economic activity and public life, particularly in opposition strongholds. The 2025 presidential election in Cameroon marked a critical moment in the country's evolving crisis of democratic legitimacy. The Constitutional Council declared incumbent President Paul Biya the winner with just over 53 per cent of the vote, securing an eighth term and extending his rule for more than four decades [20]. The opposition, led by Issa Tchiroma Bakary and backed by other candidates and civil society actors, rejected the results, alleging widespread electoral fraud, irregularities in voter rolls, and manipulation of turnout figures in conflict-affected regions [20].

5.4. Violent Protests and State Repression

Protests erupted across major urban centres, including Douala, Garoua, and Yaoundé, as demonstrators alleged electoral fraud and demanded credible results. Clashes between security forces and protesters left people dead and injured; at least four people were killed in Douala, with further fatalities reported by civil society groups. Reports suggest the death toll

may have reached dozens, with hundreds to thousands arrested nationwide. Security forces used tear gas, live ammunition, and mass arrests to disperse crowds, while detainees faced serious charges, including incitement to insurrection. Opposition leaders and activists were detained, and at least one prominent opposition figure later died in custody after being arrested during the crackdown [6]. Human rights organisations and international actors condemned the excessive use of force and urged restraint.

5.5. Regional and Comparative Implications

Cameroon's post-electoral unrest aligns with broader regional trends across Central and West Africa, where disputed elections, incumbency advantages, and institutional capture have fuelled democratic backsliding [34]. As in other hybrid regimes, elections serve both as instruments of regime continuity and as flashpoints for popular resistance. The 2025 crisis underscores the fragility of electoral legitimacy in contexts marked by prolonged incumbency, weak electoral oversight, and restricted civic space [11]. The 2025 election crisis shows that elections in Cameroon remain deeply contested and politically destabilising. Opposition rejection of the results, violent protests, state repression, and information controls collectively reinforce the perception that electoral processes lack credibility. Rather than consolidating democratic governance, elections continue to fuel conflict, deepen political polarisation, and expose the structural limits of democratic reform in Cameroon [31].

5.6. Criminalisation of Dissent and Political Imprisonment

A defining feature of Cameroon's contemporary political order is the criminalisation of dissent through legal, judicial, and carceral mechanisms. Rather than relying solely on overt repression, the state has institutionalised a framework that re-frames political opposition, protest, and critical expression as threats to national security. This securitisation of politics has enabled authorities to justify extraordinary legal measures, including the use of military courts to try civilians, prolonged pre-trial detention, and the imprisonment of opposition leaders and activists [5]. One of the most controversial instruments of repression is the use of military tribunals to try civilians. Enabled in part by anti-terror legislation and emergency security measures, military courts have been used to try opposition politicians, Anglophone activists, journalists, and protest organisers on charges including insurrection, rebellion, terrorism, and hostility against the state. This practice undermines fundamental due process protections, as military tribunals typically lack the procedural safeguards of civilian courts. Critics argue that the use of military justice against civilians reflects an executive strategy to bypass judicial independence and expedite politically motivated prosecutions. Anglophone leaders

and activists have repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of military jurisdiction over civilians, framing it as a tool of political intimidation rather than lawful adjudication [5]. Historically, the use of military tribunals to neutralise political challengers is not unprecedented in Cameroon. From the post-independence period to the present, military tribunals have been used to discipline perceived threats to state authority, thereby reinforcing continuity between past authoritarian practices and contemporary governance [1].

5.7. Long-Term Detention and Preventive Repression

Beyond trial procedures, prolonged and arbitrary detention serves as a preventive measure to neutralise opposition mobilisation. Human rights organisations have documented cases of protesters and opposition supporters detained for years after participating in peaceful demonstrations. Detention is often marked by delayed trials, restricted legal access, and harsh prison conditions, creating a punitive environment that discourages political participation [13]. In Anglophone regions and opposition strongholds, arrests frequently accompany protest cycles, reinforcing a pattern in which dissent is treated as a security threat rather than as a democratic expression. The Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé has become a powerful symbol of state repression. It houses political detainees, journalists, activists, and separatist leaders, many of whom are held for extended periods or without a fair trial. Originally built for far fewer inmates, the prison suffers from chronic overcrowding and poor conditions, reinforcing its role as both a punitive and deterrent institution. Kondengui's political significance extends beyond its physical space: it represents the carceral infrastructure through which dissent is contained, and opposition networks are fragmented [10]. The imprisonment of journalists and activists has long raised concerns about press freedom and political rights. The death in custody of journalist Germain Cyrille Ngota Ngota in 2010, reportedly due to a lack of medical care, highlighted systemic neglect and the risks detainees face. The detention of opposition figures underscores the political nature of carceral repression. Following contested elections, opposition leader Maurice Kamto and his supporters were charged before a military court, illustrating how electoral disputes can be securitized [13]. Similarly, Anglophone leaders and activists have received lengthy sentences or life imprisonment, reinforcing perceptions that detention is used to neutralise political alternatives and suppress regional grievances.

