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# Cameroon: Challenges to Biya's Leadership

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An Intelligence Assessment

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ALA 84-10120  
December 1984

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# **Cameroon: Challenges to Biya's Leadership**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by [ ] of the  
Office of African and Latin American Analysis, with  
contributions from [ ] of the Office of  
Central Reference. It was coordinated with the  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 16 November 1984  
was used in this report.*

We believe the political climate in moderate, pro-Western Cameroon during the next two years will be unsettled. President Paul Biya faces the difficult test of reestablishing his credibility as a leader in the wake of a coup attempt last April that was confined to members of his Presidential Guard. In our judgment, Biya stands at least an even chance of hanging on, but Cameroon's military—now a potent political force after coming to the President's rescue in April—is likely to keep close watch on his performance. Despite Cameroon's uncertain outlook, we do not believe the country is on the verge of widespread political instability or economic decline that characterizes many west and central African states.

As Biya strives to build a new political consensus, he faces the challenge of juggling the interests of competing ethnic, religious, and regional groups. Biya must pay particularly close attention to the concerns of northern Muslims and English-speaking west Cameroonians as well as his fellow French-speaking southerners. Moreover, we believe the President will face growing demands from younger Cameroonians for more rapid political liberalization, which he will be unable to satisfy without alienating older, still powerful political and economic barons. Finally, Biya must retain the loyalty of the military as he moves to reinforce the principle of civilian control of the armed forces.

In our judgment, Biya's problems, though serious, are still manageable, although we have reservations about his ability to provide the firm leadership characteristic of his predecessor, Ahmadou Ahidjo, during the first President's 22 years of rule. Biya, however, has managed since the coup to keep ethnic and personal rivalries in check and to resist any temptations to lash out against the north. Biya's position is further strengthened by the lack of an organized opposition, a relatively healthy economy, and administrative institutions that continue to function more or less effectively.

We do not discount the possibility that sharp economic decline or foreign meddling could contribute to political instability in Cameroon. These potential dangers, however, present a significantly lesser threat to Biya in the near term than does the domestic political arena. Despite slowed growth, Cameroon's economy is one of the healthiest in black Africa, and Biya is continuing the judicious fiscal policies of his predecessor.

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While the Soviet Union and Libya could seek to capitalize on political uncertainty in one of the region's most steadfastly moderate, pro-Western governments, we see little likelihood that either Moscow or Tripoli will make Cameroon a focus of attention in the near term. Tripoli is preoccupied with Chad, and Moscow will be more concerned with events in southern Africa and the Horn. If Biya were to move beyond unofficial ties to diplomatic relations with Israel—from whom he is seeking security assistance—Tripoli could be tempted to stir up trouble among Cameroon's northern Muslims already apprehensive over their diminished role in the post-Ahidjo era.

Close ties to France will probably be the linchpin of Cameroon's foreign policy, despite Biya's cooling of relations because of dubious suspicions of French Government support for last April's failed coup attempt. Both Paris and Yaounde no doubt recognize that the depth and breadth of economic, political, military, and cultural ties far outweigh any temporary differences. Nevertheless, Biya probably sees closer ties to Washington—particularly in areas of military assistance and foreign investment—as a means of asserting some greater independence from France while remaining within the orbit of the West.

Should Biya falter, we believe the most likely scenario would involve senior officers' taking power in the name of restoring order and preserving national unity. We would expect few changes in domestic or foreign policy. Although senior officers probably would promise a quick return to civilian rule, we believe they ultimately could fall prey to factionalism and squabbling. At this stage of Cameroon's political evolution, however, we judge that a coup by potentially radical junior officers is a possible although much less likely alternative. In this regard, we believe it is significant that the regular military, both officers and enlisted men, loyally crushed the attempted April coup.

We believe the unsuccessful April coup in Cameroon highlights the transition difficulties that face other moderate African states with a legacy of strong leadership and highly personalized political systems. In our judgment, the success or failure of the Biya presidency could be a harbinger of political trends to come in the region. Other moderate African presidents, second-generation leaders, and potential successors probably are paying close heed to Cameroon's evolution under Biya to see whether gradual reform is possible and whether the military can remain outside the political arena in times of uncertainty.

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## Cameroon: Challenges to Biya's Leadership

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### Introduction

Cameroon is in the throes of a difficult transition from one political generation to another. President Paul Biya is struggling to fill the shoes of the retired Ahmadou Ahidjo, the country's first president and strongman for 22 years. At issue is whether the United States can continue to count on Cameroon as a pro-Western bastion of political stability and economic development in the troubled region of central Africa. So far, Cameroon has been a successful example of persistent moderation in the troubled region of central Africa.

