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# Understanding how the Cameroonian Government Works

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## Introduction

Understanding the inner workings of the Cameroonian government is essential to comprehending the country's political, social, and economic dynamics. Cameroon stands as a unique nation at the crossroads of Central and West Africa, with a rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and historical influences that have shaped its system of governance. Since its independence, Cameroon has navigated a path marked by the adoption of a centralized unitary state, alongside periodic reforms aimed at accommodating its diversity and fostering national unity.

At the heart of Cameroon's government lies a framework defined by its constitution, which has undergone several amendments to reflect shifting political realities. The interplay between legacy colonial institutions and post-independence ideals has resulted in a political system that merges elements of French civil law, English common law, and indigenous customs. The result is a multilayered government structure characterized by a dominant executive branch, a bicameral legislature, and a judiciary intended to function independently—though in practice, power remains significantly centralized in the presidency.

The government operates on multiple levels: national, regional, and local. While the constitution outlines mechanisms for decentralization and participatory governance, the practical implementation of these mechanisms remains a work in progress, influenced by historical precedent, administrative tradition, and the prevailing political climate. The process of state administration flows from the capital to the ten regions—formerly provinces—continuing through a complex network of divisions, sub-divisions, and districts. At each level, appointed representatives of the central government work alongside emerging elected bodies such as regional and municipal councils, reflecting both the persistence of centralized authority and the gradual expansion of local autonomy.

Cameroon's political landscape, formally multiparty since the early 1990s, is defined by the enduring dominance of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). This dominance has significant implications for democratic governance, political competition, and the representation of diverse interests within the state. The official status of French and English as national languages, enshrined in the constitution, underscores the country's commitment to bilingualism, even as challenges of inclusion, equity, and minority rights persist.

This book aims to serve as a comprehensive guide for readers seeking a clear and accessible understanding of the Cameroonian government system. Drawing on constitutional texts, academic analysis, and practical examples, it explores the roles

and responsibilities of government branches, the process of lawmaking, the structure of local administration, and the realities of political pluralism. In doing so, it provides the tools necessary for citizens, students, researchers, and observers to navigate and engage with the institutions that govern daily life in Cameroon.

Ultimately, a deeper knowledge of how the Cameroonian government works not only sheds light on the mechanics of state power but also offers insights into the broader forces that shape Cameroonian society. By making sense of its governance structures, we can better appreciate the challenges and opportunities facing the country as it strives for modernization, unity, and democratic development.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Historical Foundations of the Cameroonian Government**

Before the arrival of European powers, the landmass that is now Cameroon was a mosaic of diverse societies, each with its own distinct political structures and systems of governance. In the northern regions, large, centralized Islamic sultanates and kingdoms, such as the Sokoto Caliphate and the Mandara Kingdom, held sway, characterized by hierarchical rule and established legal frameworks based on Islamic law. These entities had complex administrative systems, including tax collection and judicial processes, often centered around the authority of an emir or sultan. Further south, a variety of decentralized political organizations existed, ranging from the village-based governance of the forest peoples to the more structured chiefdoms and kingdoms of the Grassfields. Here, leadership might be hereditary, based on age and wisdom, or achieved through social and economic standing, with decision-making often involving councils of elders or other community representatives. These diverse pre-colonial polities, while lacking a unified overarching structure, laid a foundational layer of indigenous governance practices that would interact with, and in some cases persist alongside, subsequent colonial administrations.

The late 19th century brought the era of European colonization, often referred to as the "Scramble for Africa." European powers, already engaged in trade and missionary activities along the coast, intensified their efforts to claim and control territory. German traders had established a presence in the Douala area, and through a series of treaties signed with local chiefs starting in 1884, Germany declared a protectorate over the region, naming it Kamerun. This marked the formal birth of Cameroon as a single political entity on the international stage, albeit one defined by external imposition rather than indigenous unity.

The German administration in Kamerun focused on establishing control, developing infrastructure like railways and roads to facilitate resource extraction, and promoting plantation agriculture. While they introduced a centralized administrative system, their rule was often met with resistance from local populations accustomed to their own forms of governance. The Germans attempted to govern indirectly in some areas, working through existing traditional leaders, but also directly imposed their authority, sometimes brutally suppressing opposition. This period, though relatively short-lived, was crucial in drawing the initial boundaries of the territory and introducing a European model of centralized state control, a concept largely alien to many of the pre-colonial societies.