5.8. Death in Custody and the Crisis of Political Trust

The death in custody of veteran opposition leader Anicet Ekane in December 2025 marks a critical turning point in the relationship between state authority and political legitimacy. Ekane, detained after protesting disputed election results, died

in military custody amid allegations of inadequate medical care and neglect. Human rights observers emphasised that his death raised serious concerns about detainee rights, the rule of law, and systemic failures within Cameroon's custodial system. Deaths in detention carry profound symbolic weight. They transform political imprisonment from an instrument of control into a catalyst for distrust, reinforcing opposition narratives that the state's criminal justice system is politicised. Ekane's death, like earlier custodial deaths, risks deepening public cynicism towards institutions and weakening prospects for democratic consensus.

6. Repression, Legitimacy, and Democratic Stagnation

The criminalisation of dissent in Cameroon reflects a broader pattern in hybrid regimes, where legal frameworks are deployed to sustain authoritarian resilience while preserving the façade of constitutional governance. By judicialising repression, the state channels coercion through institutional channels that appear lawful yet operate politically. This strategy has long-term consequences. The imprisonment of opposition leaders weakens electoral competition, prolonged detention deters civic participation, and deaths in custody erode trust in state institutions. Together, these dynamics contribute to a political environment defined less by democratic contestation than by controlled pluralism and securitised governance [66]. The Cameroonian case, while rooted in its own historical and institutional trajectories, cannot be fully understood in isolation from the wider regional currents reshaping governance across West and Central Africa. Situating Cameroon within this broader landscape reveals how the accelerating nexus between insecurity and state power in the Sahel has fostered a pattern of democratic backsliding that now informs political practice well beyond the immediate conflict zones [17]. Cameroon exemplifies these regional dynamics: prolonged incumbency, legal repression of the opposition, internet shutdowns during unrest, and security-based justifications tied to the separatist conflict. These dynamics illustrate how national political strategies align with broader patterns of governance in Central and West Africa.

6.1. Regional Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: The Sahelian Security Paradigm

Recent political developments across West Africa reveal a pronounced pattern of democratic erosion, particularly in the Sahel corridor. Once regarded as a region undergoing gradual democratic consolidation, parts of West Africa are now experiencing a reversal marked by military intervention, restrictions on civil liberties, and the securitisation of governance. Burkina Faso exemplifies this trajectory and highlights how counter-terrorism imperatives are increasingly invoked to justify anti-democratic governance practices. Since the 2022

coups, Burkina Faso has been governed by a military junta led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Initially framed as a corrective intervention to address state fragility and escalating jihadist violence, military rule has persisted beyond its provisional mandate. The transitional authorities have repeatedly delayed the return to civilian governance, citing security exigencies and the need to stabilise territorial control. The postponement of elections and the restructuring of transitional institutions point to an emerging pattern in which security stabilisation is prioritised over democratic restoration. Such delays risk normalising military stewardship as a long-term governance model rather than a temporary crisis response [63].

6.2. Repression of Opposition, Civil Society and Curtailment of Public Discourse

The transitional government has also intensified restrictions on opposition actors and civil society organisations. Political activists and dissenting voices have faced arrests, enforced disappearances, and administrative restrictions. Public demonstrations have been curtailed under emergency security measures, and civic space has narrowed considerably [27].