In our judgment, the coup attempt in April 1984 by northern elements of the elite Presidential Guard has tarnished Biya's image and raised questions about his leadership. We believe continued stability in Cameroon will rest in large measure on Biya's ability to regain leadership credibility and lost momentum. His is an especially personal and political challenge because Cameroon, unlike many other black African states, is not beset by violent tribal conflict, economic decline, or active Soviet and Libyan subversion.

In our view, the failed April coup highlights the transition difficulties that face moderate African states having a legacy of strong leadership and highly personalized political systems.

### Political Stirrings After Ahidjo

Ahmadou Ahidjo—a strong-willed Muslim Fulani from northern Cameroon—governed Cameroon until November 1982. By all accounts, he ruled with an iron hand, keeping close watch on potential rivals and brooking little open challenge to his rule. Ahidjo's sudden decision—ostensibly because of ill health, according to most US Embassy sources—to resign the presidency in favor of his constitutional successor, Paul Biya, caught most Cameroonians ill prepared for the difficult transition to the post-Ahidjo era. His resignation unleashed long-dormant political stirrings, according to Embassy reporting, by raising the specter of political liberalization and caused concern among heretofore confident Cameroonians about the

political stability of the country. We believe most Cameroonians probably felt reassured by Ahidjo's retention—after giving up the presidency—of his post as head of the country's sole political party, the Cameroon National Union. At the time, most Western and Cameroonian observers saw Ahidjo's move as an honest effort to lend support to the new President and to ease the apprehensions of his politically long-dominant northern supporters (see appendix A).

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**Biya's Mixed Beginning.** Biya's initial moves upon succeeding Ahidjo won him early popularity. US Embassy reporting indicated that early in his presidency Biya displayed a more open and accessible style—in clear contrast to Ahidjo's taciturn manner—which helped elevate him from his predecessor's shadow. In his first six months, the Embassy noted, Biya further honed his political skills by touring all of Cameroon's provinces, hosting a visit by French President Mitterrand, convening a new National Assembly, and playing a well-publicized role at the 1983 OAU summit in Addis Ababa.

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At the same time, the US Embassy pointed out, Biya quickly dispelled any notion that he was a “caretaker” carrying out Ahidjo's bidding, and asserted his presidential prerogatives by making decisions without consulting Ahidjo. The President also made several early Cabinet changes, which eliminated a number of Ahidjo loyalists, and then turned his attention to gaining control of the party and the military. In addition, Biya initiated several administrative reforms, including the division of the north—Ahidjo's stronghold—into three provinces.

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As Biya's political confidence grew, we believe he felt better able to distance himself from the tone, if not the substance, of his predecessor's policies. The US Embassy reported that Biya increasingly called for anticorruption drives, the gradual liberalization of the



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### ***Difficult Transition: Succeeding a Political Legend***

*Cameroon's image as one of black Africa's most politically stable and economically prosperous nations obscures underlying ethnic, regional, and linguistic divisions, and a turbulent beginning as a state. Political and economic decisions must take into account the interests of some 200 tribes, 24 language groups, northern Muslims, southern Christians, and large numbers of animists. In addition, Cameroonian leaders must wrestle with the legacy of two colonial traditions; about 80 percent of the population inhabits French-speaking east Cameroon, while the remainder lives in English-speaking west Cameroon.*

*Cameroon's political history from independence in 1960 until November 1982 was intertwined with the thought and actions of its first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo. A Muslim Fulani from the north, he rose above modest origins to national leadership without benefit of a higher education. Firm, self-assured, and instinctively comfortable with power and its manipulation, Ahidjo displayed an exceptional ability to represent and balance Cameroon's diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic interests. He effectively distributed economic and political patronage to erect a strong presidential state, using force when necessary to quell opposition. During 22 years of paternalistic rule, Ahidjo oversaw the crushing of a seven-year-long Communist insurrection, the consolidation of opposition parties into the Cameroon National Union as the only political party, and the formal unification of east and west Cameroon in 1972. Ahidjo's cautious economic policies—particularly his emphasis on*

*agriculture and the judicious spending of Cameroon's oil revenues—also are credited with making Cameroon one of Africa's few economic success stories.*

*President Paul Biya's background and temperament are quite different from those of Ahidjo, reinforcing the challenge that succession represents to the new leader. Biya is the consummate urbane, well-educated, and self-effacing technocrat whose instincts—and talents—for firm leadership and tough decisionmaking remain in doubt. In many respects, Biya typifies the sort of second-generation Cameroonian that he hopes will form the backbone of the new leadership. A southern Christian and member of the Boulou tribe of east Cameroon, the 51-year-old Biya received his law degree from the University of Paris in 1960 and later received diplomas in France from the Institute of Political Studies and the International Institute of Public Administration. On returning to Cameroon in 1962, he worked in the Office of the President, was named Secretary General of the Presidency—with cabinet rank—in 1968, and two years later was upgraded to Minister of State.*

