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By Richard J. Pera

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Cameroon's President Paul Biya addresses the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly, at U.N. headquarters, Thursday, Sept. 22, 2016. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

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In this Saturday, July 11, 2015 file photo, Tanzania's presidential candidate John Magufuli speaks at an internal party poll to decide the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party's presidential candidate, which they later chose him to be, in Dodoma, Tanzania. (AP Photo/Khalif Said, File)

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## Paul Biya – “Lion Man” of Cameroon

[Paul Biya was born](#) in the French mandate territory of Cameroon in 1933. Like French President Emmanuel Macron, Biya graduated from the elite Ecole nationale d'administration (National School of Administration – “[ENA](#)”) and the Institute d'études politiques (Institute of Political Studies – “[Sciences Po](#)”). A French speaker and Christian, Biya is a Francophile, and has visited France on many occasions; for example, in 2009 he was [criticized](#) for spending over \$50,000 a day during a vacation in Brittany.

Biya has dominated Cameroonian politics for more than four decades. He served as prime minister from 1975 to 1982 and as president ever since. He is the [longest serving](#), non-royal, national leader in the world and, at 84, he is the [third oldest African leader](#) (after Zimbabwe's Mugabe (93) and Tunisia's Essebsi (91)). Biya is [rumored](#) to have been treated in Switzerland in 2016 for cardiac problems and prostate cancer.

Biya is often called the “[Lion Man](#)” of Cameroon, after the country's football team (the Indomitable Lions). Not long after his initial election as president in 1984, he became increasingly authoritarian, exiled his predecessor, and purged rivals. Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) became the dominant political party and has held legislative majorities for decades. Biya was reelected overwhelmingly in 2004 and 2011, though [many alleged voter fraud](#). Biya nullified constitutional term limits to permit his candidacy in 2011. Other political parties in Cameroon are largely marginalized, and there is no provision for a presidential runoff, which limits the ability of opposition candidates to unseat the incumbent. Indeed, under Biya, Cameroon is a de facto one-party state: [Freedom House](#) assesses Cameroon as “Not Free,” and [Transparency International's](#) corruption perception index (from least to most) ranks Cameroon as 145 of 176 countries.

## Biya Postures for the Next Election

[Opposition parties and the media claim](#) the government has used the security situation with Boko Haram along the Nigerian border as an excuse to limit free speech and assembly. For example, since December 2016, more than 100 people have been arrested, and four were killed when police opened fire during otherwise peaceful protests. In April 2016, security forces arrested an opposition leader for “[rebellion, inciting insurrection and inciting revolt](#).” The leader and her supporters were peacefully passing out flyers that encouraged Cameroonians to wear black to protest President Biya.

President Biya's recent statements and actions have been widely [interpreted as evidence](#) that he will stand for reelection. During a recent trip to Italy, for example, Biya praised his accomplishments as president, and [commented](#) that he wanted to continue as head of state. In April 2017, he appointed a new head of the nation's elections commission, known as ELECAM. So far in 2017, [ELECAM announced](#) that it had registered more than 100,000 new voters. Most of these voters are from Biya's Francophonic stronghold; very few originate from Anglophonic areas, where opposition to him is more prevalent.



## Opposition Candidates

More than 10 candidates have announced that they will oppose Biya in 2018. Some have been inspired by “[the Macron effect](#)” – referring to the recent election of an independent candidate, Emmanuel Macron, in France. So far, [candidates include](#) a former government minister, actor, politician, professor, lawyer, businessman, agricultural engineer, television personality, academic, and diplomat. Two of them ran in 2011. Two reside in the United States.

While he has not announced his candidacy, John Fru Ndi, 76, head of the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front, remains popular, and [has suggested that he will run](#). Ndi narrowly lost to Biya in 1992, and finished a distant second in 2004 and 2011.

[As in the past two elections](#), there likely will be between 15 and 25 candidates. Since there is no second round, lesser candidates cancel each other out, and it remains to be seen whether opposition parties can rally around a single candidate, like Ndi, in 2018.

## Election Issues

Economic and security issues are already on voters’ minds, including the fair distribution of wealth and the war against Boko Haram. The majority of election issues, however, are framed in the context of President Biya’s [allegedly corrupt government](#) which, observers claim, subverts election laws, denies basic democratic rights, and discriminates against large portions of the population:

- The timing of the election is an issue. At least one opposition party, the Movement for Rebirth of Cameroon, fears that the Biya government will “[use the security argument](#) linked to the war against Boko Haram ... or the pretext of possible electoral reform, to manipulate the electoral calendar so as to remain in power.”
- As in past elections, [electoral reform](#) continues to be a major concern. This includes issues like term limits, a two-round electoral system, independent observers at polling stations, decreasing the voting age from 21 to 18, equal access of all parties and candidates to media, and separation of ELECAM from political parties.
- Unrest in Anglophone areas ([English-speakers account for 17 percent](#) of the population) almost certainly will remain a major issue. Before independence in 1960, the United Kingdom-administered state of Southern Cameroons enjoyed considerable autonomy. Some Anglophones want autonomy reinstated, and others want to establish a new country – the so-called [Republic of Ambazonia](#). Many Anglophones reject the use of French in public schools, and resent that French legal standards have supplanted British common law. One [opposition leader commented](#): “We have problems with water, roads, and healthcare not being delivered.” As [Africa Watch reported](#), the government responded violently to recent strikes by thousands of English-speaking teachers and lawyers. Additionally, in response to the “[irresponsible use of social media](#),” the Biya government banned opposition groups and cut the internet in English-speaking areas for weeks, ruining some businesses.