This securitised approach reframes dissent as a threat to national stability. While governments facing insurgency often expand executive powers, the broad application of such measures risks conflating legitimate political opposition with security threats, thereby undermining pluralism and political participation [63]. Alongside institutional delays, the Burkinabè authorities have imposed significant constraints on media freedom. Suspensions of international and domestic media outlets, together with the detention and intimidation of journalists, signal an increasingly restrictive information environment [33]. Authorities have justified these measures as necessary to combat misinformation, maintain national cohesion, and prevent the dissemination of content deemed sympathetic to armed groups. However, the contraction of independent media space reduces transparency and weakens public oversight of transitional authorities. The erosion of press freedom also diminishes the deliberative sphere essential to democratic recovery. Independent media remain a critical threat to entrenched regimes, prompting strategies centred on control rather than outright abolition [62]. Common measures include licensing requirements and regulatory harassment; strategic defamation suits and punitive fines; arrests or intimidation of journalists; and state dominance of broadcast media markets. These measures foster self-censorship and weaken press freedom across the region. Media intimidation ensures that public discourse remains constrained even where formal press freedom exists. Authoritarian practices are often justified through security discourse. Governments present repression as necessary to combat terrorism, insurgency, separatism, threats to national unity, disinformation, cybercrime, public disorder, and electoral violence. These narratives legitimise exceptional measures and reframe dissent as a security threat. The securit-

isation of governance enables the exercise of emergency powers and legitimises restrictions on civil liberties [52].

The consolidation of military-led transitional regimes in the Sahel poses significant challenges to the regional democratic norms historically upheld by ECOWAS and the African Union. Although regional bodies have imposed sanctions and negotiated transition timelines, their influence has been uneven, and enforcement mechanisms have met resistance amid shifting geopolitical alliances. If security-driven governance models continue to proliferate, they may redefine acceptable political practice in fragile states facing insurgency. This raises critical questions about whether democratic governance can be sustained amid persistent security crises and whether new hybrid political arrangements are emerging in response to prolonged conflict [61].

6.3. Regional Patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa: The New Authoritarian Toolkit

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, formal multiparty politics co-exist with increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of political control. Rather than relying exclusively on overt military rule, contemporary regimes often deploy a hybrid repertoire of legal, technological, and discursive tools to maintain electoral legitimacy while constraining meaningful political competition. This evolving repertoire, sometimes described as digital authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, or legalistic repression, reflects a regional pattern evident across Central and West Africa, including Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Togo, Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. Recent research highlights a continental trend towards institutional and technological repression, including internet shutdowns, censorship, surveillance, and legal restrictions on civic participation. These strategies enable regimes to preserve the appearance of constitutional governance while neutralising opposition and limiting public dissent. This section identifies six interlocking strategies that constitute the emerging authoritarian toolkit. Rather than abolishing elections, regimes increasingly manage electoral competition to ensure predictable outcomes. Common tactics include disqualifying opposition candidates on administrative or legal technicalities, imposing restrictive voter registration, selectively disenfranchising voters, gerrymandering, and controlling electoral commissions. Emergency regulations are also used to restrict campaigning or assembly [65]. These practices allow incumbents to maintain international legitimacy while undermining genuine political alternation. The persistence of elections, alongside structural manipulation, reinforces dominant-party systems and entrenched incumbency [65].

A hallmark of the contemporary authoritarian toolkit is the weaponisation of law. Governments deploy broadly worded statutes, including anti-terrorism, cybercrime, public order, and defamation laws, to criminalise dissent. Across the region, journalists and opposition leaders are detained under national security or public order provisions [4]. Protest organisers face

charges framed as threats to state stability. Courts are used to delay or incapacitate political challengers. In several African contexts, anti-terrorism and media laws have been criticised as tools for crackdowns and the detention of journalists. This legalistic repression creates a chilling effect while maintaining procedural legality [4].

Digital spaces have become central arenas for political contestation and control. African governments increasingly deploy internet shutdowns during elections and protests, block and throttle social media, monitor online activity, and use cybercrime and “fake news” laws to regulate digital speech. Internet disruptions have been repeatedly used during elections and periods of political unrest across multiple African states [37]. Leaders have also learned to blunt the democratic potential of mobile technologies through censorship and shutdowns. This shift reflects a broader rise in global digital repression, including censorship and information manipulation. Digital control enables governments to contain mobilisation without resorting to visible repression [37].