*Biya's long apprenticeship under Ahidjo continued when he was appointed Prime Minister in 1975. In this position, Biya was seen as an efficient, honest, and intelligent administrator, capable of handling people and adept at managing Cameroon's increasingly complex bureaucracy. Biya viewed himself as the government's chief technocrat and avoided the appearance of competing politically with Ahidjo.*

*political system, and a renewal of the national spirit. In our view, these public statements were part of a larger campaign to place in power a new generation of younger, better educated technocrats loyal to the new President.*

*In our judgment, Biya's growing emphasis on the need for change sowed the seeds of the rift between the new President and his former mentor. The US Embassy noted that many Cameroonians interpreted Biya's pronouncements and actions as not so thinly veiled*

*criticism of Ahidjo and the northern old guard. Not surprisingly, powerful northern interests who provided the backbone of Ahidjo's support grew increasingly apprehensive as they saw the prospect of a further erosion of their political and economic prerogatives under an "independent" Biya presidency.*

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US Embassy reporting amply documents that Ahidjo's strong early support for Biya gradually began to give way to apprehension and then opposition, particularly as the balance of political power tilted in favor of Biya. Ahidjo first attempted to outmaneuver Biya by weakening the power of the presidency. The Embassy reported that Ahidjo, for example, demanded that northerners in the government—including the Prime Minister—resign their positions, and that he sought to amend the Constitution to strengthen his power as the party leader [redacted]

The balance of US Embassy reporting suggests that the question of how to deal with Ahidjo became increasingly difficult for Biya in late 1983 and early 1984 as what had been a largely behind-the-scenes jockeying for position turned into a bitter public confrontation. In August 1983, Biya replaced Ahidjo in the top party post as questions of Ahidjo's loyalty and motives grew. In early 1984, Ahidjo—by then in self-imposed exile in France—was publicly accused of plotting against the government, tried in absentia, sentenced to death, and later officially pardoned by Biya. [redacted]

**Impact of the April Coup Attempt.** The April 1984 coup attempt came against the backdrop of growing political tension between northerners and southerners. The US Embassy reports that the coup was triggered by Biya's decision to transfer many members of the predominantly northern Presidential Guard out of Yaounde and to recast this elite unit that had been created by Ahidjo. Embassy and US defense attache reporting indicates that it took loyalist troops drawn from as far away as Douala several days to crush the insurrection, which left Biya and the country shaken and uncertain of how to proceed. Moreover, Cameroon's important relationship with Paris cooled because of Ahidjo's presence in France and Cameroonian suspicions—still unconfirmed—that the French Government may have had a hand in the attempted coup. The Mitterrand government, for its part, has been careful since the abortive April coup to continue a "business as usual" approach to Cameroon and to be supportive of Biya. [redacted]

While Biya's moves in the wake of the coup attempt are open to interpretation, we believe his failure to quickly seize the political initiative seriously damaged

his political standing and undermined much of his hard-won credibility. The US Embassy reports, for example, that Biya—in contrast to his early, more open and accessible style—remained isolated in the presidential palace for the first six months after the coup attempt, making few public statements and fewer public appearances. Biya's behavior, according to the Embassy, reflected acute concern for his safety in the wake of the crushed coup that left the Presidential Guard shattered and the country awash with rumors of impending attacks by mercenaries allegedly hired by Ahidjo. Moreover, in our view, the government's secretive handling of the trials and executions of coup participants fueled rumors and added to the political uncertainty. [redacted]

Less open to interpretation, in our judgment, is Ahidjo's future political role. Whatever part—if any—Ahidjo played in the plot, we believe the widespread public assumption of his involvement has damaged the former President's credibility beyond immediate repair, and has crushed any hope he may have had of returning to power. Moreover, on the basis of US Embassy reporting, we expect the Biya administration will continue for some time to find Ahidjo a convenient scapegoat. As a consequence, we envision Ahidjo relegated to the role of an embittered malcontent, sniping ineffectually at his successor from political exile. [redacted]

#### Biya's Challenges

We, along with many Cameroonians and foreign observers, still doubt Biya's ability to establish his credibility as a leader and reshape the country's political institutions. In Biya's favor, we believe Cameroon's favorable economy and the absence of significant foreign meddling will help the President concentrate on consolidating his political power. In our judgment, Cameroon's economy—still one of the healthiest in black Africa—would have to deteriorate considerably before becoming a destabilizing factor.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See appendix A for an assessment of Cameroon's economy. [redacted]