With the outbreak of World War I, Kamerun became a theater of conflict. British,

French, and Belgian forces invaded the German colony, and by 1916, the German resistance was overcome. Following Germany's defeat in the war, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 formally stripped Germany of its overseas possessions, including Kamerun. The territory was not granted independence but was instead divided and placed under the mandate system of the League of Nations, entrusted to the administration of France and Great Britain. This division carved the former German Kamerun into two unequal parts: French Cameroun, comprising the larger eastern four-fifths of the territory, and British Cameroons, a smaller strip of land along the Nigerian border to the west.

French Cameroun was administered as a single entity, integrated, to a significant extent, into the French colonial system in Equatorial Africa. The French pursued a policy of assimilation and direct rule, seeking to impose French administrative structures, language, and culture. They invested in infrastructure and agricultural development, largely geared towards serving French economic interests. Political activity was permitted, but often within limits set by the colonial power, though nationalist movements advocating for independence and reunification began to emerge, notably the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC). The UPC, founded in 1948, became a vocal advocate for immediate independence and the reunification of the French and British administered territories, often clashing with the French authorities.

British Cameroons, in contrast, was administered as two separate entities: Northern Cameroons and Southern Cameroons, attached administratively to the neighboring British colony of Nigeria. Northern Cameroons was governed as part of Northern Nigeria, a region characterized by large emirates and indirect rule through traditional structures. Southern Cameroons was initially administered as part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Unlike the French approach, British colonial policy in many areas favored indirect rule, working through existing local authorities. This resulted in different administrative experiences and political development trajectories in the two British-administered areas compared to French Cameroun.

The post-World War II era saw a global shift towards decolonization. The League of Nations mandates were transitioned into United Nations Trust Territories, with France and Britain continuing as the administering powers but now with a greater international push towards self-determination. Nationalist sentiments grew stronger in both French and British Cameroons, though the nature and intensity of these movements differed. In French Cameroun, the UPC continued its struggle for independence, sometimes resorting to armed insurgency, which was met with forceful repression by the French administration. Simultaneously, more moderate political parties also emerged, seeking independence through negotiation.

In British Cameroons, the question of the future was framed differently. Given their administrative integration with Nigeria, the options presented were either to achieve

independence by joining Nigeria or by joining the independent French Cameroun. This presented a complex choice, influenced by distinct colonial legacies, administrative systems, and emerging political identities. Southern Cameroons, with its different history and aspirations compared to Northern Nigeria, engaged in its own political evolution, eventually gaining a degree of regional autonomy within the Nigerian federation.

As French colonies across Africa moved towards independence, French Cameroun was granted independence on January 1, 1960, becoming the Republic of Cameroun, with Ahmadou Ahidjo as its first president. This marked a significant milestone, but the question of the British Cameroons remained unresolved. A UN-supervised plebiscite was held in February 1961 to determine their fate. Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria, while Southern Cameroons voted to unify with the newly independent Republic of Cameroun.

This decision led to the formation of the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961, bringing together the former French Cameroun and Southern British Cameroons. The federal structure was intended to accommodate the distinct historical, linguistic, and administrative legacies of the two territories. The former French Cameroun became East Cameroon, and the former Southern British Cameroons became West Cameroon, each with its own regional government and legislature, while a federal government headed by President Ahidjo was established in Yaoundé.

However, the federal arrangement proved to be relatively short-lived. From the outset, there was a strong inclination towards centralization of power within the federal government under President Ahidjo. Over the next decade, the autonomy of the federated states was gradually eroded. Arguments were made about the cost and inefficiency of maintaining a federal structure with two regional governments and legislatures in addition to the federal one. Ultimately, in 1972, a referendum was held that led to the abolition of the federal system and the establishment of a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon.

The transition to a unitary state significantly concentrated power in the hands of the president and the central government in Yaoundé. This move, while presented as a means of strengthening national unity and facilitating development, effectively ended the distinct administrative and political structures that had existed in West Cameroon since the colonial era. The historical trajectory from diverse pre-colonial polities, through differing colonial experiences under German, French, and British rule, to independence and the subsequent shift from a federal to a unitary state in 1972, laid the foundational stones for the highly centralized governmental system that exists in Cameroon today.

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