6.4. Constitutional Manipulation and Term Limit Erosion

Constitutional engineering remains a key mechanism for regime longevity. Regional patterns include removing or extending presidential term limits, holding constitutional referenda to reset mandates, judicial reinterpretation of eligibility rules, and delaying elections under emergency provisions [16]. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance was designed to prevent unconstitutional retention of power, yet ratification alone has not prevented authoritarian entrenchment. Constitutional manipulation allows regimes to preserve legal continuity while prolonging incumbency. Electoral exclusion weakens challengers; legal repression deters dissent; digital censorship disrupts mobilisation; media intimidation shapes narratives; security discourse legitimises control; and constitutional manipulation institutionalises longevity. Together, these dynamics reflect a shift from overt authoritarianism towards adaptive authoritarian governance, characterised by procedural democracy without substantive competition; technological control of public discourse; legalistic repression masking coercion; securitised governance frameworks; and durable incumbency through constitutional engineering [39].

6.5. Youth Marginalisation and Demographic Pressures

Sub-Saharan Africa’s demographic trajectory intensifies governance pressures. A rapidly expanding youth population faces limited employment opportunities, underemployment, and restricted political inclusion. Youth marginalisation fuels urban protest, migration pressures, and recruitment into armed movements. In Cameroon and across the Sahel, unemployed

and underemployed youth constitute a reservoir for both political mobilisation and insurgent recruitment. Governments often frame youth dissent as a security threat rather than a governance challenge, further securitising political contestation and delegitimising protest movements. Political elites often instrumentalise insecurity to reinforce regime survival. Common strategies include expanding executive authority through emergency powers, restricting opposition mobilisation, postponing or manipulating elections, and labelling dissent as destabilising or terrorist linked [43]. Security institutions are frequently strengthened through patronage networks, ensuring loyalty while limiting oversight. These practices exemplify authoritarian adaptation, preserving formal democratic institutions while eroding substantive competition and accountability⁸. In Cameroon, prolonged incumbency and centralised control over electoral and security institutions have facilitated regime durability while maintaining the outward architecture of multiparty democracy.

6.6. The “Security First, Democracy Later” Narrative

Across the region, regimes advance a sequencing argument: democratic reforms must be deferred until stability is restored. This narrative resonates domestically with populations fatigued by insecurity and internationally with partners prioritising counter-terrorism cooperation and migration control. Yet empirical evidence suggests that democratic erosion may deepen insecurity by weakening accountability, eroding public trust, and intensifying grievances that armed groups exploit. Rather than a linear trade-off, security and democracy are mutually reinforcing when governance is inclusive, accountable, and responsive.

The Cameroonian case underscores the limits of treating security and democracy as competing priorities. Durable stability depends not only on coercive capacity but also on legitimate governance, equitable development, and political inclusion. A regional comparative perspective suggests that democratic resilience in insecure contexts requires strengthening decentralisation, addressing socio-economic marginalisation, expanding youth economic participation, ensuring civilian oversight of security forces, and preserving civic space during emergencies. Reframing security as inseparable from democratic legitimacy is therefore essential to understanding both democratic erosion and prospects for political stability in Central and West Africa.

Across Central and West Africa, youth political engagement has emerged as a defining force reshaping democratic trajectories. A combination of demographic pressures, economic exclusion, digital connectivity, and declining trust in political institutions has fuelled new forms of youth activism that challenge regimes and redefine democratic participation.

Rather than signalling democratic collapse, these mobilisations may reflect evolving expectations of accountability, representation, and political inclusion. Recent waves of protest across Africa signal a generational shift in political participation. Youth-led movements, including Sudan’s 2018–2019 uprising, Nigeria’s #EndSARS protests, and Senegal’s #FreeSenegal mobilisations, reflect a broader pattern in which young citizens challenge entrenched power structures and question the legitimacy of governing elites [18]. Analysts note that Africa’s younger populations are increasingly unwilling to accept incremental reforms or symbolic concessions. Instead, they demand structural change, signalling a deeper transformation in political expectations. Youth movements often frame their grievances around corruption, police brutality, exclusion from economic opportunities, and constitutional manipulation, positioning themselves as defenders of democratic norms rather than anti-system insurgents. Recent protest waves, from Kenya’s Gen Z mobilisations to demonstrations in Morocco and Togo, illustrate how youth activism can rapidly escalate into nationwide legitimacy crises when state responses rely on repression rather than reform [44].