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Likewise, in our estimation, Cameroon will remain on the periphery of Soviet and Libyan interests in central Africa, barring a dramatic increase in internal unrest.<sup>2</sup> [ ]

Biya thus is not without assets in his quest to fill Ahidjo's shoes, and we concur with US Embassy assessments that he has shown some good political instincts. He has managed since the coup attempt to keep ethnic and personal rivalries in check, in part by continuing to balance political and administrative appointments. Moreover, he has so far resisted temptations to lash out against the north. We also believe that the lack of a well-organized opposition works in Biya's favor. Finally, the US Embassy reports that administrative institutions at Biya's disposal continue to function more or less effectively. [ ]

Nevertheless, it is also our judgment that Biya has displayed signs of weakness. Despite Biya's assurances that the military has "returned to the barracks," we believe he has yet to cast aside the image of being beholden to the armed forces. Moreover, although Biya established a strong public image early in his presidency, most observers indicate that he remains a private person who, by all accounts, is uncomfortable in the limelight. In addition, in our view, his long seclusion after the coup has created an aura of indecision that Biya has yet to dispel, and which represents perhaps his greatest failing. [ ]

In our judgment, Biya cannot afford to be seen as simply presiding over the status quo and shuffling personnel to secure his position. In his public pronouncements before the coup, Biya raised expectations of changes; we conclude that he must be seen as seizing the political initiative and controlling the pace of change rather than merely reacting to events. In particular, we believe Biya must:

- Build a new political consensus that will help keep Cameroon's potentially destabilizing ethnic rivalries in check. Biya must also adapt and mold political institutions, such as the Cameroon National Union, to serve his political needs.

<sup>2</sup> Cameroon's foreign relations are examined in appendix B. [ ]

- Reinforce civilian control over the military by revamping his personal security apparatus and creating a stable network of alliances within the armed forces. [ ]

**Building a New Political Consensus.** Our analysis suggests that Biya faces the challenge of projecting a more dynamic image to win wider public backing and to achieve a stronger position to pursue political reform and institution building. In particular, we believe that Biya must lay out the political ground rules for his presidency if he is to distinguish his tenure from that of his authoritarian predecessor. We expect Biya also will face pressure to continue making progress on efforts to curb corruption, improve government efficiency, better living standards, and loosen the grip of vested economic interests that are sure to resist reform efforts. [ ]

In our view, Biya faces a delicate task in trying to strike a balance between the demands for political change he loosed after over two decades of authoritarian rule with his desire to assert unchallenged control over Cameroon's political institutions. Biya's dilemma in part is typified by Cameroon's restive media, which are eager to break loose from former restrictions but are unsure of the new limits of open expression. We believe Biya probably sincerely favors a more open press but is unwilling at present to allow unbridled criticism of himself and his government. [ ]

Probably more politically troubling in the longer term, in our judgment, are demands from the younger generation of Cameroonians who want Biya to move more rapidly to dismantle Ahidjo's authoritarian machinery and to allow more open political competition. Biya must juggle the demands of the younger generation waiting in the wings—his natural constituency and one to which he has appealed—with the still powerful older political elite bent on protecting its economic and political prerogatives. In our judgment, failure to achieve a workable balance and consensus over the pace and extent of change could alienate both sides and seriously narrow Biya's base of support. [ ]

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Uncertainties surrounding the role of the Cameroon National Union in the Biya presidency may make it even more difficult for the President to strengthen his personal grip and to deal with the issue of political liberalization. The US Embassy reports that party officials continue to proclaim that the "party is not dead," but also admit that its grassroots structures were unable to rally support for Biya during and after the April coup attempt. Nor has Biya yet declared what role he sees for the party under his leadership, or whether a "one party" structure is compatible with his promises of political liberalization. We believe, for example, that the issue of permitting party members to compete for office within the party could be one of the first contentious issues to surface, perhaps even as early as the next party congress scheduled for February. [ ]

In our view, Biya will be under pressure to win the trust and cooperation of potentially restive northerners and English-speaking west Cameroonians in building a new political consensus. Biya's overtures, however, will be closely watched by fellow French speakers from east Cameroon, the faction that currently holds the balance of political and military power in Cameroon. The April coup attempt notwithstanding, Biya at present does not have to contend with ethnic divisions as serious as those Ahidjo faced two decades ago with a southern-based insurgency [ ]

