

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/cameroon-after-visiting-cameroon-reporters-05-10-2011,41113.html>

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Africa - Cameroon

Need for reforms

## After visiting Cameroon, Reporters Without Borders urges government to take action

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Reporters Without Borders visited Cameroon from 26 September to 2 October to assess the degree of media freedom during the campaign for the 9 October presidential election and to promote a series of reforms that are needed to improve media freedom, including a new media law and the decriminalization of press offences.

Communication minister and government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary said a national conference on media and communication will be held in 2012.

"The media's coverage of the campaign is trying to be balanced but the campaign itself is not," Reporters Without Borders said. "President Paul Biya, who is running for reelection, and the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Rally (RDPC) are everywhere. Biya is the only candidate to be seen on campaign posters. The opposition is hardly managing to make its voice heard. Everyone agrees that there is little political debate and this is reflected in the media.

"It is clear from the diversity of the media and the outspoken reporting style that press freedom is a reality in Cameroon. But much needs to be done to improve the media, protect journalists and enable them to work effectively. We stand ready to help the Cameroonian authorities carry out these reforms. They showed a readiness to listen. We are now waiting for them to act. The statements of good intention must be followed by action."

Reporters Without Borders has written to the 23 presidential candidates asking them to give an undertaking to defend and promote media freedom if elected.

The press freedom organization also handed in a formal note to the government urging it to organize a national conference on media and communication in the very near future, to reform the legal and institutional system affecting the media, and to decriminalize press offences.

The decriminalization of media offences would protect journalists from being jailed in connection with their work. Cameroon's image was badly damaged by the death of **Germain Ngota Ngota**, a newspaper editor also known as **Bibi Ngota**, in Yaoundé's Kondengui prison in April 2010. It highlighted the fact that journalists can still be sent to prison in Cameroon and do not receive adequate medical care while there.

Cameroon had risen 20 places (to 109th) in the 2009 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index but it fell by a similar number in 2010 as a result of this tragedy.

Decriminalization does not put journalists beyond the law and does not mean they are free to do as they like. A press offence can still be punished, but only by measures that are fair, appropriate and proportionate, not by prison sentences.

"There is still some reticence in Cameroon on this issue," Reporters Without Borders said. "Some senior officials think that the threat of imprisonment is still a necessary safeguard. But in practice it is ineffective, repressive and counter-productive for the country's image. For these reasons, Cameroon must decriminalize press offences."

The legislation affecting the media, mainly to be found in the 1996 Social Communication Law and in the criminal code, sits poorly with the vitality of the country's press. It makes no provision for online media, it confuses media offences with common crimes, gives too much power to political and administrative officials and does not provide enough protection for access to information and the confidentiality of sources. The media's entire legislative and institutional framework needs modernizing.

"In Cameroon, an offence committed by means of the media is not a media offence, and this is not right," Reporters Without Borders said. "The law should recognize the special nature of a journalist's work, just as it should recognize that a media offence is a specific kind of offence."

These two important reforms – the adoption of a new media law and the decriminalization of media offences – should be discussed when the national conference on media and communication is held. This event would enable a redefinition of the rules and pave the way for an overhaul of the media sector. Who is a journalist and who isn't? What is the significance of a press card? Who issues it? Who has the right to one? What are the conditions for creating a media? And what about journalism training, media regulation and self-regulation?

Reporters Without Borders raised two important issues with the authorities. One was the economic environment in which the media operate. The communication minister acknowledged that the media receive very little assistance from the state. The other was official recognition of the privately-owned media, which are not accredited with the president's and prime minister's offices and are never invited to accompany the president on official trips.

Abusive practices within the media were also discussed. The authorities complained of the existence of a "gutter press" and of media that do a great deal of harm. Rather than passively lament this state of affairs, the authorities were urged to do something about it. Many observers think Cameroon's politicians just reap what they sow when they exploit the weaknesses of the media to settle scores with each other.

"The gutter press is fuelled by the hidden corridors of power, which provide it with much of its funding," a newspaper editor told Reporters Without Borders. "Disreputable journalists who do not respect professional ethics or codes of conduct feed from the breast of these political predators."

"The media are varied in Cameroon, but they are not independent and they let themselves be used," a Yaoundé-based journalist said. Lots of politicians fight their battles through the media. At the same time, some journalists use information or rumours to blackmail leading figures. They are denounced as "hold-up journalists" or "blackmail journalists" by some of their colleagues.

All these terms reflect the sad reality of the Cameroonian press, its relations with politicians and businessmen, and how it is bought and exploited by them for their offensives and counter-offensives.

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During this visit, Ambroise Pierre, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa Desk, accompanied by Jules Koum Koum, the Reporters Without Borders Cameroon correspondent, met with communication minister and government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary, presidential private secretary and chief of staff Martin Belinga Eboutou, and Msgr. Joseph Befé Ateba, the head of the National Communication Council (CNC), a media regulatory body.

They also met with lawyers, European diplomats and many journalists, and visited most of the newspapers in Douala and Yaoundé.

*Picture : President Paul Biya's campaign (STR/AFP)*

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