African youth activism is increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Social media platforms enable decentralised coordination, rapid information dissemination, and transnational solidarity networks. In Madagascar, for example, digitally coordinated youth activism facilitated rapid mobilisation and regime change, highlighting the transformative potential of networked protest [68]. Research shows that African youth who use social media for political information are more likely to protest, particularly in urban contexts where visibility and coordination are easier. Digital activism supports leaderless coordination, symbolic resistance, and rapid mobilisation, forming a shared tactical repertoire across youth movements. Despite this digital empowerment, states increasingly deploy repressive strategies, including internet shutdowns, surveillance, arrests for online expression, and platform restrictions [36]. During the 2025 protests in Togo, authorities restricted internet access and tightened social media controls to curb mobilisation. Such digital repression reflects the perceived political threat posed by digitally networked youth movements. Importantly, repression does not necessarily suppress dissent. Research on social media restrictions suggests that attempts to limit online communication can paradoxically intensify protest activity and collective action [58].

6.7. The Youth Bulge and Structural Pressures on Political Systems

Sub-Saharan Africa’s demographic profile is central to understanding emerging protest politics. Large youth cohorts, together with urbanisation, unemployment, and rising educational attainment, create structural pressures on political systems. Scholars identify the youth bulge, economic precarity,

⁸ Bayulgen, O., Arbatli, E. and Canbolat, S., 2018. Elite survival strategies and authoritarian reversal in Turkey. *Polity*, 50(3), pp. 333-365.

and declining institutional trust as key drivers of contemporary mobilisation. The interplay of youth demographics, urbanisation, and digital connectivity amplifies the potential for protest. Young people in urban areas who use social media are especially likely to engage in collective action, as cities provide both physical and symbolic spaces for mobilisation. In countries with large youth populations, this cohort is a growing electoral and political force [8]. In Kenya, for example, youth constitute a decisive voting bloc capable of shaping electoral outcomes. More broadly, youth-dominated populations are increasingly central to political landscapes and are associated with heightened political unrest where democratic freedoms and economic opportunities remain constrained [35]. While youth mobilisation often signals frustration with governance failures, it does not necessarily signal rejection of democracy. Instead, many movements articulate demands for accountability, social justice, and inclusive governance. Digital activism has facilitated the spread of protests and strengthened collective identities around anticorruption and democratic reform [46]. However, disillusionment with underperforming democratic systems can lead to ambivalent attitudes, including openness to alternative governance models when democratic institutions fail to deliver material and political inclusion. This tension underscores the importance of responsive governance in shaping future democratic trajectories [32].

In Central and West Africa, including Cameroon, youth activism poses both challenges and opportunities. Demographic pressures and digital connectivity will likely intensify demands for political inclusion, transparency, and socioeconomic reform. Where political systems remain exclusionary, youth-led mobilisation may escalate into prolonged legitimacy crises. Conversely, meaningful institutional reform, youth inclusion, and responsive governance could channel this activism towards democratic deepening rather than destabilisation. Rather than viewing youth protest as episodic unrest, it should be understood as a structural feature of Africa's evolving democratic landscape, driven by a generation determined to shape its political future [38].

6.8. Is Democracy Declining or Transforming in Central and West Africa

Debate over democratic trajectories in Central and West Africa increasingly centres on whether recent political developments signal democratic decline or institutional transformation. Following the political liberalisation wave of the early 1990s, multiparty elections, constitutional reforms, and expanded civil liberties formally entrenched democratic norms across much of the region [28]. Yet the past decade has brought constitutional amendments extending presidential tenure, electoral controversies, military coups, and increasingly restrictive measures on civic space. These developments complicate narratives of linear democratic consolidation. Rather than a single trajectory, three competing interpretations help explain governance dynamics: democratic backsliding,

authoritarian adaptation, and the evolution of hybrid governance [64]. The first interpretation emphasises democratic backsliding, marked by the gradual erosion of institutional checks and balances. Under this view, democratic frameworks remain in place, but their substantive effectiveness is eroding. Constitutional revisions and legal reforms have strengthened executive authority, while electoral commissions, courts, and legislatures often lack independence [64]. Opposition parties frequently encounter administrative barriers, unequal media access, and restrictions on assembly, limiting meaningful competition. In several West African states, once regarded as democratic success stories, recent coups and emergency governance underscore institutional fragility and declining public trust [23]. In Central Africa, entrenched incumbency and centralised authority structures reinforce executive dominance. Cameroon exemplifies this pattern of procedural continuity alongside substantive stagnation: multiparty elections persist, yet prolonged incumbency, administrative control, and constraints on opposition mobilisation weaken democratic accountability. From this perspective, democratic decline is incremental, occurring through legal and procedural mechanisms rather than abrupt regime change [55].