Biya's fence-mending with the north and the west and his goal of grooming new regional leaders capable of representing their respective ethnic and linguistic strongholds probably will take time and considerable effort. However, we see no strong northern leader on the scene capable of rallying the ethnically and religiously diverse north to Biya's side.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Biya probably has little choice but to rely on support from younger northerners with technocratic rather than established family backgrounds, as well as representatives of northern minority groups, many of whom are not Muslim and who received few benefits under

<sup>3</sup> Although often pictured as an ethnic and religious whole, the north is made up of widely differing ethnic groups. Demographic estimates suggest that about 15 percent of Cameroon's population is Muslim, 49 percent Christian, and about 36 percent animist. Demographic estimates also suggest that in the northern region—now three provinces—about 6 percent of the population is Christian, with the remainder either animist or Muslim [ ]

Ahidjo. While Biya has increased spending in west Cameroon and has even made some speeches in English, the US Embassy reports that these moves appear to have only partially allayed complaints among Cameroon's English-speaking minority about their "second class" status. In the past year, for example, English-speaking apprehensions have been fanned by the highly publicized arrest and trial of two anglophone doctors, a controversial education reform bill that appeared to tilt in favor of French speakers, and a clampdown on the English-speaking press after the publication of articles critical of Biya. Although discontent probably will continue, we believe west Cameroonians recognize that their minority status limits their political options and leverage. [ ]

***Reinforcing Civilian Control Over the Military.*** Biya also confronts difficult near-term problems in reinforcing his control over Cameroon's armed forces—now a potent political force after the April coup attempt—and rebuilding his shattered personal security apparatus. Although the US defense attache reports that Cameroon's military establishment, including the uniformed Gendarmerie, is more professional than many in Africa and has traditionally remained on the political sidelines, we believe the longstanding principle of civilian control over the armed forces was weakened by the military's role in aborting the coup attempt, and that senior officers are now in a position to influence a broad range of policies. [ ]

In our view, Biya faces a dual test: on the one hand, he must retain the loyalty of senior officers, and, on the other, he must reestablish the strict division between military and civilian authority. At present, we see Gen. Pierre Semengue—the Chief of General Staff who is related to Biya by tribal origin and marriage—as the President's critical link to the military. On the positive side, US defense attache reporting indicates that Semengue is loyal to Biya and now appears to be firmly in charge of the armed forces. Other attache reporting, however, suggests that the chiefs of both the Army and Air Force staffs may

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**Cameroon's Armed Forces Under Strain**

*During his tenure, former President Ahidjo maintained strict civilian control over the 6,500-man regular Army, and the 6,500- to 7,000-man Gendarmerie—including a now disbanded 2,000-man Presidential Guard. Ahidjo kept the armed forces isolated, splintered, and decentralized in an effort to keep the military out of politics. The most senior uniformed officer had no control over any military unit and served directly under the Minister of Armed Forces, a northern civilian. Ahidjo also relied heavily on the French willingness and ability to provide needed security.* [redacted]

*Upon becoming President, Biya gradually began to place his mark on the military, moving to centralize the command structure, granting greater decision-making authority to trusted senior officers, and raising several officers to the rank of general. Biya provided for a more centralized command structure, and after the April 1984 coup attempt reversed former policy and gave the chiefs of staff operational control over their units. Biya also created a southern-dominated National Permanent Defense Council to advise the president on all matters affecting security. US defense attache reporting suggests that this council is emerging as a strong influence in deciding security issues.* [redacted]

*The regime must deal with a number of issues that are likely to keep the military under strain for some time. Reducing ethnic distrust between southerners and northerners is a priority, especially since the officer corps is now southern dominated while the ranks of the Army are almost 40 percent northern. The government needs to reinforce the principle of civilian control of the armed forces, for officers remain who feel the military ought to have more say in running the country following its rescue of Biya from last April's attempted coup. Senior commanders also need to reemphasize a professional and apolitical orientation to guard against the possibility of future coups and the gradual politicization of the military over such issues as corruption and the distribution of power and spoils.* [redacted]

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have political ambitions of their own and have clashed with Semengue. In our view, should Semengue falter or lose the confidence of other officers, Biya's position relative to the military could be seriously weakened.

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The lack of an effective intelligence gathering and reporting apparatus adds to Biya's governing burdens. Although Biya has taken steps to reform his security apparatus [redacted] we believe the restaffing and training of security forces will take sometime. In our view, frequent security alerts and recurrent rumors in the capital of impending coup attempts stem in part from the government's inability to sort out wild speculation from fact. [redacted] 25X1

**Outlook**

Overall, we expect Cameroonian politics will remain unsettled over the next two years as Biya strives to project greater personal leadership. Despite Cameroon's uncertain outlook, however, its political and bureaucratic institutions remain stronger than most in Africa, and we do not believe the country is on the verge of a debilitating cycle of political unrest and coups that will undermine its hard-won unity and economic development. Events in other African states suggest that such a cycle usually is preceded by years of ethnic strife and economic mismanagement. Therefore, we judge the advent of a military regime led by young radicals to be a less probable development.