## Conclusion

Barring a serious medical issue, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Paul Biya does not hold on to power next October. He has demonstrated a willingness to use security forces to disrupt or attack the opposition, and likely will manipulate public information, including the internet, to help marginalize opponents. As the election approaches, renewed demonstrations in Anglophonic regions may be met with a forceful response. Also, having skirted constitutional laws before, Biya could do so again. Indeed, opposing Biya in Cameroon takes great personal courage. As opposition leader Edith Kah Wallah [explained](#): “Taking this stand in Cameroon will eventually get you water-hosed, jailed, or worse.”

As with Mugabe in Zimbabwe and [Bouteflika in Algeria](#), Biya has survived in part because he has blocked potential successors. When he eventually departs the scene, there is likely to be no clear succession plan, with potential consequences for national unity.

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On July 20, 2017, Tanzanian police [arrested](#) Tundu Lissu, a leading opposition figure. Days earlier Lissu had called President John Magufuli a “dictator.” The government has provided no justification for the arrest but [said](#): “the government will not accept that someone, or a group of people, abuse the freedom of expression.” Lissu’s arrest is the latest in a series of recent developments demonstrating that Magufuli of the ruling CCM [Chama Cha Mapinduzi—Party of the Revolution], who won elections in 2015 on a platform of anti-corruption, has been pushing Tanzania in an increasingly authoritarian direction.

## Background

Tanzania is a [low-income](#) country located in East Africa with a [population](#) of 50 million people and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$47 billion. Although the country became a multi-party democracy in 1992, the ruling CCM party has remained in power since 1977, [making](#) it the longest-ruling party in sub-Saharan Africa. With a relatively peaceful recent history, the country enjoys a reputation as a stable country in an unstable region. In 2016, Tanzania was the eighth [fastest](#) growing economy in the world, with a GDP growth rate of 6.9 percent. Although Magufuli came to power on a platform of commitment to anti-corruption, his government has recently clamped down harshly on political dissent.

## Recent Crackdown

After his election in 2015, Magufuli quickly won praise for his moves against corruption and his austere spending practices, as reported in the August 18, 2016 [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*. However, Magufuli has also had political opponents and critics arrested, restricted freedom of expression, and cracked down on newspapers that have criticized him. After his arrest, Lissu [charged](#) Magufuli with bringing about a “climate of fear which reigns everywhere” and of overseeing “a system based on favoritism, tribalism and regionalism.” In addition to Lissu’s arrest, in early July another member of the main opposition party, CHADEMA [Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo—Party for Democracy and Development], was arrested for merely [calling](#) the president “ill-mannered.” In March, police arrested a rapper for releasing a track that [asked](#): “Is there still freedom of expression in the country?”

Also in March, Magufuli [said](#): “I would like to tell media owners—be careful, watch it. If you think you have that kind of freedom, (it is) not to that extent.” These have not been idle threats, as the government has recently [suspended](#) a number of radio stations and newspapers for disseminating stories meant to cause “citizens to lose confidence in State organizations.” The government has also cracked down on Tanzania’s [gay](#) community, suspending a number of HIV programs, penalizing homosexuals, and [threatening](#) LGBT activists. In July 2016, Magufuli’s government went so far as to [ban](#) political rallies until the next election in 2020. After the ban was announced, Zitto Kabwe, an opposition Member of Parliament, [called](#) the move “a blatant violation of the constitution and the laws governing political parties” that has led to a “de facto one-party state in a country that has enjoyed multi-party politics for over 20 years.”

## New Authoritarian Turn?

While Magufuli has taken Tanzania in an authoritarian direction (the country [slipped](#) in Freedom House’s most recent rankings), some commentators point out that the ruling party has long relied on force and other restrictive measures to remain in power. Michael Jennings, a scholar at the University of London, cites former Tanzanian presidents’ willingness to



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violently suppress protests in 2011 and 2012. Jennings [concludes](#) that “Magufuli may look increasingly autocratic, but he is hardly alone and doesn’t actually represent such a shift in Tanzanian politics.”

Dan Paget, a doctoral candidate at Oxford University, [comes](#) to a similar conclusion, arguing that CCM’s and Tanzania’s slide toward authoritarian rule began prior to Magufuli’s election. Paget attributes the party’s “authoritarian turn” to the increasing electoral success of the opposition (the opposition candidate won 40 percent in the 2015 elections, the highest percentage ever). He [argues](#) that the “root cause of CCM’s new authoritarianism lies in the shifting balance between the governing party and the opposition, not the leadership of Magufuli himself.”

## Conclusion

Tanzania’s recent slide toward authoritarianism is a troubling development for democracy in the East Africa region. One potential bright spot for the prospects for democracy in Tanzania is that CCM and Magufuli’s autocratic moves appear to be hurting their popularity: Magufuli’s approval rating [dropped](#) 25 percent over the past year. Although his current 71 percent approval rating may still appear high, Tanzania historically has very high ratings of their presidents. Indeed, Paget [argues](#) that “by Tanzanian standards, 71 percent is poor. In fact, it is the worst rate any Tanzanian president has ever received.” Therefore, political realities may eventually force Magufuli and CCM to revise strategies, especially as elections approach.

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