A second interpretation suggests not a decline but an authoritarian adaptation. Rather than dismantling democratic institutions, regimes have learned to operate within them to ensure political survival. Elections serve as instruments of legitimacy rather than mechanisms of genuine contestation, and democratic language is maintained to secure international credibility and donor support [2]. This model aligns with forms of competitive or electoral authoritarianism, in which incumbents shape outcomes through calibrated electoral management, patronage networks, and regulatory constraints. Governments increasingly rely on legalistic repression, the co-optation of opposition elites, and control over media and digital information environments. Decentralisation reforms, while presented as democratising measures, may redistribute administrative burdens without transferring meaningful authority. In Cameroon, electoral competition exists but unfolds on an uneven playing field shaped by patron-client networks, administrative oversight, and security imperatives linked to separatist conflict and regional instability. From this vantage point, democracy has not collapsed; instead, authoritarian governance has become more sophisticated and institutionally embedded [5].

A third perspective regards current governance arrangements as evidence of the evolution of hybrid governance rather than of democratic erosion. Political systems across Central and West Africa increasingly blend democratic procedures with customary authority, informal political networks, and security-based governance practices [53]. In contexts characterised by ethnic pluralism, uneven state capacity, and transnational security threats, purely liberal democratic frameworks may be insufficient to ensure stability and legitimacy. Hybrid governance arrangements incorporate decentralisation

initiatives, negotiated power-sharing, the integration of traditional leaders into formal governance, and regionally differentiated administrative approaches. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Central and West African political systems simultaneously exhibit institutional erosion, adaptive authoritarian practices, and hybrid governance innovations. Their coexistence reflects complex political economies, security pressures, colonial legacies, and ongoing challenges of state formation. Framing the region's trajectory solely in terms of democratic decline risks overlooking how political actors reshape institutions to navigate legitimacy, stability, and international expectations.

6.9. Security–Democracy Trade-offs

Cameroon's security environment, including internal conflict and cross-border insurgency, has reinforced governance practices that prioritise order and territorial control over participation and accountability. This reflects a broader regional dynamic in which counter-terrorism cooperation and stabilisation priorities strengthen executive authority and normalise the use of emergency powers. IR scholarship must therefore interrogate how security assistance, securitised discourse, and crisis governance may entrench coercive capacities and constrain political dissent. External actors often prioritise regime durability in the name of stability, particularly where strategic interests are at stake. While such approaches may reduce short-term risks, they can entrench governance deficits that undermine long-term legitimacy. Durable stability is more likely to emerge from accountable, inclusive governance than from regime continuity alone⁹. Civil society organisations and independent media remain essential accountability mechanisms, yet face legal constraints, financial precarity, and digital repression. At the same time, digital spaces are increasingly core arenas for political participation and economic life [51].

7. Conclusion

Cameroon's political evolution complicates conventional narratives of democratic transition. Rather than indicating a failed or incomplete democratisation, the country exemplifies the endurance of hybrid governance, shaped by colonial legacies, regional inequalities, elite bargaining, and adaptive strategies of regime legitimisation. In the broader context of Central and West Africa, Cameroon is not an anomaly but a revealing case of how electoral processes, decentralisation reforms, and constitutional frameworks coexist with entrenched executive dominance and constrained political competition¹⁰. This article has argued that democracy in Cameroon must be understood through a contextual lens attentive to historical state formation, the politicisation of linguistic and regional

identities, and mechanisms of authoritarian resilience. Patronage networks, securitised governance, and instrumental institutional reforms reveal the limitations of procedural democratic metrics, while civic activism, legal contestation, and digital mobilisation point to evolving arenas of political negotiation [24]. Rethinking democracy in Central and West Africa, therefore, requires moving beyond binary classifications towards frameworks that foreground hybridity, negotiation, and historical contingency [24]. Ultimately, Cameroon's experience underscores the importance of assessing legitimacy, participation, and state responsiveness alongside electoral competition and invites future research into subnational governance, transnational influences, and emerging political actors that are shaping the region's democratic trajectories [59]. While Cameroon offers a strategically valuable lens, regional diversity limits generalisability. Governance trajectories vary across linguistic, colonial, and security contexts. The study, therefore, emphasises analytical transferability rather than universal generalisation, highlighting patterns and mechanisms applicable across hybrid regimes [14].

Abbreviations

ECOWAS Economic Community of West African States

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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