[redacted] 25X1

**Biya Holds On.** In our view, Biya probably stands at least an even chance of holding on over the next two years. His problems, though serious, are still within manageable bounds. At this point, key political and military figures seem inclined to give Biya the benefit of the doubt and more time to regain the political initiative. In our judgment, the military is not eager for power, and the majority of Cameroonians—irrespective of their feelings toward Biya—apparently do not want to see the country's hard-won legacy of stability, economic development, and civilian rule swept away by violent change and to resort to radical politics. Our analysis suggests, however, that the

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military will be keeping close watch on Biya's performance, and could—despite its traditional apolitical role—assume power if the President appears to be faltering or does not measure up to another crisis on the order of last April's coup attempt. [ ]

**Senior Officers Step In.** If the military intervenes, the most likely scenario, in our view, would involve senior officers' taking power as "caretakers," pledging to ensure order, to protect national unity, and to get the country moving again. We expect such a takeover would be motivated by a growing belief that a civilian leadership vacuum existed and that the senior officer corps needed to act before junior military elements did. As a warning indicator, we would look for evidence of growing debate and conflict among senior officers over the country's state of affairs and the proper role of the military. More specifically, Semengue's decline or fall could signal a tilt in favor of the senior officers perhaps not as loyal to the President.

Likewise, Biya's sudden departure from the political scene—through resignation or assassination—almost certainly would draw the military into a more active political role. In our judgment, the military would be reluctant to tolerate a prolonged struggle for power among contending civilians, none of whom probably could claim a nationwide following. While Biya's constitutionally designated civilian successor—the President of the National Assembly<sup>4</sup>—could perhaps hold the government together during an interim, we do not believe he would have the political support or strength to govern in a long-term capacity. [ ]

We envision few major policy changes under a regime dominated by senior officers. On the basis of precedents elsewhere when senior military leaders have taken power in French-speaking Africa, we believe senior Cameroonian officers probably would attempt to craft an ethnic, regional, and linguistic balance capable of maintaining stability, ensuring economic growth, and reassuring traditional allies. In our judgment, such a government would emphasize unity and

<sup>4</sup> Assembly President Solomon Muna is a nearly 80-year-old west Cameroonian who, according to many US Embassy sources, lacks the respect of the younger generation of Cameroonians and who has no national political base. [ ]

order and rely heavily on civilian advisers and bureaucrats, perhaps even establishing a mixed military-civilian government. [ ]

Over the longer term, however, we believe Cameroon's senior military establishment could fall prey to the same sorts of problems that have plagued most other African military regimes. With the passage of time, we would expect such a military regime to become vulnerable to growing factionalism and political paralysis as the process of engineering a return to civilian rule was found to be more difficult than first envisioned. [ ]

**Radical Younger Officers Take Charge.** Although we deem this scenario less likely, we do not discount the possibility that younger officers could seize power and attempt to push Cameroon in a more radical direction. We believe, however, that the military's relative lack of exposure to leftist ideologies and the country's general economic prosperity militates against a takeover by radical junior officers at this time. Moreover, although these ranks are not immune to grumbling over pay, promotions, and tribal favoritism, there is no evidence to suggest discontent has reached a level that directly threatens the authority of senior officers or the civilian government. [ ]

In our view, a radical coup is more likely after a period of unsuccessful rule by senior officers or a prolonged period of ethnic and regional turmoil and economic decline. Under such circumstances, we believe deteriorating military discipline, coupled with the weakened authority of a more politicized officer corps, could act as an incentive for junior officers to move. [ ]

If radical young officers seized power in the next two years, we would expect, on the basis of past practice throughout Africa, that they would steer Cameroon on a more nationalistic and populist course. This would include a more confrontational approach to relations with traditional allies—such as France and the United States—and a willingness to diversify relations to include closer ties with Libya and the

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Soviets. While we believe Cameroon's economic dependence on the West could work to temper more radical impulses over the longer run, Cameroon's political and social institutions would be put to a severe test.

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#### **Implications for the United States**

In our judgment, the success or failure of the Biya presidency may be seen as a harbinger of political trends to come elsewhere in the region. In our judgment, other moderate African presidents, second-generation leaders, and potential successors probably are watching to see whether gradual reform is possible and whether the military can remain outside the political arena in times of uncertainty. Moreover, African moderates will be looking closely to see how much Western support they could expect to receive. A military takeover, particularly by radicals, in one of Africa's heretofore most politically stable and economically prosperous nations would do little to encourage other Western-oriented leaders to take risky political and economic moves that could ensure orderly change and political stability down the road.

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Barring an unexpected takeover by radical officers, we do not expect a sharp about-face in either the tone or substance of Cameroonian-US relations during the next two years. Cameroon is likely to continue to provide quiet, behind-the-scenes support for most Western positions and to keep differences within diplomatic channels. Even if senior officers replace Biya, we do not expect his successors would seek support by launching an anti-Western crusade or laying Cameroon's troubles at the West's doorstep.

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We believe Cameroon, under either Biya or a senior military leadership, is likely to continue to see improved ties with Washington as a means of reducing what many Cameroonians now see as excessive dependence on France. The US Department of Commerce lists 50 US resident firms operating in Cameroon, and estimates direct US investment at over \$500 million—mostly in the petroleum sector. We expect that Cameroon will continue to look to the United States to increase its economic stake there by providing greater security assistance and encouraging further private investment.

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## Appendix A

### Sustaining Economic Growth

Cameroon has weathered the world recession better than most other black African states, according to US Embassy and open source reporting. Despite some shortages of basic commodities, higher consumer prices, and slower overall growth, the economy is in reasonably good shape. The country does not have crushing debt burdens, and the economy continues to expand modestly, supported by oil earnings, continued strong agricultural production, and conservative fiscal management. Cameroon's balance-of-payments position is relatively good, and its debt service ratio is quite manageable. [REDACTED]

Cameroon owes its good economic fortunes to policies initiated by former President Ahidjo. During his first 15 years in office, Cameroon enjoyed moderate, broad-based economic expansion, with real growth averaging about 4.6 percent annually. Ahidjo's favorable agricultural pricing policies helped double the production of coffee and cocoa, then the major export earners. This export expansion was accomplished without sacrificing food production, and, in good years, Cameroon was a net food exporter. [REDACTED]

Moderate economic growth gave way to rapid growth when Cameroon began pumping oil in the late 1970s. US oil industry sources report that oil-export earnings rose from \$25 million in 1978 to over \$700 million in 1980. The development of an oil industry, coupled with political stability, made Cameroon attractive to foreign bankers just when international financial markets were overflowing with recycled OPEC money. Although Cameroon's external debt—largely to France and the United States—climbed to over \$2 billion, the debt service remained a manageable 12 percent of export earnings. [REDACTED]

In our judgment, Cameroon has proved more successful in managing its oil windfall than most other African oil producers. US Embassy reporting indicates the government has used oil money and other financial resources to build up other sectors of the economy, particularly agriculture, which still employs about 70 percent of the work force and contributes

about 25 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. By the end of 1981—less than a year before Ahidjo's resignation—economic growth had topped 6 percent for the third year in a row, and oil production had increased by more than 25 percent, to 88,000 barrels per day. Cameroon also could cite increased agricultural output and a strong industrial performance, led by food-processing activities. [REDACTED]

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Despite its strong past showing, Cameroon's economy is not without its problems, some of which are beyond the government's control. Recent drought conditions, although not as severe as in many African countries, have hurt both farmers and processing industries that depend on agricultural raw materials. Nigeria's decision to close its land borders last April, as well as constant turmoil in Chad, has wreaked havoc with regional trade—both legal and illegal. In addition, generally lower world prices for cocoa, coffee, and oil, as well as higher interest rates on external loans, have slowed economic growth. [REDACTED]

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Other economic problems can be traced to Ahidjo's choice of priorities. He expanded the state-sponsored economic sector throughout his tenure to provide employment and patronage, and spur industrialization. Today, the woefully inefficient parastatals are a serious drain on government finances. One French economic journal reports that the 60 or so enterprises grouped under the Societe Nationale d'Investissement had total losses in fiscal year 1981 of \$107 million. Cameroon also suffers from an inadequately developed infrastructure in many areas. Roads between the political and administrative capital in Yaounde and the financial and port center in Douala, for example, fall far short of what is needed. Finally, liberal credit policies in the latter part of the Ahidjo regime allowed many loans—particularly to northern businessmen and other cronies of the President—that are unlikely ever to be repaid. [REDACTED]

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**Table**  
**Cameroon: Selected Financial Indicators**

	1980	1981	1982	1983
<i>Million US \$</i>				
Exports (f.o.b.)	1,848	1,901	1,917	1,904
Oil	666	943	1,080	1,197
Agricultural exports	658	484	379	361
Other	525	473	458	347
Imports (f.o.b.)	-1,538	-1,403	-1,192	-1,100
Trade balance	310	498	724	804
Services and transfers	-164	-144	99	217
<b>Current account balance</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>824</b>	<b>1,021</b>
<b>Foreign exchange reserves</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Total external debt</b>	<b>2,360</b>	<b>2,380</b>	<b>2,470</b>	<b>2,510</b>
<i>Percent</i>				
Real GDP growth	6.2	6.5	6.5	5.0
Inflation rate	9.3	11.2	12.8	
Debt service ratio	12	15	22	23

Over the longer run, Cameroon will face some tough choices as it confronts the prospect of adjusting to dwindling oil income and slower economic growth.<sup>5</sup> Most estimates suggest that oil production is fast approaching its peak of 150,000 to 160,000 barrels per day and that it will level off in the late 1980s. Failure to cut back what is now substantial development spending, in our judgment, would force Yaounde to run up Cameroon's debt and to turn to the IMF and foreign creditors for recurrent balance-of-payments assistance and debt rescheduling, actions that would entail politically painful economic adjustments.

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## Appendix B

### Keeping Friends and Fending Off Threats

Biya has not significantly altered the general outlines of Cameroonian foreign policy that had served Ahidjo so well. He continues to emphasize Cameroon's non-alignment and independence to avoid being drawn into East-West confrontations, even as Yaounde tilts toward the West, which provides the bulk of the country's economic aid, investment, and arms. Biya also maintains a low profile in the region to ward off potential external threats to stability. US Embassy reporting indicates that Cameroon's principal regional concern is to keep its borders secure, primarily against a militarily stronger Nigeria, and to prevent any spillover of the Chad conflict into northern Cameroon.

Cameroon's important relationship with France has cooled under Biya because of Ahidjo's exile in France and lingering Cameroonian suspicions—as yet unconfirmed—of a French hand in the April 1984 coup attempt. Biya is using the current tempest to reaffirm Cameroon's "independence" from Paris as well as to establish closer relations with Washington. While back-channel grumbling against the Mitterrand government will continue from Yaounde, we believe a prolonged deterioration of relations is unlikely. In our view, both sides recognize that their larger mutual economic and security interests are best served by keeping the current dispute within manageable bounds. Indeed, the Mitterrand government has been careful since the aborted April coup to continue a "business as usual" approach to Cameroon, to consult closely with Biya, and to reassure him of continued French support.

Over the longer run, close ties and extensive consultation with France will remain the linchpins of Cameroonian foreign policy. Numerous accords signed with Paris at independence in 1960 remain in effect. In addition, the US Embassy reports that some 18,000 French citizens reside in Cameroon and that the French presence is pervasive throughout the military and the economy, as well as the administrative, judicial, and educational systems.

Biya's potentially controversial opening to Israel bears watching. US Embassy reporting indicates that Biya has allowed Israel to open an "interests section" in Yaounde and that he is looking to Tel Aviv to train and arm a new Presidential Guard. While we do not discount the possibility that Biya may eventually restore full diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv, such a move would carry considerable risk, in our judgment. The US Embassy in Riyadh, for example, reports that Saudi Arabia would react to the establishment of diplomatic ties by canceling development assistance loans totaling about \$60 million. On the continent, Cameroon would find itself criticized by radical African states for breaking ranks with the OAU majority that eschews relations with Tel Aviv. At home, Cameroonian Muslims could interpret diplomatic ties with Israel as another example of the government's insensitivity to northern interests and add it to their list of grievances.

Biya harbors no illusions concerning Libyan and Soviet intentions in West and central Africa. Cameroon maintains only nominal ties with Tripoli, and in the past has expressed quiet but firm support for Western efforts to curb Libyan activity in the region. In addition, the US Embassy reports that Biya has expressed concern that Cameroon's porous borders with Chad and Nigeria could offer Libya relatively easy access to northern Cameroon's Muslim population.

Cameroon also has kept the Soviet Union and its allies at arms length, with relations remaining correct but limited. Cameroon has no military or economic agreements with Moscow. The US Embassy reports that trade with Communist countries in 1983 accounted for only about 1 percent of Cameroon's trade.

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Barring dramatic political and economic deterioration, we do not believe Cameroon is likely to become a major target for either Libya or the Soviet Union in the near term. Tripoli is preoccupied with Chad, and Moscow will be more concerned with events in southern Africa and the Horn. Nevertheless, we believe Tripoli and Moscow will keep an eye on the evolution of Cameroon's domestic situation and continue to gauge opportunities for gaining greater influence. If Yaounde were to renew diplomatic relations with Israel, however, we believe Qadhafi could be inspired to stir up resentment among Muslims in northern Cameroon against Biya.

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